Where Madness Follows

The Search for Gold in the Amazon Jungle

Text & Photos By Anthony Boccaccio

In the summer of 1972 Anthony Boccaccio ventured into the deep Amazon Jungle at a time when only Indians, a few brave adventurers, road-builders and gold miners inhabited ***God's Green Hell.*** Just twenty-two years old at the time, he was one of the first to document in text and photographs the construction of the legendary *TransAmazonica* — a dirt road cut through the heart of the jungle connecting the farthest reaches of western Brazil with the Atlantic coast.

Back then, the Amazon jungle was practically untouched. The rivers were clear and full of fish. The forests were uninhabited except for a few homesteaders, river-dwellers —*Ribeiros* — and Indian tribes, many of which were still undiscovered. The land was primordial, reminiscent of images of the dawn of Eden.

He returned to the Amazon twenty years later, only to find that the TransAmazonic Highway, and others like it, changed everything. Much has happened in the Amazon since the first of a million great forest giant buttress trees were felled. Hydroelectric dams have flooded millions of acres of virgin forest. Railroads have been built. Tin, manganese, iron ore, copper, nickel, cassiterite, lignite, natural gas, aluminum, diamonds, silver and gold were discovered in vast quantities. The Transamazonic road now has less than seven hundred of it's original three thousand miles of passable roadbed left. Indian tribes have been "civilized" practically out of existence. In the state of Rondonia, an area the size of Belgium has been incinerated and the world waits in suspense to see if the burning will continue into the next decade and across the whole forest. National Parks have been established. Territories have been turned into states, and regions into new territories. The whole place has been crisscrossed with new roads. Indian Reservations have been established and whole populations of the Natural Man has been lost. Long and short term scientific studies have been launched; 30,000 new species of animal and plant life have been recorded. More than 500,000 species, unknown and yet undiscovered have gone extinct. Cultures have collided; Indians mix with Whites, impoverished homesteaders have become land barons overnight, cattle ranchers are fighting farmers who are fighting the rubber tappers. Everyone fights the government. Only Nature has her way.

In the midst of this amazing ecological and cultural collision, one individual, more than any other, has contributed to the devastation of the land, the poisoning of the rivers, the decimation of the Indians, the ruin of the family, and the wealth of a few: the garimpeiro — the gold miner.

When the word went out, up and down the roads and rivers, that there was gold in the jungle, more than a million men left their homes and families in search of the yellow ore. At the height of the gold rush, more than fourteen tons of gold was carried out, one sack at a time, from the open pit of the Serra Pelada. A multitude of mud-covered bodies crawled up the steep, red-cliffs of the mine, each with a sack of earth slung over his shoulder. Every ounce of rock in those sacks contained precious amounts of the yellow ore. From a distance, the ground itself seemed to move, as thousands upon thousands of men climbed like ants up and down wooden ladders. The scene was apocalyptic, reminiscent of the building of the great Pyramids.

Where Madness Follows is the story of the search for gold in the Amazon jungle. It is the story of the miners, the land, the life, and the adventure of these remarkable men who risk everything for the sake of gold.

Boccaccio's work is a rich blend of imagery and words — nearly 300 photographs spanning two decades and 40,000 kilometers of travel throughout the vast Amazon jungle — words taken from his diaries and from the very mouths of miners, settlers, women, children, missionaries, soldiers, politicians, adventurers, colonists, engineers, and Indians. This is a rare treat and a remarkable look at what is perhaps the greatest and last gold rush of the Twentieth Century.

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The Search For Gold In The Amazon Jungle

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"The Devil's not as ugly as we make him out to be."

— Brazilian proverb

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The author on the Transamazonic Highway, near Itaituba, 1972

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The Dream & The Deal 8

Rivers of Gold 28

Green Over Gold 50

Motherlode 72

The Gold Miner 92

The Last Page of Genesis 112

Seeds of Destruction 138

Abandonment & Displacement 158

Violence, Rage & Death 180

Whores & Forgetting 206

The Inheritors - Children of Gold 224

Afterthought 252

PREFACE

Fortune-seekers have been digging for gold in the Amazon for centuries. Most died looking for it; some found it. But they were few and far-between. Of those who struck it rich, only a handful returned from the forbidden forest to tell of their adventurers. They kept alive the myths and stories of great deposits of gold, of rivers flowing with it. Yet, few dared venture into the depths of *God's Green Hell*, even for gold. But that has changed. In the last quarter century the Amazon has seen an unprecedented invasion by the white man. They came in great numbers with even greater plans to conquer the primeval forest.

The Transamazonic highway's construction began the invasion. Started in 1970, the two-lane dirt road cut through the heart of the forest bringing with it vast colonization stretching from Maraba', near the eastern edge of the Amazon, to the uncharted Territories of Acre in the west. Pushing deeper and deeper into the jungle, the road left behind a deep scar which oozed red mud. It looked as though the forest was actually bleeding. But this didn't stop the colonists from coming.

Within ten years, millions of landless poor migrated to the road from the south and the great deserts of the Nordeste to settle in its wake. They planted and harvested, burnt vast stretches of forest and built towns. They raised families and struggled against a hostile land full of danger and death. But in a few years, the shallow soil gave out, and the men who dreamt of a new life in the Amazon met disaster. No longer able to support their families as farmers, they went looking for other ways to make it in the *Mar Verde,* the Sea of Green. They became gold miners.

Mining was an easy alternative; there was plenty of gold and plenty more stories of men who had found the Motherlode. They found it in many places : in the Tapajos, the Madeira and the Solimoes, in the Surucucu', the Crepori, and the infamous Hole of Pain, the Serra Pelada. So thousands went looking, and hundreds of thousands followed, all searching for the Dream.

They brought bulldozers, jeeps, dump trucks, airplanes, diesel generators, helicopters, sluices, chain-saws, boom-boxes, dredges, motor-boats and mercury. They brought whisky and wagons, Coca-Cola and condoms. They brought malaria, tuberculosis, and the common cold. Sertanejo music from the south, Farro' music from north and Bosa-Nova from the coast. They brought pistols and prostitutes, television and typhoid, satellite dishes and dollars.

The gold rush was on, and is still on.

Hydroelectric dams flood millions of acres of virgin forest. Railroads are being built. Tin, manganese, iron ore, copper, nickel, cassiterite, lignite, natural gas, aluminum, diamonds, silver and gold are being discovered in vast quantities. The Transamazonic highway now has less than seven hundred of it's original three thousand miles of passable roadbed left. Indian tribes are being "civilized" practically out of existence. In the state of Rondonia, an area the size of Belgium has been incinerated. While National Parks are established, territories are turned into states, regions into new territories. The whole place has been crisscrossed with new roads. Long and short-term scientific studies have been launched : 30,000 new species of animal and plant life have been recorded. More than 500,000 species, unknown and yet undiscovered have gone extinct. Cultures have collided; Indians mix with Whites, impoverished homesteaders have become land barons overnight, the poor become rich, the rich go broke. Some find gold. Many more are still looking. And in the process, gold miners are fighting Indians who are fighting the government. Cattle ranchers are fighting farmers who in turn fight rubber-tappers. Everyone fights Nature.

The Amazon will never to be the same.

When I first traveled to the Amazon in 1972, I found the jungle practically untouched. The rivers were clear and full of fish. The forests were uninhabited except for a few individualists, river-people and Indian tribes, many of which were still undiscovered. The land was unpolluted, unspoiled. There was gold, but it didn't matter. When I returned over twenty years later, I found much had changed; the Amazon was under seige by a million gold miners. It was filled with an obsession for gold, an obsession where madness followed.

This book tells the story of road builders, missionaries, Indians, colonists, prostitutes, rubber-tappers, children, and *garimpeiros* — gold miners, in their own words. It is the story of the extraordinary and insane life of people who face Nature and impossible odds to find the precious yellow ore. They do it single-handedly, armed with nothing more than their wits and unshakeable faith. That, and the dream of gold.

Gold is the great Seducer, the Temptress, the Harlot of the Forest, and men run after Her.

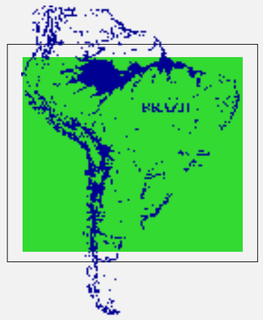
Ahead of her goes the shining countenance of wealth, the joyful face of hope, the desirable call to happiness.

Behind her comes greed, lust, lying, cheating, murder, violence, destruction, strife, hunger and loss.

Nothing good can come from seeking Her, for where gold is, madness follows.

— Antonio Grunupp,The Prophet of Devil's Pit, the Serra Pelada Gold Mine

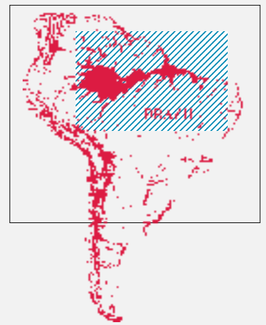
For my mom, Dora Austin
and for Derek & Maria Lovell-Parker



The Dream & The Deal

Here's the Dream: You leave your family, go to the gold mines, work like a dog and maybe in a year or two you make enough money to retire and never worry about money again. Here's the deal: You leave your family, go to the mine, work like a dog and return broke. Maybe your family is there waiting. Maybe not. It's a toss of the dice. You put everything on the mine and you either win or lose. Most lose.

— Elton Rohnelt, Entrepreneur & Owner of Goldmazon, a gold mining company, Manaus



There was a church in Gaviao. Two brothers thought there was gold under it, so they started digging. But the town folk told them to stop because they were afraid their church would fall down. Well, these two brothers promised that if it did fall, they'd rebuild it with the gold they were sure to find. So everyone said OK, go ahead and dig. Well, they dug until the church collapsed and in the end, instead of gold, they found a diamond. They say it was as big as a fist. So they went to Manaus or the big city wherever it was, and sold it. They made a lot of money, bought a truck, filled it with booze, fireworks and whores and went back to the town where they threw a party that lasted for days. After it was over, the booze was gone. The fireworks and the women were spent, and the only ones left standing were these two brothers. So they sat around the fire talking about all the fun they'd had the last few days and the conversation rolled around to the richest man in the valley.

"Well," said one brother, "who do you think is the richest man in the valley?"

"I heard say it was Fulano so-and-so down there in some-place-or-other. He has more money than you can shake a stick at."

"Is that so?" asked the other brother, and he stood up, pulled a wad of money out of his pocket and threw it in the fire. "That's how rich I think he is," he said with pride and sat down.

His brother, not to be outdone, said "Hell, I'm richer than you and him put together," and he threw all the money in his pockets into the fire.

Well, being brothers, they couldn't stop. So the first went over, picked up a big satchel full of money and threw it in the fire and burnt it. This went on and on until the next morning, and when the sun came up, they had nothing left. They burnt all their money, and the church never got rebuilt.

Both brothers were back in the mine that same morning working like dogs. Everyone was surprised.

"Why are you here?" they asked. "You have more money than anyone could ever have. Why are you working?"

The brothers were ashamed to say they had burnt up their money.

"Well," they said, "we sent most of it home to our families and we decided to stay here and look for more gold. We'd rather mine. We're miners."

I never met a gold miner with money.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, known as Padre Moses
Missionary, Humaita'

I know a guy who struck it rich in the Serra Pelada. He went to Belem and bought one of those fancy Italian cars, a Maserati or something. He drove it up and down the Transamazonic Highway to show off his fortunes at the different gold mines in the region. It finally got stuck in one of those big holes in the road and sunk in the mud. So he left it there and went back to town to buy another one. That was less than two years ago. Today he drives a truck for a living.

— Victor Rogerio Cavalcante Silva,
General Manager of Sweet River
Mining Company, Maraba'

The true hero of the Amazon is the gold miner. He's the one who has risked everything to take possession of the land.

— Elton Rohnelt,
Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company

Jose Altino and his pistoleiros *got to Boa Vista first. He controlled the gold miners and the flow of gold out of the Surucucu'. But Elton didn't care. He wanted in on the game. So he sent me and five men up there, to Boa Vista. We had guns and we used them. There was a war, you know, between Elton's men and Jose Altino's* pistoleiros.

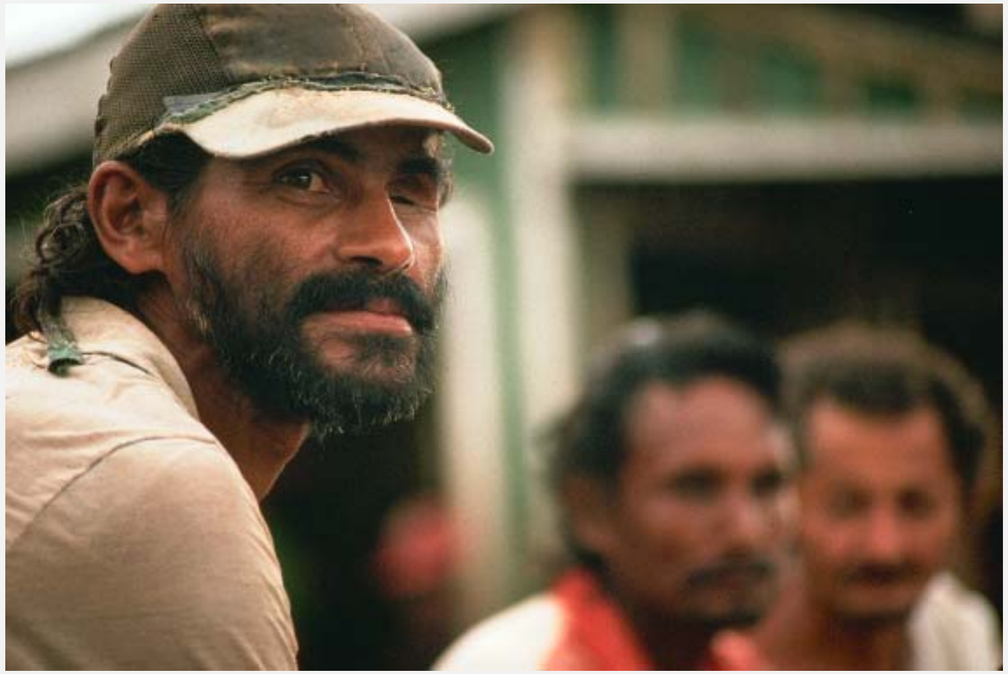
Well, it got very expensive. I mean, it's hard to do business, mine gold, fly planes, keep men happy and make a profit when people are shooting at you. Elton and Jose spent all their time, money and men fighting. No one got anything done. No one could get any gold mined. So these two guys finally got together, shook hands and made a truce. No more shooting. We got to do business in Boa Vista and Jose Altino gave our pilots landing rights at Paapiu, Barra de Formiga, Feijao Queimada and all the other strips in the Surucucu'. Elton and Jose basically became mortal friends, as it were. Business went on as usual.

— Sr. Neves,
Second in Command
Goldmazon Mining Company

When I asked "Who died?" the man said "My brother". I must have looked embarrassed because he held out his hand and said, "That's OK. Death is more common here than life." And he turned to put his brother into the ground.

The gold miner doesn't know how to get rich. He only knows how to find gold.

— Cabeludo, a gold miner on the Madeira River



Gold destroys everything.

— Edvaldo Campos, 'Liberal' Produce Store Owner, Itaituba

We have a saying in the Amazon: 'Don't be in a hurry.' Another one is this: 'In the Amazon neither time or distance means anything.'

— A gold miner preparing for a two month walk into the Surucucu'.

Between the trees and the river, the river is better.

— Rogerio Abreu, Pilot,
describing how to crash a plane.
He is a survivor of nineteen crashes.

Don't worry. It took Mother Nature a hundred million years to make gold. It'll only take 100 years to make the trees again.

— Anonymous gold miner

I crossed over to Bolivia with my brother, my brother-in-law and three other guys. We carried seven hundred pounds of gold mining equipment on our backs into the jungle somewhere south of Guajara-Mirim. Six days by foot. We made a pact with the Bolivian Army. If we gave the soldiers a ten percent cut in any gold we found, they'd leave us alone. As soon as we struck gold the Bolivians came with guns in the middle of the night and started shooting. I escaped, me and one of the other guys. I don't know if my brother made it out alive. The last thing I saw was him running into the jungle with nothing on.

I was lucky 'cause I got up to go to the bathroom and had my boots and pants on. So I ran. But it was dark and I fell into a damn palmeira and jammed over eighty spines into my left leg. My brother was sleeping when they attacked. That's when they came. That's when I escaped. I left everything I had back there. I have nothing now. My brother, I don't think he got out alive. Not from that jungle. Not naked. Not without boots.

I don't know what to do next. I got a wife and kid in the south. I haven't seen my kid in a long time. I called him today to wish him a happy birthday. He's sixteen. He told me he quit school today, being legal, and I got mad. He told me to mind my own business. He showed no respect. If I had any money I'd go home and whip some sense into him.

He's a good boy. He's just revolting like kids do. He wants to get ahead fast. He's like all the kids. They see those fancy things on the TV and they want them. So they drop out of school looking for quick money and they end up in the gutter.

I'm sick over it. I'm so upset. I've lost all my money, my equipment, maybe my brother and now my only son. I've lost his respect. I'm at the edge of despair over it. I even went to a church today. I wanted to find the old priest and scream or cry or something. Anything, just to get it off my chest. I don't want to go home and be a failure. I'm going back to the gold mines, but first I want to get drunk.

— Carlos Augusto Nogueria Tosta, 34,
gold miner from Sao Paulo

The only way in and out of the Surucucu' is by foot or by plane. It's cheaper to fly in. It's almost twice as much to fly out because they know it's the only way out so you pay dearly. Unless you're dead, or dying. Then theyll usually take you out for nothing. The pilots are generally greedy, but we're not bastards.

— Rogerio Abreu, Bush Pilot

Once a garimpeiro stole from another. He stole gold. When they found him they tied him up and dragged him up and down the Transamazonic. Then they cut him to pieces and hung his parts on sticks all up and down the road, to warn others of what happens to thieves. I know, because I saw it."

— Padre Mario
Salesian Missionary Priest, Humaita'

"The Virgin Mary visited me last night," Elton said. "She brought a couple of young kids who were mining gold in the Surucucu'. They wanted to sell their claim for ten kilos of gold. I bought it for eight."

Elton said the two kids were pulling out three hundred grams of gold a day but gave up because the tin ore was wrecking their sluice. Elton is the head of *Goldmazon*, one of the largest gold mining concerns in the Amazon. His men supply gold miners with equipment and transportation in and out of mines all over the Amazon.

"Actually, I stole it," he said. "The kid and his partner, they went into the jungle by foot and walked for almost two months into the Surucucu'. That's sure death. They should've died. But they were lucky and lived. Not only that, they found gold and tin. They didn't want the tin, they wanted the gold. They've worked five months trying to extract the gold from the tin. They've dumped a fortune worth of ore into the river doing it, too.

"*Deus me livre* -- God help me," he said and he pulled out a map of the Catrimani River Region in the Surucucu'. He pointed to the location of the mine.

"We'll send the ore to Sao Paulo and have our men separate the tin from the gold," he said. "The gold stays with us. The tin we sell. Now, all we have to do is put the word out and in a short time everyone will know that mine belongs to me and no one will dare set foot on it. It'll cost them their lives and they know it."

He picked up an old green Pepsi bottle filled with honey that Rogerio, his pilot, brought to him.

SLUICE BOX AT GOLD MINE GOLD 80-416-6

Pulling out the cork, he sniffed at the bottle and said, "Janaini. This is definitely made by the Janaini bee. They're all over the place, but they're harmless."

He raised the bottle to his lips to drink, but hesitated.

"Look," he said and held up the bottle of golden liquid. "A dead bee, stuck in his own honey. Just like those two kids, stuck in their own gold."

He grinned, then swallowed it whole, honey and bee.

— Diary entry, the author, Paapiu airstrip, the Surucucu', Roraima

The gold miners, they don't care. They don't care if death comes. You can see it in their eyes. Hell, not just the murders. There's forty of them a month. They've seen it since they were kids. They've lost half their families, brothers, sisters, to malaria, disease, murder. They've grown up with death. Death comes easy. It comes a lot easier than life.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, Missionary, Humaita'

Rivers of Gold

When I reached the river, I got scared. The place was full of desperate looking men. They stared at me. I felt out of place and my camera made me feel like a target. The air was full of black flies the stench of rotting garbage and dead fish. Ghetto-blasters were everywhere, and they all had different music playing. Taxis were crammed together along the dirt road that disappeared into the brown river. Large diesel trucks were coming and going, unloading food, beer, and equipment. Men stood around stripped to the waist, sweating. They had guns, and they looked like they'd kill me.

— The author, diary excerpt

Carlos Augusto Nogueira Tosta was looking for work. The week before he had been ambushed by Bolivian soldiers while mining gold across the border and lost everything he had. He said he was broke and needed to get back to the Prainha gold mine eighty miles up the Madeira river. I didn't want to go to the gold mines alone. The miners have guns just like the Bolivians and I didn't know how to deal with this, so I hired him to be my guide. I figured if he'd survived a massacre in a Bolivian gold mine he would know how to get around on the Madeira river.

He told me he didn't want my money. He said he just needed a bus ticket to the Prainha mine and that once he got there, the gold dredge owners would take care of everything, even his cigarettes. So I told him I'd pay his way and buy him beers if he'd show me around. He said OK and we headed for the Prainha mine eighty miles up the Madeira river. We took a taxi. The bus was cheaper but not faster, so we took a taxi eighty miles to the gold mine.

When we got there I followed Carlos down to the river. It was brown and smelled like gasoline. There was a dozen or more wooden barges crammed along the banks of the river. We made our way to a one which was a floating restaurant and bar moored next to a floating gas-station. It was tied to the shore with steel cables and we had to walk quickly up a gangplank to get on the barge. The board was thin and narrow and it sprang up and down when Carlos stepped on it. Garbage, rotting fish, and excrement oozed in the mud just below his feet. When I stepped onto the plank, I was filled with a feeling of imbalance and fear. I couldn't get rid of the feeling after that. Not until I got out of there and back to Porto Velho.

We sat and drank some beer. Music blared from a tape deck behind the bar. There were a few miners drinking at the table next to ours. They stared at me like they were thinking I was going to steal something. One of them came over and asked right out if America had queers and drag queens.

"Of course," I said.

"How many?" he asked.

"How the hell would I know?" I said.

He made an obscene gesture at me and went back to his table. Carlos told me to ignore it and he ordered another beer. I lit up a cigar and looked out over the river. There were plenty of yellow river taxis zooming back and forth. I could have hired one of them, but I was waiting for someone, anyone who would take us up-river for free. It's not that I didn't want to pay. I just didn't want to show any money. I was afraid they'd rob me.

Finally, a guy showed up, a little man. He said his name was Domingo, that he was a gold dredge foreman and that he had come down-river to buy supplies. Without asking, he sat down at our table. It was blue and round, made of metal. It vibrated from the diesel engine running all the time in the back. That's how they make electricity. We had to keep putting our beer bottles back toward the center of the table because the vibrations made them jitter toward the edge. Domingo didn't pay attention and his bottle vibrated off the table and broke. I bought him another beer. They cost five bucks each out there on the river. Or a half gram of gold. I didn't have any gold so they took my money.

Domingo grinned and gave me a thumbs up sign. He was already drunk but he kept ordering beers until our table was rattling with bottles. After an hour or so, he stood up. The sun was setting and the river was all pink and blue and purple. It was lined with thousands of twinkling lights, the lights of the gold dredges strung up and down the river.

"C'mon with me," he said. So we went with him in his river taxi. It's called a *voadeira,* or flying boat because they zoom across the rivers at high speeds and hit rocks or logs or each other and kill miners in the dark. They're long and metal, very fast, very dangerous.

He took us to one of the floating whore houses a few miles down-river. You see, the whores get in these barges and float up and down the river. Everything's in the river. Everything is a barge of some kind. The general store, the bar, the whore house, the machine shop, the food store, the taverns. They're all connected, a regular Venice in the middle of the Amazon.

Carlos and I sat at a table, ordered another beer and watched the whores. Domingo said he'd be right back and then disappeared with one of them in tow. He was gone over an hour and it was already dark on the river. I got scared. I didn't know where I was or how to get back.

"Don't worry, " said Carlos. "If he doesn't show up soon, we'll steal his *voadeira* and make it back alone."

You steal anything on this river and they find you and kill you. I didn't want to steal his *voadeira*, so I ordered another round of beer.

Finally, Domingo showed up. This time with a different woman. She was twice his size and fat. No matter where on her he tried, he couldn't get his arm around her. He pulled a Polaroid snapshot out from under his T-shirt. It was her, dressed in nothing but a towel.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" he whispered. He said it more than asked it. I nodded. She was fat and ugly, but he was lonely. He started dancing with her, but we pulled him away, got back into the *voadeira* and sped off into the dark. He pulled the photograph out, smelled it, gave it a big kiss, grinned and made a thumbs-up sign again. "I'm in love!" he said, and he gunned it. The *voadeira's* pointed bow raised out of the water and we plunged into the inky darkness up-river toward the twinkling lights of the gold dredges.

There's over 5000 dredges and barges on the Madeira. That's at least 50,000 men shitting and pissing into the river. The river is full of it, and garbage and oil and mercury. Mostly, it's full of gold, gold mixed with shit and piss but we don't care.

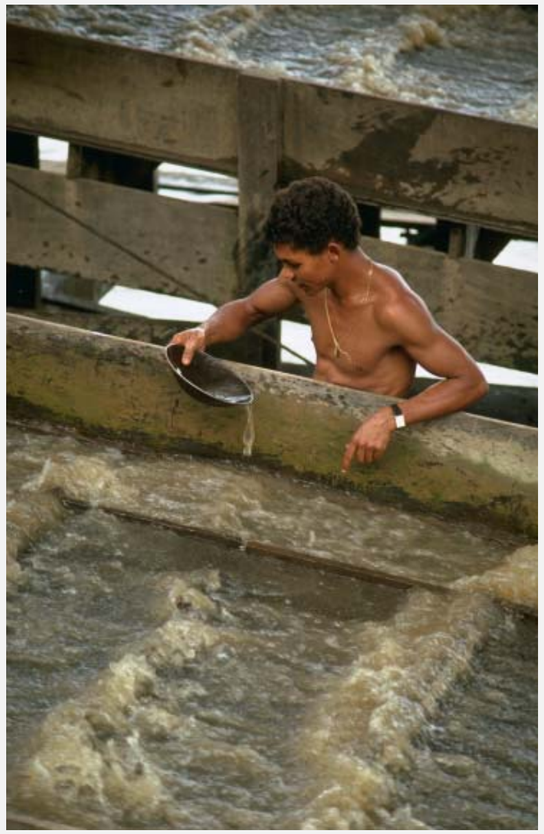
— Euclides Aparecido "Credola" Cardoso,
Gold Dredge Foreman, Madeira River

They name the mines after someone or something that happened. There's Simonzinho, (Little Simon), Tombetas (Falling Over), Paredao (Steep Banks), Vai-Quem-Quer (Go-Whoever-Wants), Machado (Machete), Palmerao (Great Palm), Caldeirao (Pothole), Fofoca do Trinta (Thirty Gossipers), Penha (Pity), Praia Durao (Beach of Pain), Taquara (Bamboo), Arara (Nincompoop), Chocolatao (Chocolate Bar), Praia-do-Aviao (Airplane Beach), Buracao-da-Dor (Hole of Pain), and Prainha (Little Beach). That's where I'm going, 'cause I hear the gold is flowing there.

— Carlos Augosto Nogueira Tosta,
Gold Miner from Sao Paulo

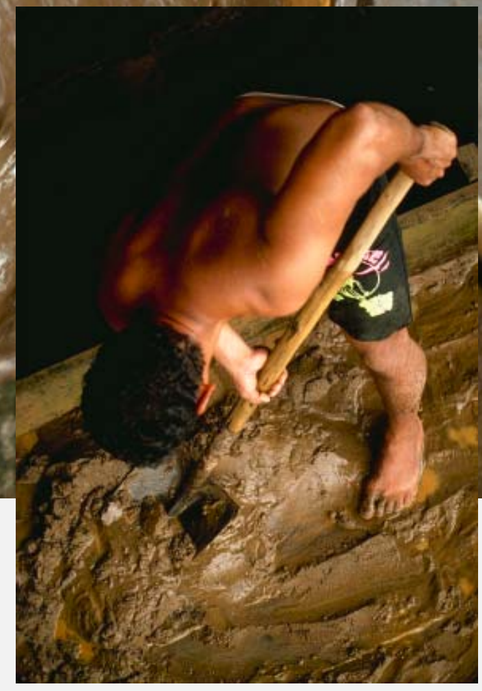
I bought my first dredge two years ago for $60,000. Within five months I pulled eleven kilos of gold out of the Madeira. Then I bought another and it pulled out six kilos in three months. So I bought two more dredges. That's when the gold was good. Now, the gold is down. Between all four dredges I'm only pulling two kilos a month out and it costs more than that to run the whole operation. I'm losing money.

— Gold Dredge Owner, Porto Velho



Hold on, let's do some math. First, the peons have no risks and no expenses. We pay for everything. Right down to their cigarettes. And medicine,too. If they get sick, they still get their share. So, the guy who pulls out 45 grams of gold gives 5% of it to each peon. That's just over two grams, or about fifteen dollars American. In a month, that figures to $450.00 pure profit. The minimum wage in Brazil is less than $600 a year. So a peon can make a lot of money, even when the gold is down. On a good day, he can make a hundred dollars or more.

— Owner of six gold dredges on the Madeira River, from Santa Catarina



Then there are the balsas *which are like small dredges except there are men attached to big vacuum hoses that suck up the mud on the bottom. They go down, sometimes fifty feet, and they stay there for three or four hours at a time. They breathe through a rubber hose with a compressor attached to the other end. Sometimes the guy running the compressor falls asleep, the compressor runs out of gas, and the poor sonofabitch on the bottom dies. It happens more than you think.*

— Nelson Dionizio, Known as The Paulista, owner of Dredge Manufacturing Company, Porto Velho

Our draga *is one of the best on the river. I like working here because we have a cook and sleeping quarters. But you don't get much sleep because the damn noise from the deisel keeps you up. It never stops. We go up and down the river and tear up the bottom, then suck up ore and separate the gold out with mercury. I think the way we mine is very primitive. Probably less than twenty percent of the gold that's pulled out of the river ends up in anyone's pockets. The rest of it goes back into the water.*

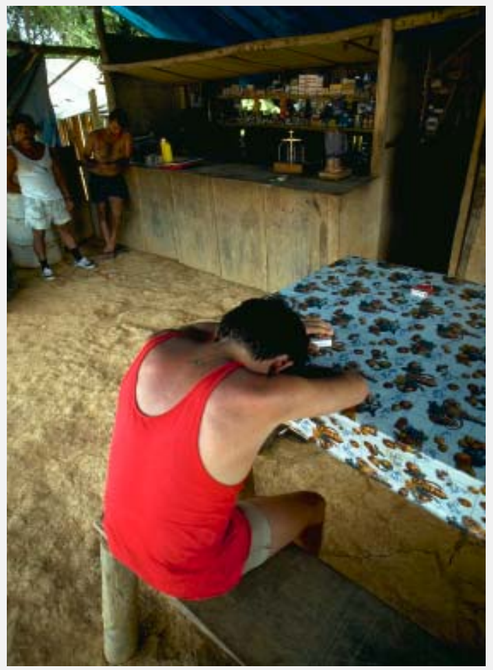
— Euclides Aparecido "Credola" Cardoso,
Foreman of gold dredge, Madeira River

Last week one of the drill-heads got a balsa *diver. You can't see them down there on the bottom it's so muddy. It tore his arm off and sucked it right up. What a mess. They never found him, so he must have drowned.*

— Paulo Sodas Nogueira,
body guard on a gold dredge

It's boring as hell here. All we do is work. That, and drink. There's no gambling on the river. It causes too many fights and guys get shot. Thank God there's whores, even though they're mostly fat and ugly. But a woman is a women and I'd go crazy here without them.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Madeira River near Bolivia



I drink eight or nine litres of water a day, not counting beer, and I don't piss. The heat's going to kill me one of these days.

— Euclides Aparecido Cardoso,
Prainha Mine on the Madeira River

It's like the gold rush in California. You had pioneers looking for a new life in the West. People grabbed land , then they were pushed into desperation because crops failed, farms failed, and in the end you had thousands of settlers that had no-where to go, who didn't know what to do with themselves. Look around you, it's the same here, too, only worse. The Amazon is full of violence, poverty, hunger, disease and rugged men who are out there just to find gold and strike it rich. But they're destroying the land doing it.

—Jose Renato Heiss, Pilot
from Itaituba flying gold miners
and supplies in and out of the jungle

I heard that babies are being born without eyes and stuff because of the mercury they dump into the river. The river people eat the fish and they're full of poison. So, if you're ever in a restaurant near a river, especially the Madeira, don't eat fish because you'll die or go crazy or something.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Hole-of-Pain Mine, Madeira River

Whenever anyone finds gold, all the other dredges hear about it because the peons get drunk and can't keep their mouths shut. They tell the whores and the whores tell everyone. They get bigger tips that way. Before you know it, everyone on the river knows about the gold. They call it a fofoca *-- gossip. So everyone floats their dredge to the* fofoca *and they try their luck at it. There are no secrets on the river. It's because everyone knows there's enough gold to go around.*

—Eurivaldo Soares de Andrade, young gold miner,
Prainha Gold Mine on the Madeira River, Rondonia

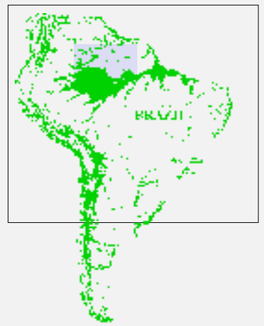
"They say there's more gold in the Madeira River than water."

— Anonymous Gold Miner

Green Over Gold

Green is the color of the forest.
Gold is the color of money.
Where there's green, there's gold.

— Gold miner at Paapiu Airstrip,
The Surucucu', Roraima



When the Transamazonic Highway was being built back in the early 70's, there were rumors all over the Amazon about secret landing strips in the jungle, about gold and diamonds and all kinds of illegal smuggling.

At first, no one believed it. The stories were all made up, they said. It was just part of the lore and mystique of the Amazon. But by the time the road was built over three hundred clandestine airstrips had been discovered along its way. Some of them were used by missionaries, others by the military. Most were run by enterprising miners who knew there was gold in God's Green Hell. Since then hundreds more have been discovered. Hundreds more remain hidden. No one knows how many are still being built.

Of all the airstrips, Paapiu is the most famous. It's the only open airstrip in the Surucucu'. That's the name the Indians gave the region; they named it after a poisonous snake because that junlge there is full of them. The airstrip is hidden in a hilly region, in the western edge of the State of Roraima, right in the middle of Yanomani Indian Territory. If you don't know the terrain and how to follow the rivers, you'll never find it. The only way the miners can get to their claims is by first flying to Paapiu.

Mining gold in the jungle is not as easy as pulling it out of a large river like the Madeira, the Tapajos or the Crepori. Those rivers are easy to find, easy to navigate, and they don't change course very much. Once the prospectors, or *garimperiros* as they're called, get to Paapiu, they have to get to their claims by foot.

Gold is usually found along a small stream, or *igarape'*. There are millions of them winding through the jungle like a labyrinth. In the rainy season they overflow their banks, change course, and branch off to other *igarape's* . In the dry season, they might dry up or even disappear. There are cases where a miner found huge deposits of gold, came out of the jungle to stake his claim, and when he went back to get more gold, never found it again.

The airstrip is lined on both sides with an odd-ball collection of clap-trap huts, tents, shacks and corrugated-steel hangars belonging to gold mining companies that fly supplies and miners in and out of the jungle. Almost every one of them has the wreckage of a plane that crashed sitting in front of their hangars. There's also several *cantinas*, a general store, and a mechanic shop. One of the *cantinas* has a television hooked up to a satellite dish. The miners watch the soccer games with the Indians.

There's a Yanomani indian village at the end of the runway called the *Mahauteri Maloca*. A *maloca* is a round grass hut, usually about 120 feet in diameter. It's one of about a dozen Yanomani villages near Paapiu. About eighty-five indians, counting children, live in the Mahauteri Maloca. Half of them are dying from malaria and tuberculosis brought from the south by the miners. The miners have polluted the *igarape'* that runs by the village so the Indians can't drink the water without getting sick.

Over the years, the indians at Paapiu have come to depend on the miners to supply them with food, beer and other trappings of civilization. So, they have forgotten how to plant and they don't teach their children how to hunt or fish anymore. When the planes take off the children run out with their bows and arrows and try to hit the planes just for fun. They usually miss because they're not very good at it.

Once, when we flew up into the mountains just south of the Colombian border I counted thirteen airstrips in ten minutes flying a straight course. I saw an airstrip that was at least 1200 feet long, paved with asphalt and with a yellow line down the middle. Someone has plans, big plans.

— Rogerio Prunes de Abreu, Pilot, entrepreneur, adventurer

Very little of the gold stays in Brazil. It's all illegal. The gold gets put into a small plane owned by some nameless person and it's flown at night across the border to Paraguay , Bolivia, or maybe even Columbia. Generally Paraguay because it's safer. Paraguay is one of the world's leading exporter of gold and there's not one gold mine in the country.

— Anonymous Gold Miner, Paapiu Airstrip, Roraima

All airstrips have special names: "Feijao Queimado" (Burnt Beans), "Jacare' Tres" (Crocodile Three), "Bom Futuro" (Good Future), "Biano Formiga" (Bahian Ant), "Pau Grosso" (Thick Stick), and then there's Paapiu. Paapiu is a Yanomani Indian word. No one knows what it means or where it came from.

— Goiano, Helicopter Pilot, Paapiu

They make you pay with gold. The more you weigh, the more you pay.

— Anonymous gold miner

I was coming back from my claim when I got lost. I ended up wandering around the jungle for days until I collapsed from exhaustion. That's when I fell and broke my arm. I would have died in there if the Indians hadn't found me. They took me to their village and kept me there for three months until I got better. Then they took me to the 'edge of the world.' That's a place in the forest where they say their world ends and the White man's world begins. They won't go past that spot because they believe they'll die, so they left me there. It took me another week to get back to Paapiu on my own. I still had my gold. The Indians didn't steal it. I was lucky, because it's not always that way. There are many stories of miners fighting Indians and Indians attacking the miners.

— Gold miner nicknamed Indian,
Real name unknown

The Brazilian government can't control this. They won't pay the going prices. They never did. That's why all the smuggling happens. Twenty years ago they built a Federal Banking System and they tried to put a branch in all the major cities in the Amazon. They were crazy. They should have put a bank in every gold mine and paid the gold miners going prices. The government would have made a fortune. But they didn't want to. They thought they didn't want to do that. So today, these guys say 'Fuck'em! Why should I get paid $300 an ounce when I can fly across the border and get more and not pay tax on it and not have the government nosing around, and who knows, maybe even find a good woman for the night?' So they do that.

— Placido Moura de Santana,
Gold miner, mechanic, truck driver,
Creporizinho Gold Mine, Crepori River

The government has tried to shut down the gold mines to protect the Indians. They send the army up here to dynamite the runways and force the miners out at gunpoint. But it doesn't do any good, because a week later the miners come back, fix the runway and they're back in business. No one can stop this. In 1990 there were fifty thousand gold miners in the Surucucu' and only eleven thousand Indians.

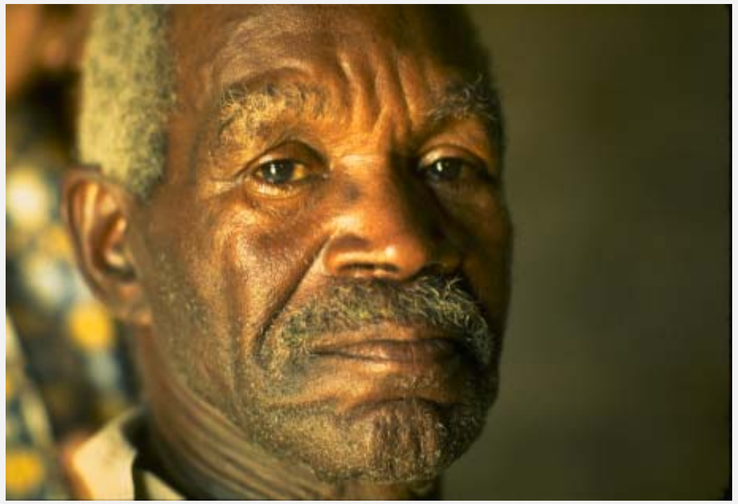
— Dr. Antonio Milimtino Pedroso Junior,
Cheif of the Indian Post, Paapiu

Show the world you have some upbringing and use the toilette seat. When you're finished show the world you have some understanding of hygiene and hang it up again.

— Sign hanging on outhouse wall in gold mine

You know, a gold miner, he gets bit by a mosquito down there in Ariquemes, or somewhere in the South. And then the gold mining season gets washed out because the rains come early, so he leaves. He heard there's a lot of gold in the Surucucu'. He gets on a plane, or a boat and comes up here and he brings malaria with him. So, some mosquito bites him and there it starts.

— Goiano, Helicopter Pilot, Paapiu Airstrip, Roraima



There is news, news of a miner who found gold. They say he found it in the bottom of the Crepori river. But he had to pull a ton of ore out to get only a little bit of gold. I heard he spent all his money building boats to go up the river looking for more gold. Today he is poor as I. Easy come, easy go. I don't think they will find much gold, not down there. There's nothing in the Crepori River but water.

— Diary entry, August 15, 1972
interview with Ignac Nelson Jacob,
Sao Luiz-Itaituba

There are two places on the crepori river where there's gold. Creporizinho, that's the smaller mining town on the other side. It's only three years old. And here, in Creporizao, which is older. It's been here more than twenty years. Last year we pulled over three tons of gold out of the Crepori. Many men have gotten rich on this river over the last twenty years. But I heard that the guy who discovered gold here died broke.

— Edivan Xavier, Vice-president
The Creporizao Community Association of Miners

There's only one supplier of fuel here. He robs us because he knows we have to pay. Last year a guy came in here and tried to set up another deisel company and compete. They gave him one day to leave, but he stayed. He said he wouldn't leave. He's still here, too. In the bottom of the river.

— Mayor of Creporizinho,
Gold Mining Town on the Crepori River

I'm not a garimpeiro, I'm an adventurer. There's a difference. I go into the forest and explore for gold. I make the plot and then sell it.

I've got a plot — it took me five months to find it. Me and my partner. It's on an igarape' two or three meters wide and two thousand meters long. I'm selling it for eight thousand dollars American. I'll go back home and do something else. No more gold for me. The longest time I spent in the forest was forty three days, eating whatever food I could hunt. It was tough. There are a lot of dangers. You get sick or hurt or lost in there and you're dead.

— 27 year-old f who left his farm in Parana' for the gold rush in Roraima

They say the world is mad at us. They say we're destroying the forest, the lungs of the world. That we're polluting the sacred forest and the skies with fire and smoke and mercury. The greatest pollution I ever saw in the Amazon was the human pollution. People living in sub-human conditions. This makes me sad. And the world is preocuppied with trying to save the forest — a forest which doesn't exist the way they believe it does. They don't care about the people. It's not right. They have no right until they come here and do what we've done.

— Elton Rohnelt,
Owner of Goldmazon

More than half the indians here have malaria or tuberculosis. They can't eat the fish anymore because the nearby streams are polluted from miners dumping mercury and mud into them.

— Mariam Blau, TV Reporter commenting about the Yanomani Indian village at the end of the Paapiu airstrip.

(Right) An igrarape' winds through dense forest. One of countless small rivers, this one appears to be a dirt road, though its color is caused by the dense silt washed into it from gold mining along its banks.

There are places on the Crepori river where it's so thick with mud from the sluices that the water drips off your fingers like oatmeal.

— Diary entry, Creporizinho, on the Crepori River

MOTHERLODE

We could have built Brazil three times over with the gold that came out of the Serra Pelada.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada gold mine

74

I drove to the Serra Pelada, the greatest gold mine in Brazil., with a preacher from Maraba'. He wanted to see the mine but didn't want to go there alone and I needed a four-wheel jeep to get there. He had a one, so we went together.

Driving through the jungle at night is like speeding down a dark tunnel full of flying insects with only a flashlight. You can't see anything except splattered bugs on the windshield and maybe thirty feet in front of you. It hypnotizes you. I've heard of guys driving like that and ramming into a tree at full speed. They never knew what hit them. It happens too fast. It's all darkness and holes in the road and no lights anywhere on the side. It was like that, dark and fast and hard on the nerves.

Three hours down the road, the headlights caught something in the middle of the road. The miner swerved and just missed it. I thought it was a dead jaguar or an anta. It was a body, a man lying in the road.

"Keep driving." I said.

He wanted to stop, to help the guy.

"No," I told him. "He's either dead, or sleeping," I said. "If he's dead, you can't help him. If he's sleeping, he deserves to die. If he's not already dead or sleeping, then he's waiting."

"Waiting for what?" he asked.

"For some dumb sonofabitch like you or me to stop so he can pull a gun on us, blow our heads off and steal the jeep. So, leave him."

We left him and drove on in the inky blackness. The trees were so thick above us they blotted out the stars.

We got to the turnoff to the mine at midnight. There was a cluster of small buildings that serve as a tavern, a bus stop, a machine shop, and a truck stop. The whole thing was lit overhead by a single streetlight lit by a diesel generator. It was the first street light we saw in four hours driving through the jungle, and the only marker for the intersection. The preacher turned off and drove toward the tavern. We passed a row of wooden shacks, each with a number on the door.

"When the Serra Pelada was booming, there were plenty of women around. Those shacks were the whore houses. They're empty now," I said. "When the gold runs out, so do the whores."

He parked the jeep and we went into the bar. I ordered a whisky, but there wasn't any, so I drank a beer. The preacher ordered a Coca-Cola.

It was another fifty miles to the mine and the road was dangerous. Full of holes and deep mud and running through hilly terrain. We decided to wait until daylight to go on.

"Where can we sleep?" I asked the man behind the counter. He sent a boy to fetch the night guard. We waited ten minutes. The guard came with his gun. He looked aggravated.

"How much?" I asked.

"Thirty cruzados," he said.

I took out the money and gave it to him. He looked at the money then at me.

"Each," he said.

I paid him another thirty and he took us back up the road to the row of shacks. He banged on door number one and a man dressed only in green shorts appeared. They talked, the guard gave him thirty cruzados and then the man in the green shorts took us down toward the end of he row of shacks. He stopped at Number 12. He unlocked it and pushed it open. A strange odor hit me in the face. It smelled like whores. Whores and sweat and spent passions.

"Twenty cruzados," he said and he lit two or three candles and placed them on a small table between two beds. "For the candles," he added without turning around.

I paid him and he disappeared into the dark. The preacher sat on the bed and started to take off his boots.

"Leave them on," I said. "And your clothes. Sleep in your clothes and don't put the sheet over you. Lay on top of the bed."

"Why?" he asked.

"This was a whore house.," I said. It's infested with God-knows what. Don't undress. It's dangerous here. We may have to get out of here fast."

"What about the jeep? Is it safe?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Will someone steal it?" he asked.

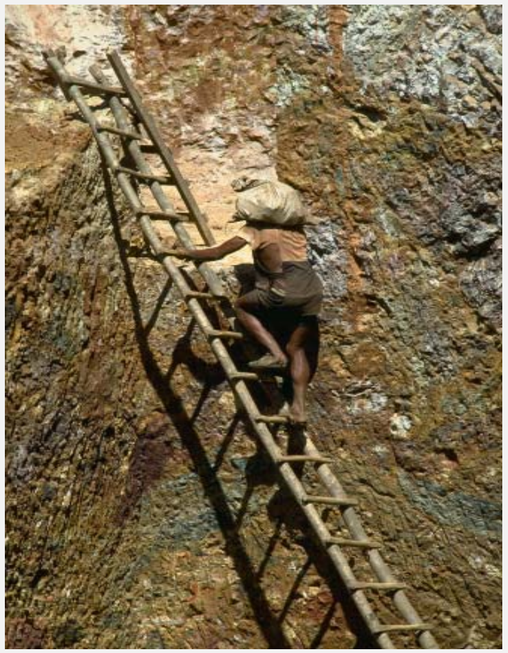
"Don't worry," I said. "If they try, we'll know who it is in the morning."

"How will you know that?" he asked.

"I paid the guard fifty cruzados," I said. "To shoot anyone who came near the jeep. I told him I'd give him fifty more in the morning if the jeep was still there, and if he killed whoever tried to steal it, I promised a another hundred on top of that."

The preacher didn't like that. He said that would be murder and he wanted no part of it.

"Shut up and go to sleep." I said and blew out the candles.



When I came here I saw many people getting gold, pretty gold, no? So I went here. You see, I had two meters square. Every miner gets only two meters square of land to dig. We dig very, very deep, maybe to China, but never bigger than two meters square.

—Juvenal Mauro da Silva, gold miner

When the gold was good, there was over 15,000 claims being dug here, all next to each other, lined up in squares. Some were deeper than others, but every one of them was no wider than the deight of a man.

Anonymous miner, Serra Pelada

VIEW OF MINE AT LUNCH BREAK GOLD 05-498-10 153%

We work all day and try to give something back while the theives in the government steal everything and give nothing.

Anonymous gold miner
Serra Pelada

80

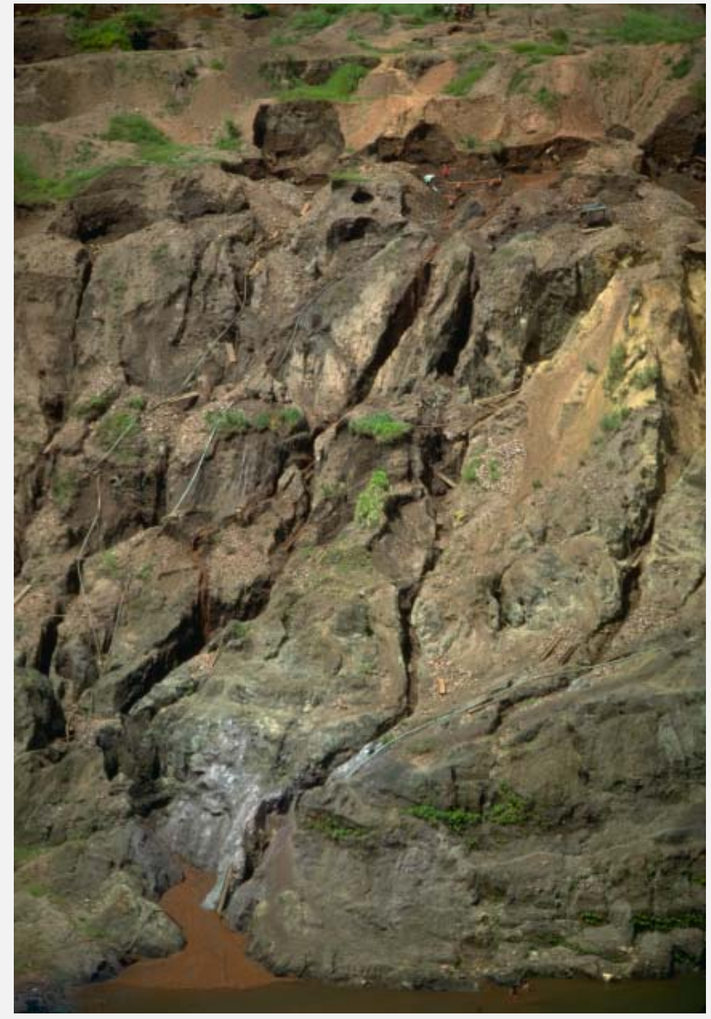
Once there were over 100,000 miners in this hole. Right now we got only five thousand working here. The miners stay away because we don't have food from the government. They will come back when this problem is solved and the government gives us food. Then we have to move this mountain.

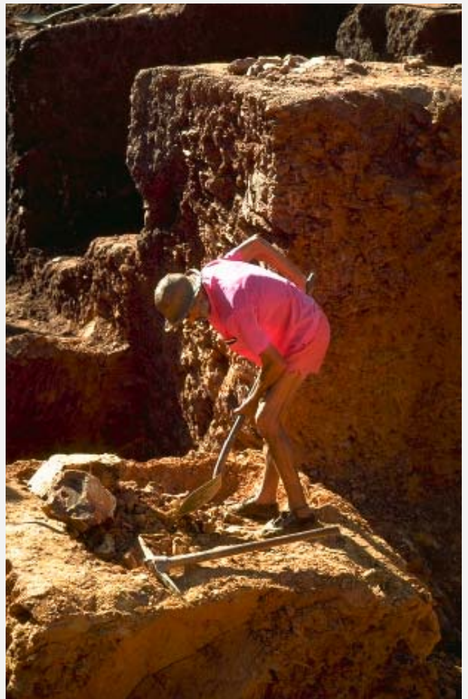
— Juvenal Mauro da Silva, gold miner, Serra Pelada

82

See that mountain? We put it there. One sack at a time. Those are the tailings from the mine and they say there's over fifty tons of gold in the rock we threw away.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada





There are Formigas, the peons who climb the ladders. Then there are Diggers, Carriers, and Owners. We even have our own Prophet. He doesn't dig or carry, but he's good luck to have around. We are many kinds of men, but we are all equal in the hole. We are all Garimpeiros.

— Antonio Grunupp, known as
The Prophet, Serra Pelada

There are no women here, only pornographic magazines. That guy makes a fortune. The miners have only two things on their minds: gold and women. There's plenty of gold here, but no women to speak of. It gets very lonely.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Serra Pelada

Russian and Japanese satellites told us that we got 300,000 tons of gold only 17 kilometers straight down the valley East of here. That is why the government won't help us. They want to steal it.

— Juvenal Mauro da Silva, gold miner, Serra Pelada

86

I dug and dug for months until I was down more than forty feet. Then I found gold. It was a big chunk but most of it was buried in the claim next to mine, so I couldn't get to it. You can dig as deep as you want, but never beyond your two square meters worth. When the guy who owned the claim next to mine came, I made him pay a lot of money to dig his gold from my side. If he didn't pay me, he would have had to dig from on top. Why should I do all the work so he can get rich?

— Anonymous miner, Serra Pelada, on the rules of digging a claim.

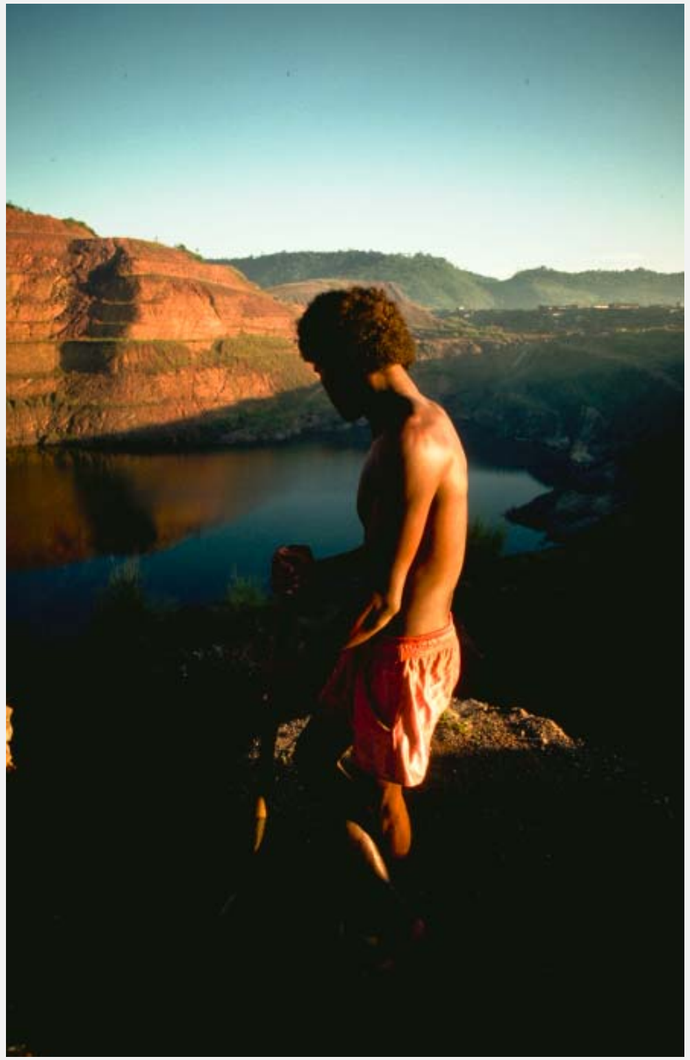
I leave my house each day on time
Forced by hunger to dig
I'm trying my luck in the mine
Respecting the small and the big.

I work with the rich man and the bum,
Taking care to mine the wall
Never crossing the owners
Or the bosses who make the law.

Finding gold is my only goal
'Cause I'm a miner who's poor
I shovel all day in the deepest hole
And I'm always looking for more.

I sweat in the midst of the multitude
Working for just one thing:
To get my card and be legal
The card that only gold can bring.

— Verse from an anonymous
story-teller, Serra Pelada gold mine



In 1979 when the people started prospecting gold here we got 112 tons of gold in one year. That was when there were 200,000 miners in the hole. These days the gold is down and we are only 5,000 men not counting the children.

— Juvenal Mauro da Silva, gold miner, Serra Pelada

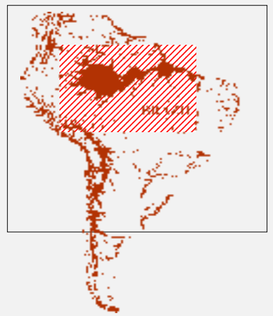
We can't drink here. And no guns. The Federal Police make sure of that. You've got to have papers to get in here alive. You don't need anything to get out dead.

— Anonymous gold miner, Serra Pelada

The Goldminer

The true hero of the Amazon is the gold miner. He's the one who has risked everything to take possession of the land.

– Elton Rohnelt, Entrepreneur
owner of Goldmazon Mining Company



Carlos is a gold miner who crossed over to Bolivia with his brother, his brother-in-law and three other guys. They carried seven hundred pounds of gold mining equipment on their backs into the Bolivian jungle somewhere south of Guajara Mirim. A six day journey by foot. They made a deal with the Bolivian Army: if they were allowed to dig gold without interference from the Bolivians, they'd give ten percent of the gold over to the soldiers. The soldiers said okay, so Carlos and the others began to dig.

They dug until the hole got to be fifty feet square and ten feet deep and then they struck gold. A lot of gold. They celebrated that night and drank whatever whisky they had until they all fell asleep.

In the middle of the night the Bolivians came with guns and began shooting. Carlos escaped, but he didn't know about his brother. The last thing he saw was his brother running naked into the jungle.

"I was lucky," he said. "I got up to go to the bathroom and had my boots and pants on. That's when they came, when they started shooting. That's when I got out. I left everything I owned back there. I have nothing now. My brother, I don't think he made it out of the jungle. Not naked. Not without boots.

"I don't know what to do now. I got a wife and kid in the south. I haven't seen my boy in a long time. I called him today to wish him a happy birthday. He's sixteen. He told me he quit school today, being legal, and I got mad. He told me to mind my own business. He showed no respect. If I had any money, I'd go home and whip some sense into him.

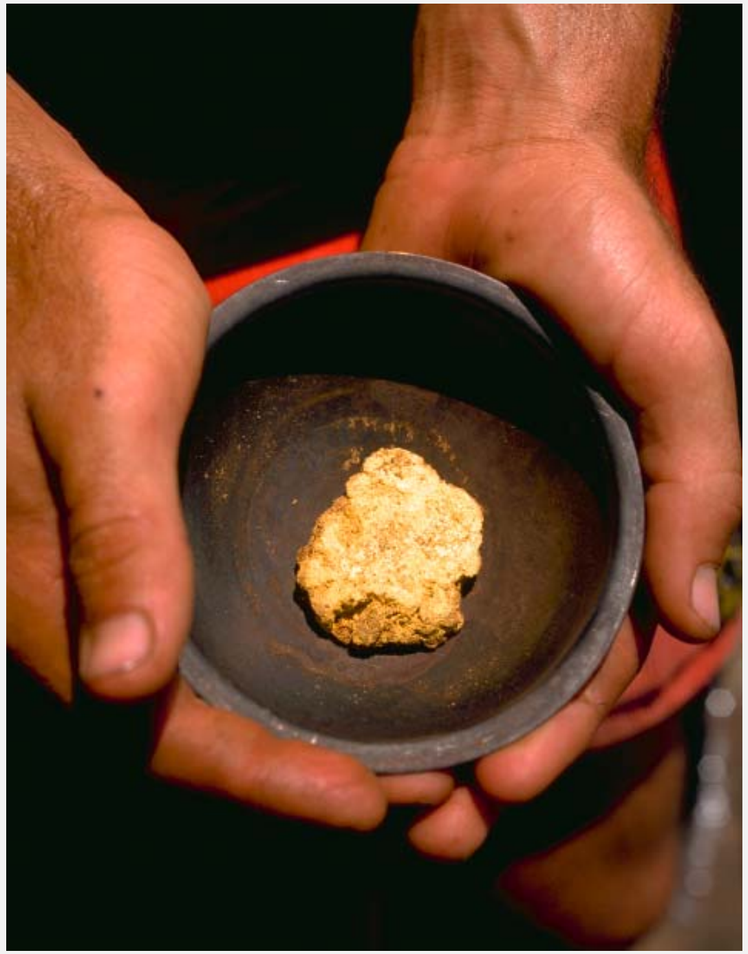
"He's living with my parents. My dad's a saint. Closest thing to God I ever knew. I asked him, *'What's with the boy?'* He said he was a good boy, he said that he's just revolting like kids do. He wants to get ahead fast. He's like all the kids. They see those fancy things on the TV and they want them. So they drop out of school looking for quick money and end up in the gutter."

He fell silent for a moment.

"I don't know what to do," he said. "I'm sick over it. I lost all my money, my equipment, maybe my brother and now my son. I've lost his respect. I'm at the edge of despair over it. I even went to a church today. I wanted to find the old priest and scream or cry or something. Anything, just to get it off my chest. I don't want to go home and be a failure. I gotta get back to the gold mines and make some money or I'll starve to death."

"I want to go back to the mines. I gotta go back. But first, I want to get drunk," he said and ordered another beer.

94



They found a guy who'd struck it rich in the gold mines running down the street pulling a long string behind him. He had thousands of cruzados tied to the string in 100 cruzados notes. When asked what he was doing, he said, "All my life I ran after money. Now it's time money ran after me!"

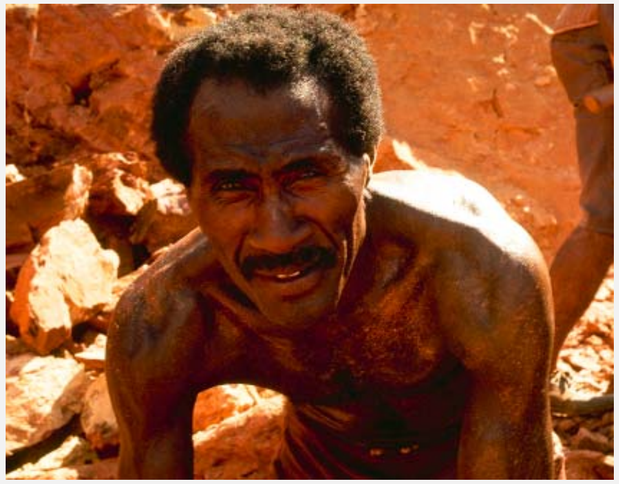
– Story told by a gold miner in the Serra Pelada Mines

96

So when the money is gone
I know where to find more.
It's in the gold mines of the Serra
The Serra has gold galore.

The Serra has brought wealth
to many a jerk,
The only ones who don't get rich
Are the ones who don't work.

– Verse from anonymous storyteller, Serra Pelada gold mine



You gotta have a nickname, a name no one will forget. That's very important here. There's a rancher on the Madeira River known as John-Eats-'em-Alive. They call him that because he tore a man's ear off and ate it.

– Taxicab driver on his way to the gold mines of the Madeira River

You can't be a criminal and survive the Amazon. You have to be serious, strong and honest. You have to know when to let Nature have Her way.

– Elton Rohnelt, Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company

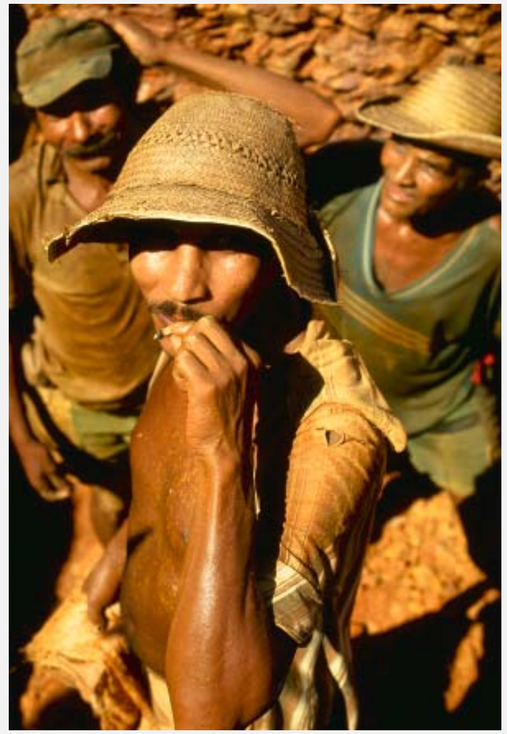
Garimpeiros work like dogs in this sun. I don't know how they do it. The younger ones are strong. They can take it. But the older men, men my age, the heat and the work will kill them. Or just make them older before their time. But they don't care. They can only thing of getting rich. But what good is it to be rich if you're dead?

– Padre Adolfo Rolh,
(Padre Moses) Missionary, Humaita'

100

When I start drinking, I don't stop.

-- Commandante Rogerio "Maconha"
Prunes de Abreu, pilot & goldminer



Garimpeiros are a bad influence. The garimpeiro doesn't value much except what's in his own pocket.

– Padre Adolfo Rolh,
(Padre Moses) Missionary, Humaita'

The jungle is so big. The mosquitoes are so small. Both are killing us.

– Anonymous miner, Paapiu, Roraima

Gold is the Mother of whores. She's the begetters of bastards, the maker of orphans, the creator of widows, the destroyer of the land, the defiler of all that She touches.

She's a killer, the messenger of greed, violence and death. The beginning and end of greed, She sets the trap and men fall into the pit. She's Fortune's foe. She is the great Seducer, the temptress, the harlot of the forest, and men run after Her.

Ahead of Her goes the shining countenance of wealth, the joyful face of hope, the desirable call to happiness.

Behind her comes greed, lust, lying, cheating, murder, violence, destruction, strife, lying, adultery, pride, idolatry, hunger and loss.

Nothing good can come from seeking Her, For where gold is, madness follows.

-- The Prophet, Antonio Grunupp, The Serra Pelada Gold Mine

"I'm sixty-four but never too old to screw," he said and blew smoke out of his large nostrils. He brushed his hair back and tapped at his forehead.

"It's mostly metal in here. From my crash in Mato Grosso. I flew the damn plane right into the river bank. It was an amphibian. I lost one of the floats flying. Must have hit a tree on the way out. So there I was, half bird, half fish. I couldn't land on water and I couldn't land on land. So, I tried to land on the margin of the river : half water, half land. A slight miscalculation. That's all. Very small. But the damage was great. Destroyed the plane. My copilot died. Got crushed to death. I went through the windshield. Broke both my legs, smashed up my head and internal stuff. I was lucky. It was the only time in my life I didn't have my seat belt on. My star shines. God, how my star shines."

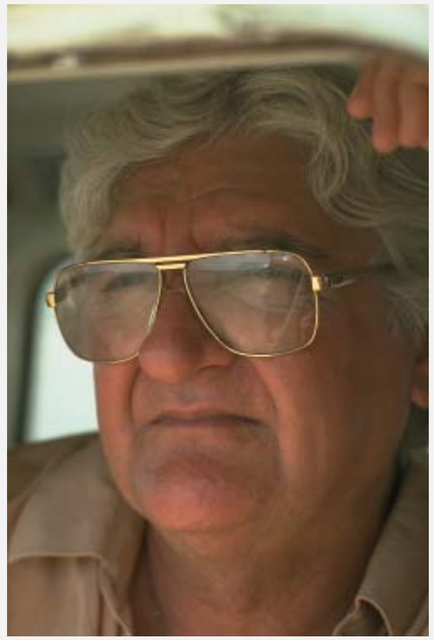
"Once, I got hired by a guy up in Columbia to run contraband cargo back and forth from Manaus to Bogota. He had a storehouse full of stuff, including a pile of corrugated iron. So, I found a guy in Manaus that needed corrugated iron. He promised me thirty thousand dollars for a shipment of the stuff. He had plans to sell it to the government for a big profit. Well, I paid this guy in Columbia fifteen thousand cash for his pile of corrugated iron. When I delivered it to the guy in Manaus he backed off and told me he only had ten thousand. Knew I couldn't go back to Columbia with the stuff being illegal and all, so he tried to screw me. No one screws me. I told him to drop dead. Then I took the plane up over the poorest part of town and threw all the iron out the door, one sheet at a time. You should have seen the poor running back and forth down there trying to get the stuff. Instant roofing from heaven. They thought it was a miracle."

He smiled, puffed on his Camel again, rubbed his beer belly and turned up the volume of the tape recorder. Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. He filled a shot glass full of whiskey and held it up to the light, like he was inspecting a diamond.

"For the *garimpo*, the gold mines, only the airplane worked. But in time, they built roads and brought in trucks. That's when it loses interest for me. That's when I leave, when it's not interesting. So, I went to the Tapajos. After that I went to Porto Velho. I'm always first. But in a short time, two hundred airplanes, then three hundred. Unbelievable. So I left and went to Amapa'. Sure enough, that damned mining company Paranapanema showed up, made roads and once again I got the hell out. I went back to the Tapajos River. That's where I met Elton Rohnelt. We made plans, big plans and then went to the Alto Rio Negro.

We stayed there two years. Cleaned up the place. There was a lot of gold, a lot of Colombians, too. They wanted the gold, but we had more guns. More guts. They ran after they figured we weren't leaving without the gold. Besides, it was on our side of the border. They had no right to it, the bastards.

After that, I came here, to Roraima. I was the first one here, too. I called Elton. That was in 1986. The rest is history. I had my own mining operation. Tin. Five hundred thousand hectares, practically right where everyone's mining now. In the Surucucu', near the Parima River, in the Valley of Ua-wa-wari. But during the dictatorship in 1972 they kicked me out and made the whole thing a National Park. I lost my claim. Afterwards, they sold it to Shell Oil, who pulled out eight hundred tons of tin. I got nothing. But don't worry. I'll take care of myself because I don't quit, dammit, I'm Rogerio Prunes de Abreu."



The only protection in the jungle is God. Without faith, you'll never make it.

— The Preacher, Serra Pelada Gold Mines

It's a mentality. They find gold. They have a lot of money. They have a good time. Then it's gone. It's an additction. They don't want money. Don't believe them. They only want to mine gold. They're miners, not investment bankers.

– Padre Mario,
Missionary, Manicore'

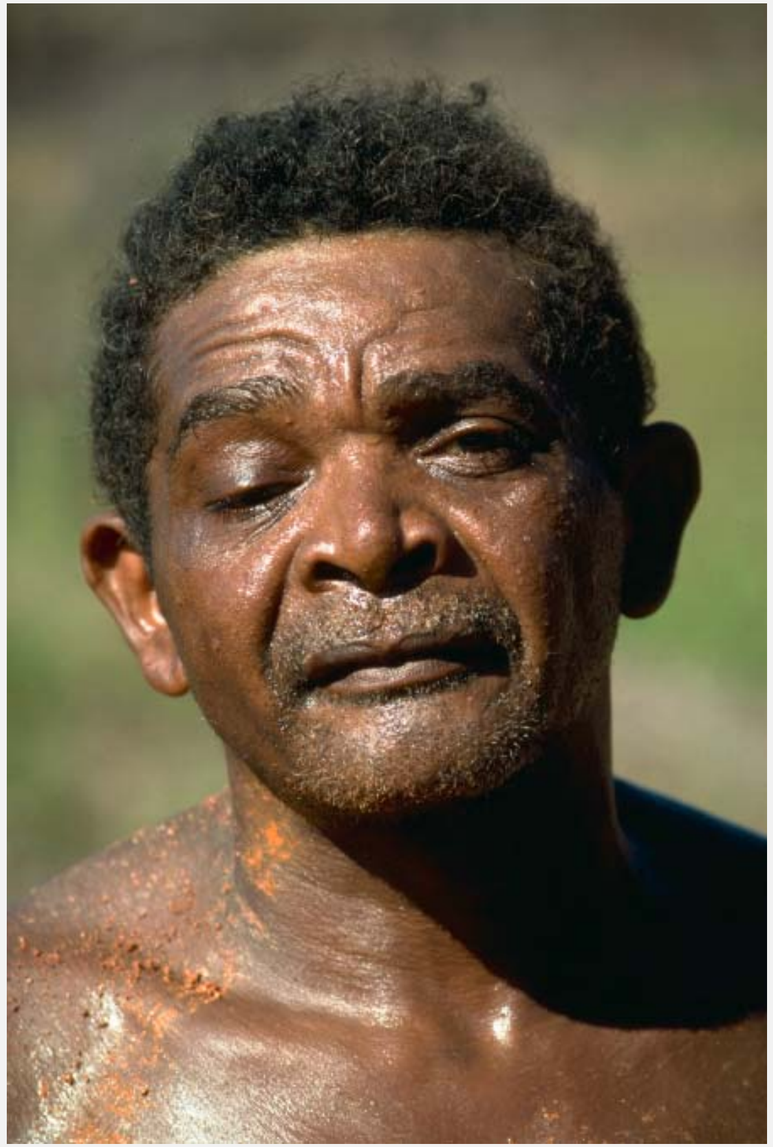
I have eight sons. Six of them are garimpeiros – gold miners. I stay away from gold. It drives men mad.

-- A Gaucho from Rio Grande do Sul drinking in a bar on the Madeira River, Humaita'

106

I' m getting out. I'd rather be poor and alive. All I want is four or five kilos, and then I'm going home. I'm going in, this time deep, to find another stake. I'll be going home with or without gold on December 15th. I can't go long without my family. My daughter is nine and studies piano. She's bright and I want to send her to the United States or Europe to a school to learn about computers.

— Anonymous Gold Miner on his way to the Serra Pelada, also known as The Devil's Pit.



I don't want to become a criminal. But I am afraid. If I don't find gold, I'll have to steal to stay alive.

– Young gold miner in the Serra Pelada mines

108

The gold miner is a man you can't trust. Don't trust him. Don't trust any gold miner. The only thing that is important to a gold miner is gold.

– Elton Rohnelt, Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company

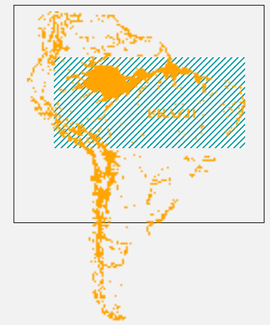
The Amazon is very eclectic. We have Indian Gods and Xerox machines. But there's little room left for people like us. I love warriors. I'm a warrior and so is every gold miner in the Amazon. We're probably the last of the romantic adventurers.

– Elton Rohnelt, Owner of Goldmazon Mining Company, Manaus

The Last Page of Genesis

In truth, its ruin, like all things under the sun, is only a matter of time.

— Last diary entry, November 1972,
The Amazon Valley



The Amazon isn't just another jungle, it's the greatest of all jungles. Like the morning mist that rises silently over the Amazon River, enveloping the jungle and the beasts of the forest, the Amazon is shrouded in mystery and myth. It invades our dreams and stands as an archetype of all that is primordial and eternal.

The idea of destroying the jungle, the entire Amazon Valley is absurd to us. Who could ever cut this down? It's too big we argue. How could we ever pollute the great rivers? They'll flow forever we say. How can we endanger the wildlife? It is us who are in danger in the jungle. How can such a vast of forest ever be destroyed? It will never happen. That's what everyone thinks. That's what everyone says.

We want to keep the mystery alive, we want to believe in the myth, the myth which whispers to us that the Amazon is indestructible, invulnerable, immortal. But it is none of these.

The truth is much different. When road-builders, ranchers, colonists, adventurers, speculators and gold miners venture into the Amazon valley they are, without realizing it, writing the last page of Genesis.

114

116

There's a majesty about the jungle. Great torrential storms rage across the sea of green trees like land-locked hurricanes. From the air you can see two or three, even four at a time, rolling over the flat planes of the green canopy like great tall ships, driving all manner of birds and animals before them.

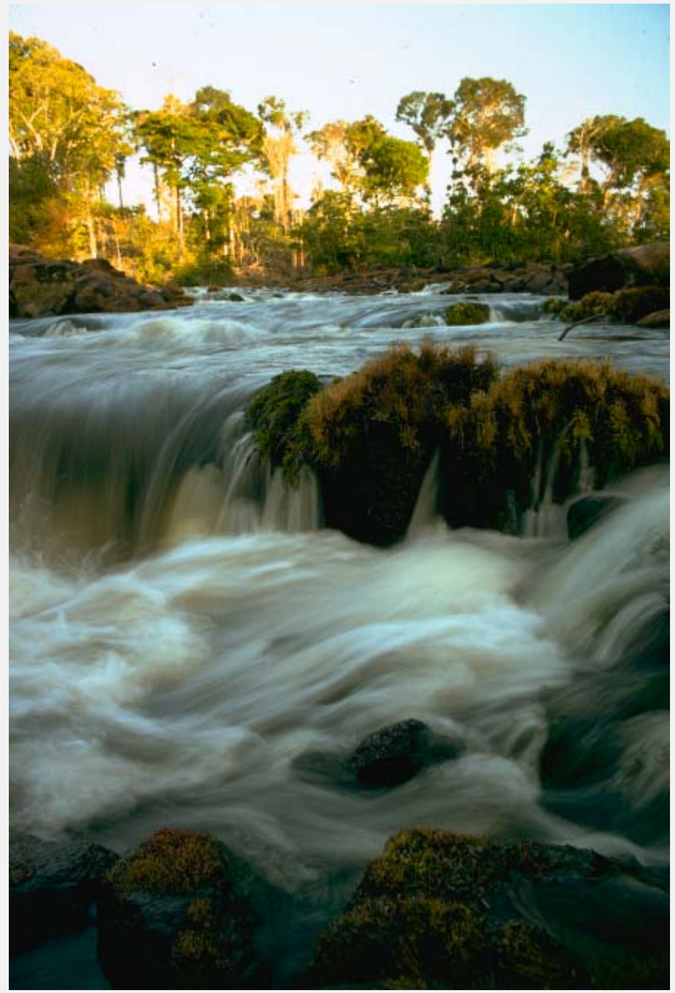
In the rainy season these isolated storms gather together and fill the sky with clouds so thick and dark it blots out the sun for weeks. Thunder rolls back and forth and lighting all pink and yellow and blue ignites the skies with frightening regularity. This goes on for weeks until the heavens open up. In the Amazon it doesn't just rain. Water simply falls from the sky in biblical proportions.

— Diary entry, November 1972
Itaituba

The insects are so colorful they look like Van Gogh painted them. At times there are so many butterflies that you can't see ten feet for all the fluttering of design and color about you. The greatest of these is the Morpho, whose iridescent blue wings are brighter than the backsides of king- fishers. Some grow to be ten inches from wing-tip to wing-tip. It doesn't flutter like most butterflies. It glides until it loses altitude and then, with one intermittent flap of its great wings, will catch another current and soar until it loses altitude again. It looks more like a bird in a thermal than a butterfly. At night the jungle fills with strange and beautiful sounds, a symphony of primordial music coming from a thousand species of birds, reptiles, mammals and insects. All manner of chirping, cawing, croaking, roaring, slithering, clicking, buzzing, flittering, hooting, whooshing, flapping, thumping, whistling, and other sounds too strange for words echo back and forth in the inky darkness.

— Diary entry, Rabelo Construction Camp, Front Line of the Transamazonic Highway, at night in my hammock with a flashlight

118



There are millions of Igarapes or smaller stream that overflow their banks in the rainy season and fertilize millions of acres of forest, insuring the continued existence of countless species of plants, fish, animals and insects. The Amazon river overflows its banks every year flooding the forest sixty miles inland along its banks.

— Diary entry, September 1972 Near Sao Luiz-Itaituba

The jungle is full of danger. Full of death. There's a beautiful frog called the Dendrobates Leucomelas. It's back is shiny black and yellow. If you just touch it, even with one finger, you'll die. Not right away. Slowly, over a period years. The poison destroys the nervous system. There are various species of the Assassin Bug which bite you on the neck or face and then, gorged with your blood, they defecate next to the wound. When you scratch the sore, you rub the droppings into your bloodstream. You get an incurable and fatal disease called Chagas. Mostly, they bite at night when you're sleeping. You scratch in your sleep and kill yourself.

— Diary entry, September 1972, Itaituba

120

Eectric eels lay buried in the mud on the bottom of rivers. If you step on them, they'll deliver a five-hundred volt shock of electricity. It won't kill you. You'll just pass out and drown. Don't ever shave before bathing in a stream. The piranha will strip you to the bone in less than three minutes.

Don't swim nude. There's a fish so small it can swim up your anus. It'll lay eggs and they'll get in your bloodstream and kill you eventually. And don't urinate in the water. There's an even smaller fish called the Candiera that swims up the warm stream of urine and enters the penis. Once inside the urethra, it'll open it's barbed fins and implant itself. The pain is unbearable. They say the only way to get rid of it is to cut the penis open and take it out by hand.

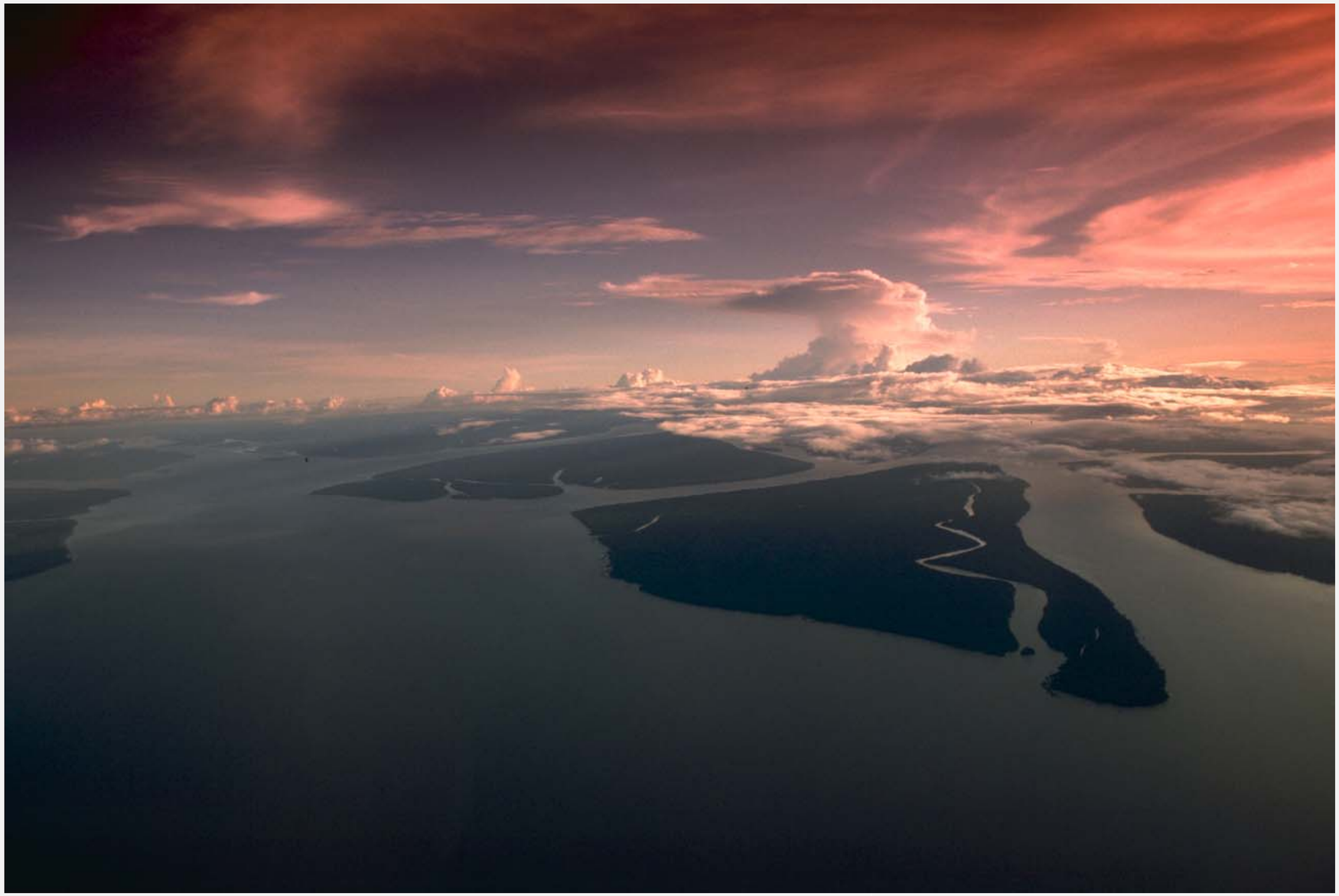
— Diary entry, September 1972
Things I heard while bathing in the Tapajos River
Itaituba

124

The jungle has plenty of everything. Fish, fowl, insects, trees, plants, herbs, water, diamonds, iron ore, tin, gold. How can we ever exhaust its riches. It 's an infinite treasure-house waiting to be plundered. The forest stretched unbroken as far as the eye can see. Some of the trees are two-hundred feet high and so big around at their base it takes ten men, hand to hand, to circle the trunk. Before it rains, the skies fill up with dark clouds for weeks before a drop of water falls. When it finally rains, water falls from skies for days, sometimes weeks at a time. And lighting. I've never seen so much and in such color: yellow, pink, red, blue, white and even green. I saw three separate storms moving across the Amazon river at the same time. The sky lit up every two or three seconds. There's no end to it. The Tapajos river is so clear you can see clean to the sandy bottom from three hundred feet up in a helicopter. Last night, there were frogs so large and in such vast quantities that I couldn't hear the guy in the next hammock snoring for all the croaking that went on. There's so much gold in the Tapajos river that people joke about the river not having enough room for water.

— Diary entry, October 1972
Santarem

126



The Amazon River is like an ocean. Two hundred times the total daily usage of water in the United States flows out its mouth every day. The Rio Negro is so pure you can see the bottom sixty feet down. The Solimoes has more species of fish in it than the Atlantic Ocean. The Tapajos has more gold in it than all of Africa. The Xingu is as green as an emerald, and the life-source of one of the greatest Indian Tribes in the world.

— Diary entry, November 1972
On a boat approaching Belem, in the Straits of Breve

The Amazon forest is so rich in variety that you can find over a hundred trees pertaining to sixty different species growing in less than three square acres.

— Diary entry,
Transamazonic Highway, 1972

I watched a bulldozer knock over a two hundred foot tree today. When it fell, it took many lesser trees with it. It's not sensible to think that we could tear down the whole jungle. Though it's only a two-lane, hard-packed dirt road, the Transamazonic highway cuts right through the middle of the Amazon jungle and will probably spell the beginning of the end of the forest. The jungles's life depends on a delicately-balanced symbiosis between flora and fauna, between waterways and weather patterns. It's hard to imagine a two-hundred foot plank-buttressed forest giant, sixty feet in circum-ference at its base, as something fragile. But it is.

— Diary entry, September 1972
Front Line Camp The Transamazonic Highway

132

The beauty is unearthly. In the morning, just before sunrise, a shrouded of soft mist rises from the moist jungle through the canopy and into the sky. At sunset, the sky is filled with striking combinations of delicate pastels -- pinks, blues, purples and greens mixed with brilliant rays of red and gold. At night, the air is so pure the stars look like you can touch them.

It's a Garden of Eden. Today, I waded in a stream so full of Tucunare', a large trout-like fish, that with one swift kick of my boot I landed three beauties on the banks. Who would miss three fish? I thought, or three million for that matter? We lay in our hammocks deep in the jungle, with rifles pointed into the branches above us, waiting for dinner to show up. It almost always does in the form of a small monkey called Guariba. Bam! And they fall right into your lap. Well, almost. The young ones look like little babies when you skin them. They taste like Swiss steak without the tomatoes.

— Diary entry, Rabelo
Construction Front Line camp between Itaituba and Jacarecanga

134

There's one tree in the jungle that has thirty four species of ants that live in it, which, by coincidence, is the exact number of species of ants in all of England. With every step I take in the jungle, over 1200 species of vegetable and animal life lay under my boot, counting fungus and micro-organisms. Over two million different species live in the Amazon. Of these, only thirty percent are known by science. The rest are disappearing at a rate five hundred times greater than the natural cycle of life and death imposed by Nature.

— Diary entry August 1972, Manaus

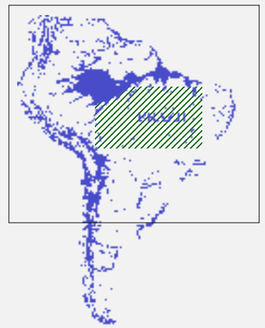
An excess of heavens above an excess of water...and is the last page of Genesis that has yet to be written.

— Euclides da Cunha, 1903, Brazilian writer and poet Upon seeing the Amazon for the first time

Seeds of Destruction: The Transamazonic Highway

An empty forest would be land without men for men without land.

— Garrastazu Medici,
president of Brazil, 1970



Twenty-five years ago someone drew an almost straight line across a map of Brazil's Amazon jungle and called it the Transamazonic Highway. Ten thousand men armed with little more than axes went into the forest and cut a path three-hundred feet wide and three-thousand miles long. They did it with their bare hands. The trees were enormous. Some reached into the sky over two hundred feet and grew thirty foot in diameter. It took only two years to chop down what took Nature millenniums to grow.

Then the yellow bulldozers came. They roared and belched diesel smoke everywhere. At first, the Indians thought they were living beasts, so they attacked with bows and arrows. It didn't do any good and the yellow giants kept coming, kept pushing the road ahead three kilometers a day. They carved a deep scar across the land which oozed red mud. It looked as though the forest was actually bleeding.

The dream of conquering the Amazon galvanized the whole nation. Three million square miles of forest, rivers and natural resources lay waiting for the taking, and nothing could keep Brazil from claiming her destiny.

Most everyone was convinced that this two lane, hard-packed dirt highway would unite all of Brazil in its struggle to enter the twentieth century as a power to be reckoned with.

But the critics said the road would connect "nothing with nowhere."

140

"The Transamazonic Highway connects nothing with nowhere."

— Brazilian ecologist, Altamira, 1972

In the beginning it was just a muddy road. A scar cut into the living jungle. In the end, it will bring with it the best and the worst of civilization. Adventurers, prospectors, scientists, soldiers, prostitutes, farmers, woodcutters, cattle ranchers, hired guns, explorers, teachers, the rich, the poor, the hopeful, the disenfranchised, and all manner of fortune-seekers -- all traveling a road through God's Green Hell.

— Diary entry, Itaituba-Jacareacanga Stretch, 1972

142

The driver wrenched at the controls of the mammoth yellow bulldozer. It lurched forward spewing arcane smoke from its exhaust. The blade smashed into the huge plank-buttressed forest giant whose trunk measured six men 'round with outstretched arms. It was a sight to see, a Promethean rising majestically into the humid, dull-green canopy almost two hundred feet above our heads. The steel blade cut deep, leaving a dark gash which exposed the glistening white wood beneath the smooth, light-colored bark.

The tree trembled and bits of bark rained down, followed by large green leaves which waffled toward us from the upper canopy. The bulldozer roared louder, its mud-filled treads churning at the red earth as it pushed and shoved with determination. The tree shuddered, then began falling backwards slowly. The ground shook as its massive roots tore through the shallow subsoil, ripping up millennium of rotting humus. The jungle erupted with the sound of wood splitting and exploding as the colossal arching branches swept through the canopy and surrounding treetops, colliding with lesser trees, pulling and smashing down everything in its path. The earth shook as the tree hit it with a gruesome thud.

The guttural howling sounds of frightened *Guariba Monkeys* could be heard in the distance as they skittered through the treetops, then disappeared. A single Screaming *Piha* glided by and shrieked its displeasure.

"Wee-weeeeeeeee-peeee-o, Wee-weeeeeee-peee-o" in shrill and uneven whistles.

The iridescent blue wings of the *Morpho* butterfly, which sailed everywhere in the jungle, was no-where to be seen. Except for the muted metallic grumbling of the bulldozer, the jungle was deathly still.

This was the *Linha da Frente,* The Front Line.

In a very real sense, it was the End of the Line on the Transamazonic Highway.

This morning I sipped the coffee out of my cup very carefully, to make sure nothing was floating around inside, dead or alive. They make the coffee with water taken from the nearby stream. They strain it through a cheese-cloth, but the same stream serves as a laundromat, barbershop and bathroom. Men shave, bathe and piss in it constantly. I hope the coffee was strong enough to kill anything which might have gotten through the cheese-cloth.

— Diary entry, The Front Line Construction camp, between Itaituba and Jacareacanga, November 1972

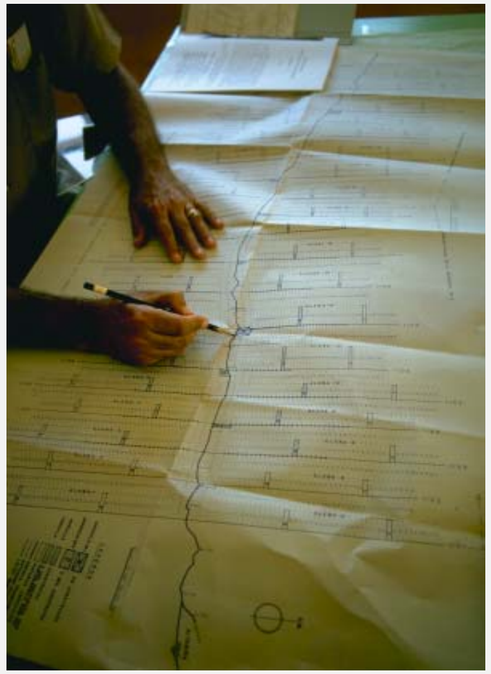
144

The most dangerous beast in the forest is the white man. Only the white man kills you for a pack of cigarettes. I sleep alone, far from their camp. They make noise and scare the birds away. They wear clothes all the time, so they stink. If you stink, you can't hunt. It scares the animals away.

— Diary entry, 1972 -- from conversations with a Kayapo Indian boy, a guide for the Front Line construction crew.

On a map, it was only a thin blue line. In men's imaginations, it was the road to the Promise Land. In reality it was the route to immeasurable devastation. Verdant forest, pristine rivers, unknown species of plant and animal life, whole populations of natives, families, cultures and traditional values are being lost along the way.

In ten years a million settlers migrated from the South looking for a new life in the Amazon. Families without land, without work, without hope, came to the new frontier to begin again. Small town like Itaituba, Altamira, Jacareacanga, and Humaita' exploded and became centers of commerce overnight. Whole tracts of land were burned and cleared and Agrovilas, or agricultural mini-cities, were built for the colonists. It was the Wild, Wild, West of Brazil, where a man could go from rags to riches overnight. All he needed was a little luck, a lot of courage, and a place to call his own.



146

The Brazilian military leaders sees the Amazon as a way to solve two different and unrelated problems: National security and abject poverty. They're killing two birds with one stone by transplanting thousands of itinerant farmers, starving families, and colonists from the south and the deserts of the Nordeste, into a jungle whose average rainfall was over 100 inches. A whole disenfranchised population from the south migrating north to the jungle in search of a better life. An empty forest would be, in the words of Gen. Emilio Garrastazu Medici, the president of Brazil, "a land without men for men without land." I think it will be more like a land without promise for men without hope.

— Diary entry, The Front Line between Itaituba and Jacareacanga, 1972

The Government is giving everyone a plot of land, a small house, tools, a yearly stipend, an interest-free loan and enough seed to plant the first two years of crops. Where there was once only forest now stand little Agrovilas, or agrarian communities of neat, white, three-room wooden houses lined up along unpaved streets. Each community has a school, a makeshift infirmary, a storehouse, and if they're lucky, a church. Co-ops are being created to distribute crops among the people. These isolated, little towns appear along the road every 100 kilometers with a single homestead every half kilometer on either side of the road in between.

— Diary Entry, 1972, Brasil Novo, an agrovila 54 Km West of Altamira

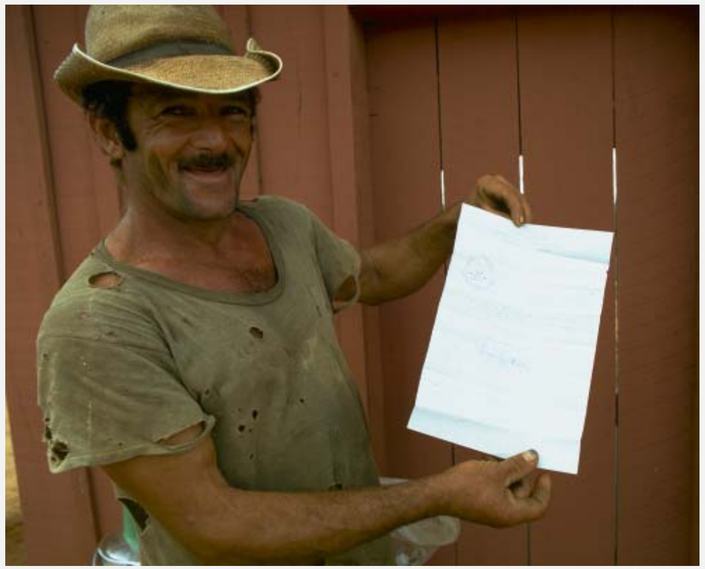
148

The first two years of crops were poor. I spent most of my time clearing the land. I had little time left for planting. Next year should be better. After all, I've got two years of hard experience behind me. It's a hard life, but a good one. It's my own to do what I want.

— Adoao Merois de Rosa, known as Patria Amada, the first colonist on the Transamazonic Highway, near Posto 54, Altamira, Para (1972)

Today I met the first colonist on the Transamazonic highway . His name is Adoao Merois da Rosa, but everyone calls him "Patria Amada", or The One Who Loves His Country. He and his wife walked 1200 miles from Rio Grande do Sul to the capitol of Brazilia to ask President Medici to give them a plot of land along the Transamazonic highway so they could begin a new life. He had a deed to prove it, too. Signed by the president of Brazil. They got their wish and Brazil got a hero.

— Diary Entry, July 29, 1972
Serraria Km 46, West of Altamira



"Amazonia - Integrar para nao entregar." (The Amazon - Use it or lose it.)

— Motto on colonist's T-shirt, Front Line Construction camp, near Jacareacanga, Para', 1972

*"With God
I will win"*

*— Bumber sticker on truck at
Hotel Altamira,
Altamira, 1972*

In 1971 when the Transamazonic Highway reached Humaita' a hundred people a day came to Ji-Parana'. They brought a lot of children,hope, and malaria with them. The place has never been the same since.

— Padre Marquese de Silva, Missionary, Ji-Parana', Rondonia

154

I had ten children. But five died before they reached puberty. Life is hard here, but we have hope.

— Colonist, Brasil Novo Agrovila, Transamazonic highway, 1972

Over the next ten years engineers drowned millions of acres of virgin forest behind huge hydroelectric dams and lit up whole areas of the jungle. Politicians and prospectors uprooted various Indian tribes and discussed the merits of *integration*. Thousands of lives were lost to malaria, yellow fever, typhus, diarrhea and other diseases while thousands more were displaced by economic hardships. An area the size of Belgium was cut or burned down for the sake of cocoa and cattle. Innumerable, yet undiscovered, species of flora and fauna were decimated and the skies filled with clouds of arcane smoke. Many said that this was progress and a price had to be paid. Others said it was a crime against Nature. Most agreed that it was madness, but the seeds of destruction had already been planted.

Within ten years after cutting down the first tree, the Transamazonic highway was almost non-existent, most of it washed away by torrential rains, or taken back by the jungle. The agrovilas were practically empty, some totally abandoned. The soils, leached by tropical rains, stopped producing cops. Government subsidies ended and life got worse. In the end, thousands of homesteaders abandoned the land. The great socio-agrarian experiment was an indisputable failure and men looked for other ways to exploit the land, other ways to survive. Many went to the cities looking for work. Many more went deeper into the jungle looking for gold.

During the twenty years since the beginning of the Great Experiment, it is estimated that over one million miners staked claims throughout the Amazon looking for gold. They dug holes, ripped up forest, dredged rivers and uncovered untold amounts of the yellow ore. In one year alone, they poured twelve tons of mercury into the great tributaries of the Amazon, and ten times that into the atmosphere. They built over 750 clandestine airstrips throughout the forest, and made new cities where there was once only unbroken jungle. They invaded the lands of the Yanomani, the Nambi-kwara, the Kayapo, the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau, and the Xingu, looking for gold, and they waged war on any an all who resisted them.

In time, there was talk everywhere about enormous deposits of the yellow ore found all over the jungle. The word went out all up and down the road and the gold miners came.

156

As of September 26, 1972:
40 million cubic Meters of earth moved.
4000 meters of wooden bridges built.
120 million square meters of deforestation.

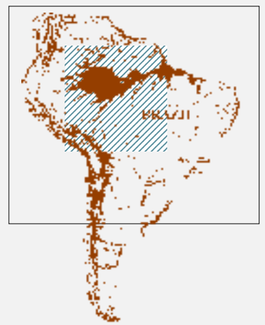
The Transamazonic highway is one of our generation's commitment with the future. It's our contribution: a doorway to the jungle.

— Mario Andreazza, Minister of Transportation, at the inauguration of the first completed stretch of road between Altamira - Itaituba, Km 1254, September 26, 1972

Abandonment & Displacement

"If you move a seed, it will die."

— Brazilian proverb
Sr. Antonio
Agrovila Brasil Novo, 46 km West
of Altamira on the Transamazonic



"I want to visit and photograph several of the Indian tribes. The Xingu in the Tapajos, the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau in Rondonia, and theYanomami in Roraima. "

"I'm sure we can arrange that. But you have to understand that they will expect some kind of, let's say, gratuity."

"What kind of gratuity?"

"If it's money, and with the work you want to do, I'd say that something around ten thousand US dollars. But, I'm sure after I talk to the chiefs that they'll settle for two thousand. Up front."

"What do I get for that money?"

"Well, we can arrange a week, maybe two weeks at one of the villages."

"Where will the money go? To them?"

"Well, not exactly. It goes into an Indian Trust fund we've set up. Then we'll parcel the money out as we see fit."

"Do they get all the money?"

"There are administrative costs for sure, but they will get most of it no doubt."

"Can I give something other than money?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know. What do the Indians need?"

"Planes, jeeps, boats, food, gas...all the essentials."

"I can have two thousand dollars worth of gasoline delivered to any village you choose."

"You can? How can you do that?"

"Give me the phone, I'll make one call to Rio and it's taken care of."

"We didn't realize you were so connected."

"Why would that make a difference?"

"Well, it doesn't really, but we can't accept that as payment."

"Why not?"

"We prefer the money, you'll have to pay money and in American dollars."

"OK. How do I know the Indians will get it. I know they'll get the gas. How do I know you'll pay them the money?"

"You have to trust us. Listen, there was a Japanese film company that came in here and promised twenty thousand for film rights and never paid. We have to protect the Indians, their rights. You'll take picture then go home and sell them and what do they get?"

"This isn't a commercial venture. It's for publication as educational material. There's no real money in it."

"Everyone takes advantage of the Indians. We have to protect them."

"Then let me deliver the gasoline. Tomorrow."

"No, you must deal with us directly."

"Why? The Chief of the Kayapo is sitting here next to me. Let me deal with him directly. He can protect himself. He's a chief."

"That's our job, not his, to protect the Indians."

"Like you've been protecting them for twenty years? Are you serious?"

"Be careful what you say."

"I don't have to be careful. You do. I don't trust you. I trust him. If he trusts you, he's a fool. The history of the government Indian Agency is legendary. You've done more to harm the Indians than to help them. You take advantage of them, we don't. You have no right to demand money from the press. It's extortion."

"No, it's not extortion. It's simply our policy."

— Conversation between the author and Antonio Vitor De Sa' Wanderely, Chief Assessor, National Foundation of Indians (FUNAI)

The old Indian leaned out of his hammock and rummaged through a sack. He pulled out a small bunch of green bananas and offered them to me.

"Pilha," he said, and held up a size C Eveready battery and a transistor radio.

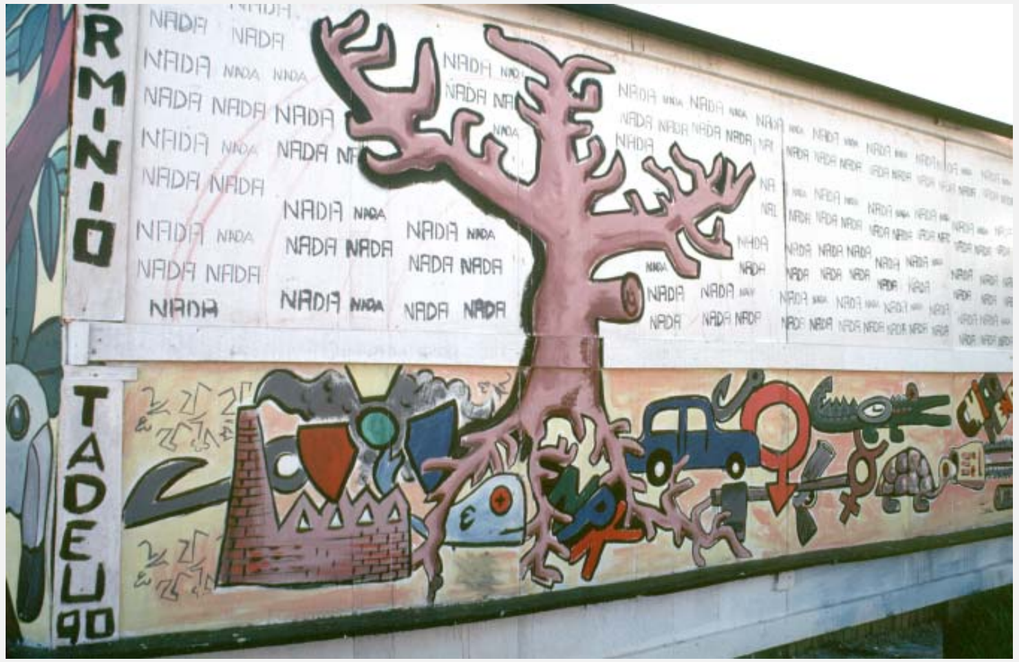
"Morto," he added. It was dead. I told him I didn't have any size C batteries, only size AA and he didn't understand. I spoke Portuguese. He spoke Yanomami. He smiled through eyes full of glaucoma.

"Chow," he said, and he shook my hand gently.

— Yanomami Indian at the Mahauteri Maloca, Paapiu Airstrip, in the Parima Serra of the Surucucu', Roraima

In 1820 there were 128,000 white men and 2 million Indians in the Amazon. Today there are less than 200,000 Indians and 8 million white men.

-- Padre Alberto Bresciani, Salesian Missionary, Porto Velho, Rondonia



"Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing..."

"We want you to look to us who are suffering great injustices. We need you to help us, since these problems aren't going well for us Indians. The gold miners forced us onto boats and burnt our house and took three Indians prisoner for forced labor to Boa Vista. On February 25th they burnt five house and took five Indian, leaving the women and children abandoned. And a third time [they] burnt eight houses and took away 26 Indians without counting the children. All this happened to the Miang village. They have destroyed a total of 14 houses. They have cut the fences around our gardens down three times with chain-saws. Now everything is destroyed, our gardens are finished and we can't plant. We're defenseless and without shelter, without anything to eat, without houses to live in, without forest to work and everyone is getting malaria and we don't want to abandon the same place that our grandfathers and great-grandfathers lived. We want you to take some action over this, because we aren't animals..."

— Excerpts from a letter of denunciation by the Indians of the Miang Village in the Surucucu', sent to the Commission of Action by the Citizenship (Taken from Roraima: O Aviso da Morte - The Death Notice)

Everyone forgot us. The Government, the miners, the whole world forgot us. It makes me sick because every ten minutes a planeload of pure gold flies right over the maloca and the Indians are here inside dying because there's no help anywhere. No medicine, no supplies. I don't even have a radio. The Indians are dying of malaria and other sickness I don't even recognize. They are going to disappear and I can't do anything to stop it.

About eighty-five Indians, counting children, live there. The gold miners have polluted the igarape' that runs by the village so the Indians can't drink the water without getting sick. The women have to walk eight miles into the jungle to find fish not poisoned by mercury and feces. There are beer and coke cans all over the floor of the maloca where they live. One of the Indians has a Playboy foldout hung on the wall near his hammock. The children don't know how to hunt anymore. All they want to do is listen to the radio or watch TV down at the airstrip. Their culture is dying and the miners don't care. No one cares.

— Dr. Antonio Milimtino Pedroso Junior, National Foundation of Indians (FUNAI) at the Mahauteri Yanomami Maloca , at the end of the Paapiu airstrip, in the Parima Serra Region of the Surucucu', Roraima

I grew up in the great desert of the Northeast. As a boy, I collected firewood for my family. That was my job growing up. Find firewood to cook with and keep warm. But there wasn't much wood because there's not much water and so not much grows. It's a desert, a desert where once it went eleven years without rain. Well, it got so hot sometimes I'd faint and my older brother would have to carry me and the wood, too. He'd carry me home and leave me lying next to the pile of wood so our old man would think I had collected it, so I wouldn't get whipped. My older brother vowed that when he grew up he'd make a run for it and go somewhere where there was plenty of water and and plenty of wood.

Eventually, we grew up. I stayed home, being the youngest. But he took a wife, had six kids, and moved them all by bus across the Amazon to Rondonia, as far away from the deserts of the *Nordeste* as he could get. He wrote us and said it was a paradise. He said more rain fell in one week in Rondonia than he'd ever seen in his entire life. Wood was everywhere, too. Tall trees full of it. He said he could make it in Rondonia.

The government gave him a plot of land. Fifty hectares in the middle of the nowhere. He cut trees down to make a path, then make a house then make a living. He cut and then burned the wood because no man could ever move the trees. They were too large, too many of them. He planted rice and beans and waited.

The rains came. They came and came and came and wouldn't stop coming. It almost drowned him out. His kids got cold and wet and two died of pneumonia because he couldn't get to the doctor, he was so far into the jungle. Spring came and the harvest was a good one. They'd survived the water and forest. They'd make it now. The next year came and they planted again, and again they had a pretty good year. But, in the third year the plants didn't grow. It was a bad year. The soil was no good. So, he burned another fifty hectares like the first and planted again. The jungle was immense. There was more wood there than could ever be burned. Besides, he was deep in the forest and no-one would know if he was burning fifty or five hundred hectares. So he cut and burned all for the sake of planting. If he didn't plant they'd all die.

One day, the government people came. They said they saw him burning. Said they'd seen it on a photograph taken at night from five hundred miles up by something called a satellite. He didn't understand but said yes he'd burned the land and so what. They said it was against the law. He said he didn't have a choice, that it was either sacrifice the land or his children. There was plenty of land, he said. But he only had four children left. What could he do? They didn't care and slapped a huge fine on him. He didn't have the money. He only had the crops which were still in the ground. They took away his house and his tools and told him he'd have to pay up or go to jail. So, he ran. He took his wife and four kids and packed up everything they owned and got on a bus and headed toward Acre State. He'd heard there was plenty of land there, and you could burn without the government knowing. That's what he heard and he believed it.

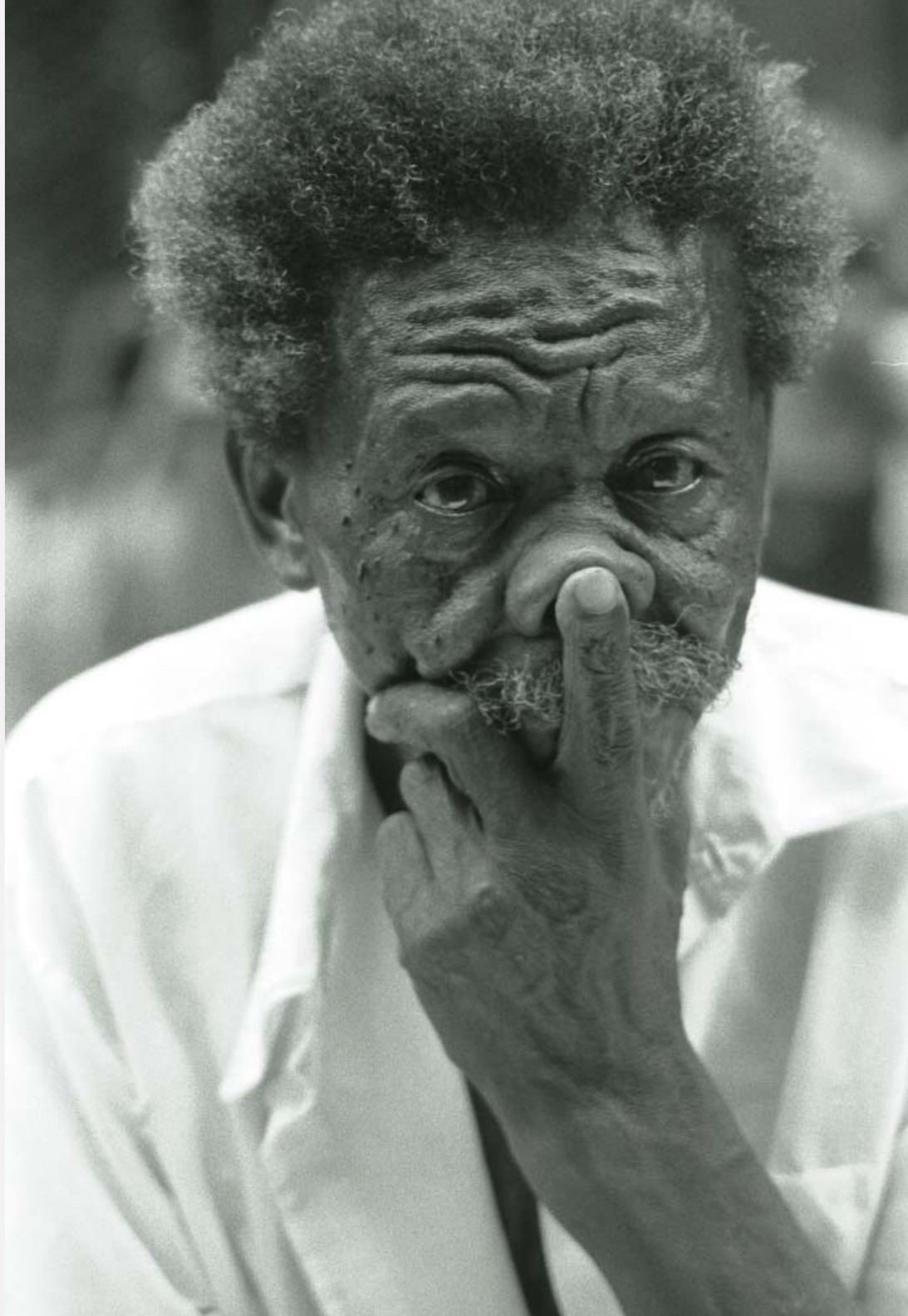
So he went West but he never made it to Acre. He made it as far as the Madeira River near Abuna, on the Bolivian border. He made it as far as the famous *Vai-Quem-Quer* gold mine. He took up mining to feed his family. Cutting and burning and planting was too dangerous. If the rains didn't get you, the jungle did. If not the jungle, then the government. Mining gold was a better bet, as long as you didn't die of malaria or a gunshot or drinking. And the gold would never run out. It was like the water that fell from the sky. It was endless. That's what he said. That's what he'd heard about the Madeira, and he believed it.

By the end of the first summer his youngest boy died of diarrhea and his wife got so sick from influenza she almost died, too. So, she took the kids and came home to her parents. The gold mine was no place to raise a child she said, and she left. He promised to send money and come home when he'd struck it rich. That was six years ago and he hasn't been heard from since.

In the end, he probably lost everything. Or maybe he's dead. And all because from the start there was too much desert, too much water, too much wood, too much land, too much gold, and finally, too much hope.

I know this, because I ended up marrying his wife. She told me everything. Now, I'm raising his four kids besides my own.

— A taxicab driver, Manaus



An old woman came up to me and took the photographs from my hands. They were shots of Brasil Novo, the same Agrovila, I had visited twenty years ago. She looked at each one slowly. When she came to the one showing the houses all lined up new, painted white, with picket fences and flowers in front, she began to cry.

"Look, look," she sobbed, and pointed to the photo of the houses all painted white. "Look how it used to be. I'd forgotten. It was beautiful then. We lived where it was beautiful once. Now it's ugly."

A man grabbed them out of her hand. He looked hard at the photograph and said, "You didn't forget. They did. The bastards in Brasilia." He turned to me. "Stay a while," he said. "We'll tell you what happened here, what happened in the last twenty years."

Someone in the back of the bar laughed out loud. Without looking around, he shouted, "That should take ten minutes, because nothing has happened here in twenty years."

— Anonymous Colonists, Brasil Novo, 46 km West of Altamira the first Agrovila built on the Transamazonic Highway in 1972

We ought to rebuild this stretch of rail and just push the train back and forth from one end of town to the other. How else will I get these things out from the front of my house?"

— Resident of Mutum, Rondonia

I squatted in the road, in front of one of the wooden clapboard houses. A man came out and squatted down next to me.

"I've heard that other Agrovilas made something of themselves. They grew. We didn't," he said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"The government put us here and promised to help us. They gave us land, money, tools and seed to plant. That lasted four years, then they were gone. The road is impossible. Even if you plant you can't get the crops to market. No one can use the road in the winter. Too much mud and water."

"Why don't you leave here?" I asked.

He drew something in the dirt with his finger. "If you run the beast will get you," he said. "If you stay, he'll eat you. It's hopeless. The only thing we have left is our despair."

— Sr. Antonio, Colonist living in Brasil Novo Agrovila since 1971

A colonizing company called Trivelato got a million hectares from INCRA and they promoted a huge advertising campaign. Fooled everyone with promises of a paradise. In 1984 there were twenty families. Today there's six. They came from Parana', where there's little land. Those colonists believed that they had a future and a lot of land waiting for them up here. When they got here they couldn't find their land. The maps were wrong. There weren't any roads. So they complained to Trivelato. Promises were made to cut roads into the jungle to their lots -- some of them were 30 km into the jungle. Trivelato brought in six topographers. Two got malaria and the rest took off. The families who remained now work in the tin mines. Farmers turned miners. No dream there.

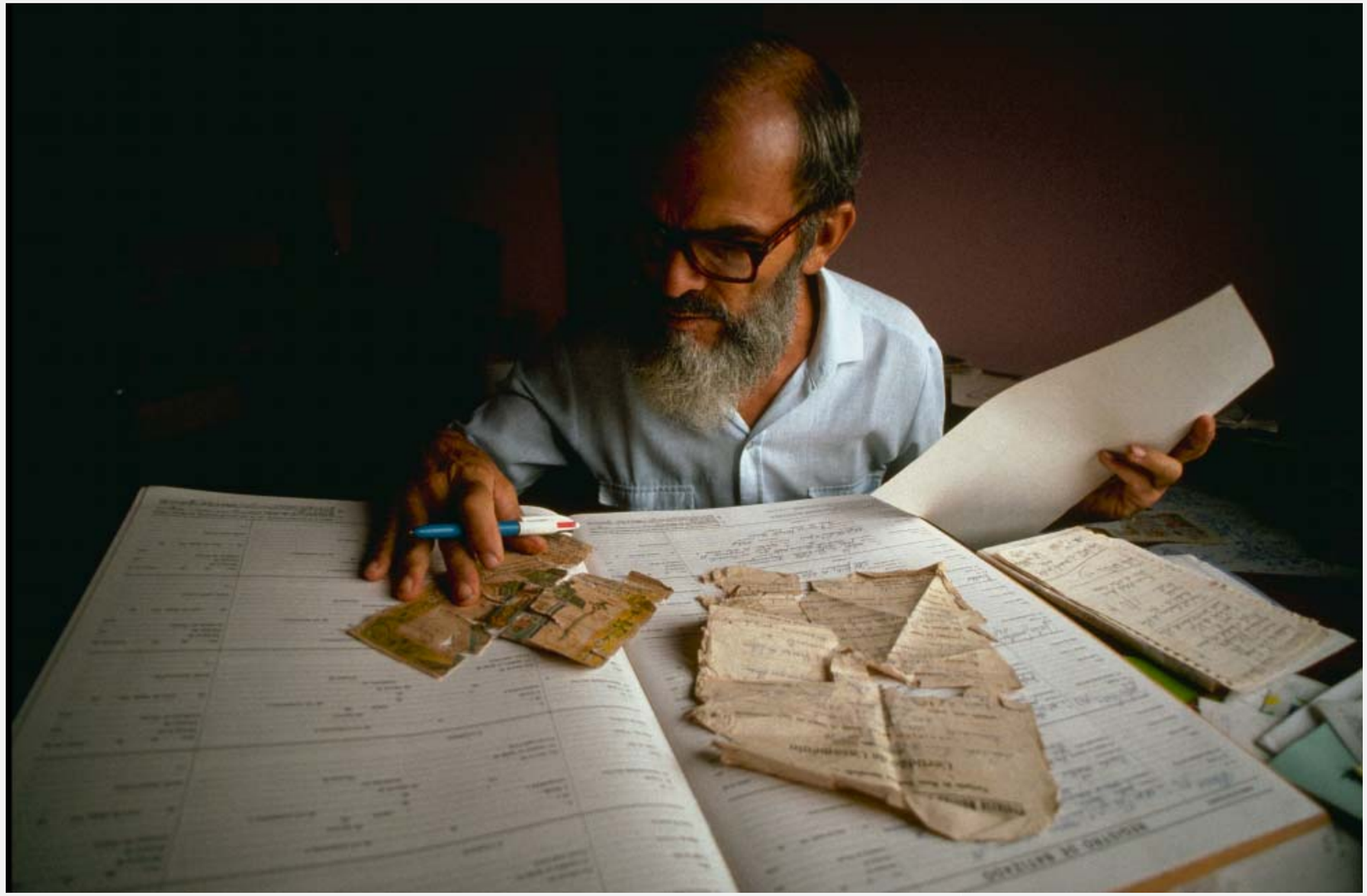
— Padre Adolfo Rohl, known as Padre Moses, Missionary, Humaita

When you get into the Straits of Breves, near the mouth of the Amazon River, you can hear the cries of children's voices along the river. The mothers come out in canoes with their naked babies and pinch them until they cry. They paddle out to meet ships like ours and hold the babies up in the air , waiting for the passengers to throw food or things overboard. Once, I wrapped some food and soap and a comb in a plastic bag and threw it as hard as I could toward one of the canoes. Two other mothers saw it and paddled furiously toward the plastic bag, but it sank into the river before any of them could get to it.

— Anonymous passenger on the Haley's Comet boat, nearing Belem

Twenty-five years ago, you'd see crocodiles along these banks. And birds. Today, with so many boats and people you don't see them. Humans come and the animals go. Once, the Solimoes river was empty. Today it's full of people. Things change.

— Jose' Ferreira Lima, itinerant seller of wares, on the boat to Borba, Madeira river.

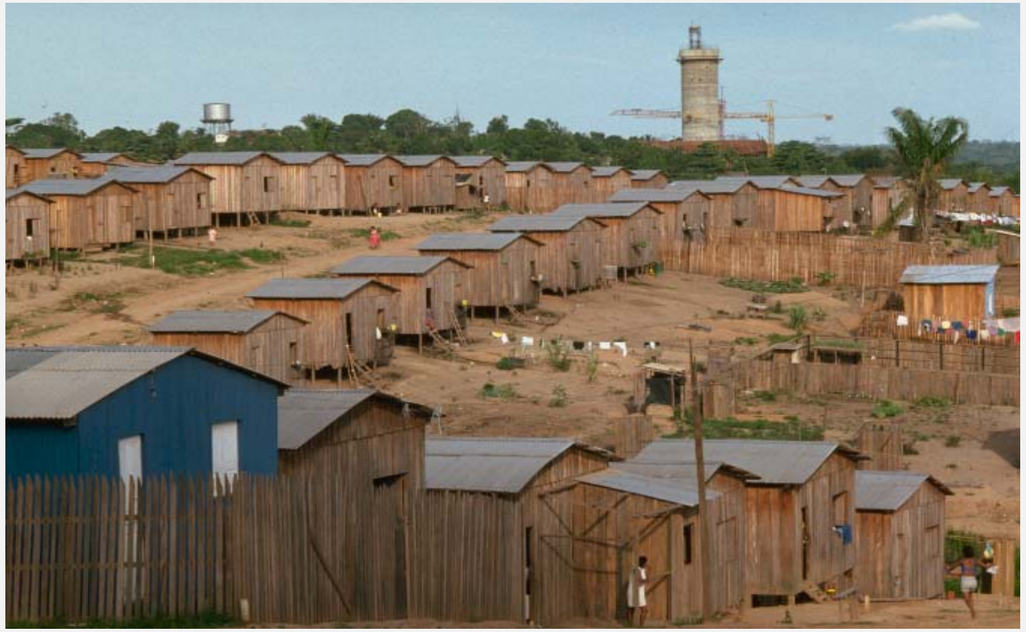


I've had this one for more than five months. I promised the woman I'd bring it back in two, but the rains came earlier this year. Now she has to wait. Maybe next year. It's too bad for her. She can't do anything, can't go anywhere without identification. This is all she has. Without this paper, she's a non-person. Might as well not exist.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, known as Padre Moses Missionary, Humaita'

Way up on the Ipixuna River, Eletronorte started to build a dam but quit before it was finished. They left it there. They paid a symbolic fee and sent people away. Probably ten families, sixty or seventy people. It's thirty eight kilometers from here. There's a beautiful chapel there, but it's been abandoned.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, known as Padre Moses Missionary, Humaita'



Look at those houses. It makes me sick. They all have tin roofs. In the summer they turn into ovens. They're unlivable. And they have no water, yet the government is building a new water tower within sight of this housing project. But the water is for the rich, not these people. We call them the ballot people, because they voted for the sonofabitch who promised them everything then forgot them as soon as he was in office.

— Luiz Campos Xavier, owner of a plant store in Rio Branco, Acre State

This place is poor. Very poor. We're ***Seringueiros,*** *rubber tappers. I've lived here twenty-one years. I was born here, like my parents and their parents and their parents before them. My dad is seventy-six years old, mom is sixty-two. I'm married with one child. I think my dad is going to die. He's been sick, and there's no help anywhere. However, to hope is good. Hope is better than death.*

— Antonio Texeira Mendes, Cousin to Chico Mendes, Seringal Cachoeira, Nova Fazendinha, near Xapuri, Acre State

There's no school here. The Preacher is trying to get one built. He found a missionary in Fortaleza who'll come and teach for fifty dollars a month. There are only twenty kids left. There used to be forty-eight families here. Now there are only five. The others left and their houses torn down. Used for firewood. There's no church, either. There are other agrovilas that grew, that made something of themselves. This one died. No one took charge. The Government abandoned us.

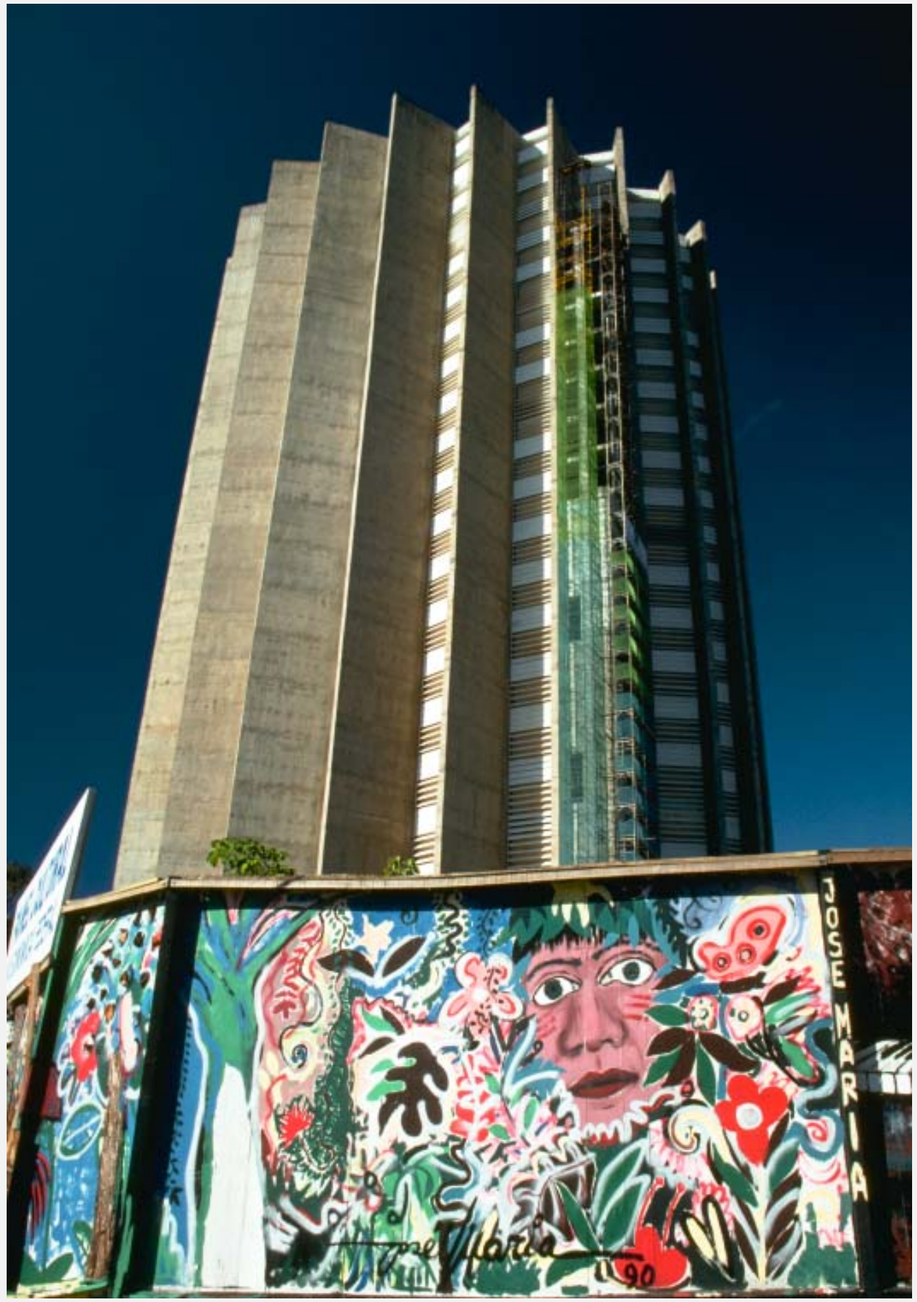
— Sr. Antonio, Colonist, Agrovila Brasil Novo, 46 km West of Altamira, Para'

Balbina dam is a disaster. It drowned almost a quarter million square kilometers of forest, destroyed the ecosystem of the area, buried over 150 archeological sites, displaced hundreds of Indians, and in the end, what do we have? A lake 250 kilometers long filled with hundreds of kilometers of mud, stagnant water covered with a layer of yellow scum that's killing all the fish and making the water undrinkable. The Balbina dam was a fucking lie. It gave the land owners in the south money and for us, nothing. In the end, there are always two stories. You have to decide which is true.

— Young woman, in Armando's bar, Manaus

The Indians love the color of green. Not of the forest, but of the American dollar.

— Antonio Azevedo Correa, ecologist, National Institute of Amazonian Research (INPA)



When you find a small community that has survived all this, you'll find they are all Amazoneses, or Paranaenses or Gauchos. Generally, they stick together by custom. At Km 250 on the Transamazonic you'll find a community from the Nordeste. But after three or four years they begin to lose and forget their customs. The radio and television helps them to forget. There's no social structure to keep the traditions alive. For many of them, the only thing which unites them is religion and faith. That and suffering.

— Padre Moises Adolfo Rohl, known as Padre Moses, Missionary, Humaita'

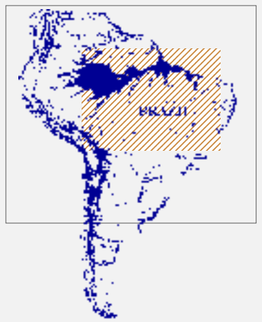
The TV stations from the South have been in this area for eight years, preparing these people for the invasion of their land and life by a different culture from the south. Even the radio has stopped playing Forro' -- the traditional Nordestino music -- it plays mostly Sertanejo music from Rio Grande do Sul or other parts of the South.

— Padre Luiz , Parish Priest Xapuri', Acre State

Violence, Rage & Death

The Amazon is full of violence and rage. Even the forest rages when it burns. This place is hard to look at. Everything around me reminds me of my own rage, and I can't stand it.

-- Colonist from Rondonia



She sat the man down on a chair with the boy on his lap. The boy had curly bown hair. He looked about five or six years old, and was crying softly . The man was gaunt. He looked like he had malaria a few times. His beard was several days old. He was nervous and wouldn't look at the doctor. She pulled her stethoscope up on her ears and began listening all over the boy's body.

When she was done, she gave the man two bottles of medicine. One for the boy's cough, the other for his chest.

"He has a fever," she told him. "Give him this and take him home. He'll be fine in a few days."

The man looked relieved and gathered the boy into his arms and went out.

"He'll be dead before morning," she said without remorse. It was a prognosis, nothing more.

"Why didn't you tell him that?" I asked.

"Why should I? It will only make him more unhappy. He didn't bring him to me ten days ago when the boy first got sick. I could have helped him then. But it's too late now. No one can help the boy. Not here, not in the middle of nowhere."

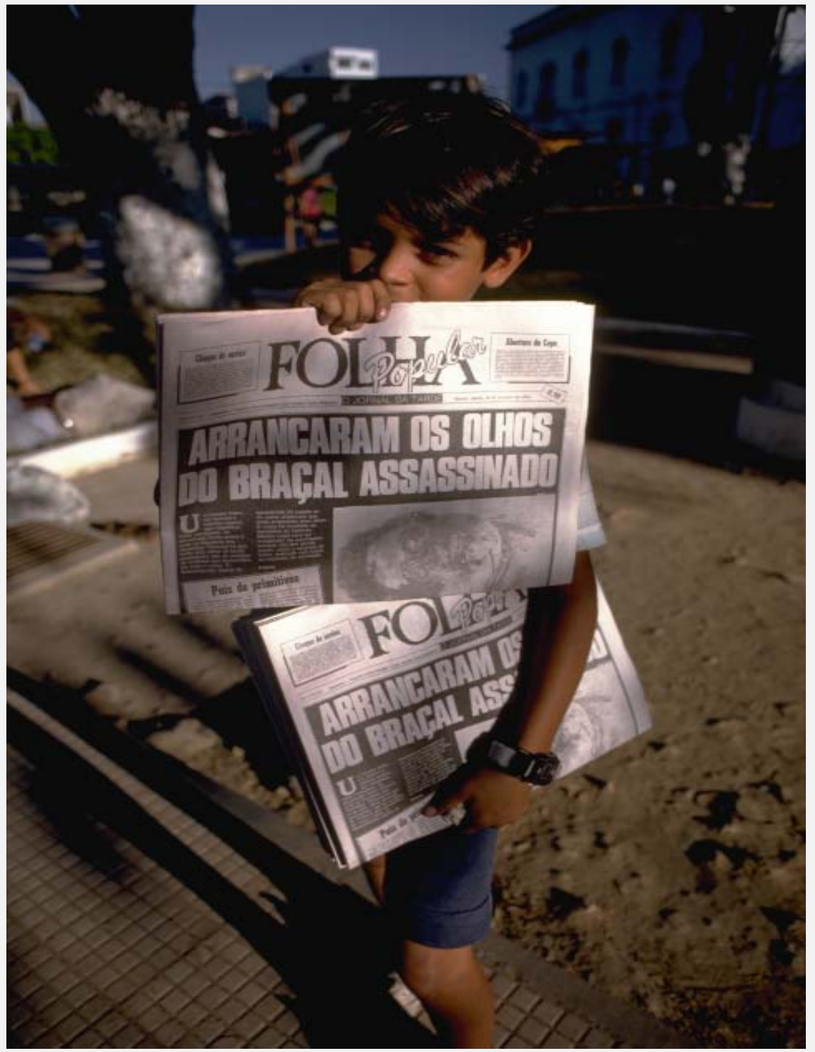
"Why didn't he bring him here when he first got sick?" I asked.

"Because he lives upriver. Two days by boat, but he didn't have a boat. So he finally had to walk. He carried the boy, carried him four days through the jungle, but it was too much for the child. He killed his son. He killed him because he waited. That's why," she said.

— Conversation with Dra. Elizabeta Lisboa dos Santos, Pediatrician, in a makshift hospital on the Araraquarina River, between Altamira andI taituba.

The world is mad at us. They say we're destroying the forest, the lungs of the world. That we're polluting the sacred forest and the skies with fire and smoke. And the world is preoccupied, occupied with trying to save the forest, a forest which doesn't exist the way they believe it does.

— Elton Rohnelt, Owner of
Goldmazon Mining Company



"Eyes of laborer ripped out before being shot."
(Newspaper Headline, Folha Popular,September 6,1989)

Manaus has more than forty murders a month. There's an economy at work here. A murder a day, a photograph a day. For the front page. One a day, everyday, forever.

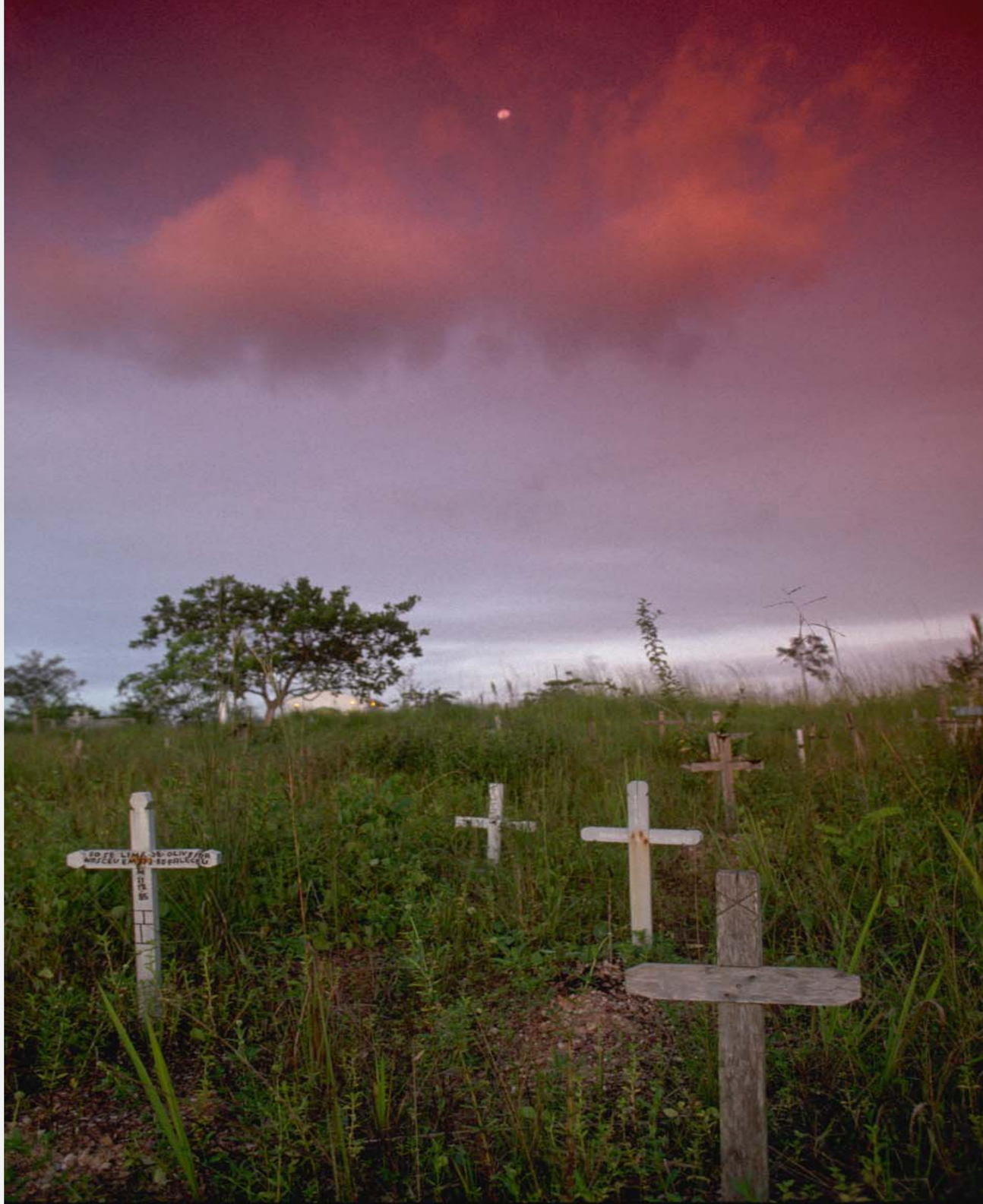
— Padre Jacy Cogo,
Salesian Missionary, Manaus

Alta Floresta was built by a man from the south. A Gaucho named Ariosto da Riva. He came to the Amazon in 1975 and planned the whole thing out. I know because I've been driving a truck down there delivering fish for years. But when the gold miners started coming and they found gold, the so-called Mafia took over and things got out of hand. That's when Ariosto hired a pistoleiro, a hit-man, called Ditao who in turn hired twenty more guns. They killed over eight hundred people in four months. Not just men, either, but women, children and young boys, too. They cleaned up that town. Anyone who didn't look like a Gaucho, someone from the South, was shot on site. Executed. I know, because there were many times that whole families would beg me to take them out of the city at night. I'd hide them in my cargo. If you had a face like a Paranaense or Maranaense, you were dead. They wanted only Gauchos left alive.

— "Liberal" Edvaldo Campos, a store owner in Itaituba

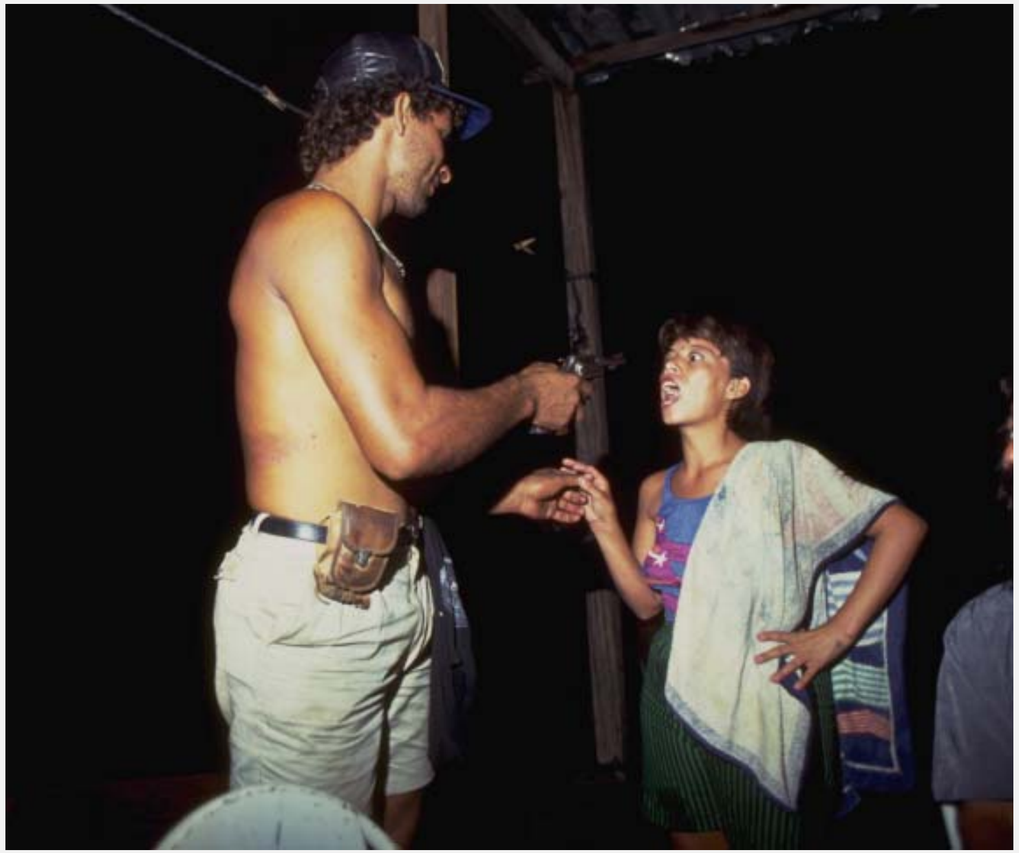
A dead man is only a dead man.

— Anonymous gold miner, while burying his murdered brother, Altamira



Today there are over forty murders a month here. Five years ago there were over 7,000 gold dredges on the Tapajos River. Today, there are fewer dredges. Less gold, but more murder.

— Mayor of Itaituba, Para'



There's a place in Mato Grosso called Mata-Mata. That means Kill-Kill. *That tells you everything about the place.*

— Padre Mario Zingarini,
Missionary in Manicore'

"I want to eat"

The government has a new study with Surucucu' snakes. They outfit them with radio monitors and track their movements from space. Can you believe it? They're more interested in tracking a snake in the jungle than feeding their own people.

— Anonymous colonist in a bar, Humaita'

I hitched a ride with a Bishop in the middle of the night. The road was full of pot holes and it was raining. We passed a dead boy in the middle of the road. He was hit by a pickup truck trying to avoid a pot hole. A woman was holding the boy's head in her lap. His face dripped with rain and blood. As we passed by, the woman looked up crying, reached out with one hand toward us and called out. The Bishop didn't stop. He didn't even slow down. "He's probably already dead," he said, and we continued down the road in silence.

— Diary entry, the author, on the way to Ji-Parana, Rondonia Ji-Parana', Rondonia

"It's easy to wage a war. It's hard to put out the fires of the multinational corporations."

-- Gold miner's art, Creporizinho gold mine, on the Crepori River

On the wall: "Take your hands of f the Amazon. Get out imperialists!"
On the tree protector: "Grow Sibipiruna. The people are waiting for you."

Where there's a road, there's a fire.

-- A rancher from Rondonia

Gold is responsible for the end of the family. The miners, they leave a wife and who knows how many kids behind. Those are the ones I minister to. The ones without fathers or husbands. The women call it whoring after gold. That's what they call it.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, known as Padre Moses, Abuna, Rondonia

"Disarm yourselves. No more violence. Black and White, we are all brothers, we all have the blood of one nation. What does violence bring! but unemployment, ignorance, poverty, hunger."

— Slogan on placard carried in parade during Carnival

The hospitals in Manaus are shit, pure shit. They operated once but it didn't help. He went to Brazilia to a better hospital. My mother's there with him now. I want to cry when I talk about it. It's not right to say so, but if I knew who did this to my brother, I wouldn't kill him, I'd put him in a wheelchair, paralyzed like my poor brother, and he'd know what suffering my brother is going through. He's a beautiful person, full of life and vitality, a beautiful person and his life is ruined because of that shit who shot him.

— Washington Luiz A. Alcantara, 18, on his older brother who is paralyzed from the neck down from a drive-by shooting.

Other countries sacrificed their ecological and natural resources to grow and prosper. Why shouldn't Brazil?

— Rene', owner of five houses of prostitution, Porto Velho, Rondonia

They fined me 11 million cruzados for a fire which burned only twenty-two hectares. But I already paid the damn tax, and I had permission to burn. I just didn't have the papers on hand when the government agency people showed up. They didn't care. They just gave me the fine and told me to pay it or I'd go to jail. Now I've got to get the order rescinded before it goes through. I've lost two days of work because of this and my ranch is fifty kilometers away.

— A rancher waiting in the office of Dr. Paulo Benecia, Director of IBAMA, Acre State

Chico Mendes, rubber tapper, founder of the Rural Worker's Syndicate of Xapuri' Acre State. Murdered on his doorstep the evening of December 22, 1988.

My father was a Nordestino, but he worked as a rubber tapper, a *seringueiro.* By the time I was nine, I knew how to tap the rubber trees and gather latex. I was going to be a *seringueiro* like my father. We lived in the rubber tapper region near the Bolivian border. I don't remember how I discovered that we lived near a political exile from the Communist Conspiracy Movement. He was an army official who joined the Prestes insurgents. He was a great kid, only twenty years old or so. When the Prestes insurgents were destroyed, he was arrested and jailed, but he escaped and took off for Bolivia where he joined the Communist movement there. But they wouldn't leave him alone and hunted him down until he finally went into hiding in the jungle on the frontier. Eventually, he made friends with some of the *seringueiros* who taught him how to tap the trees and make rubber.

One day he passed by our house. I don't know how it was he got his hands on month-old newspapers, but he did. And during a conversation with my father, who hated the plantation bosses because they exploited us, he convinced him to let me spend the weekend at his house. Well, for the next three years, spent every weekend with that guy. I had to walk three hours each way through the jungle to do it, too.

During those days, he taught me how to read. I studied every Saturday and Sunday, until sunrise, then I had to high-tail it back home to work on the plantation. I read those newspapers he got from God knows where. He explained everything to me and I became interested in the plight of the rubber tapper. He lent me a transistor radio, and I started listening to the international news from Moscow, the BBC in London and Voice of America. This was the beginning of my anger, my rage. It was the beginning of my fight for the rights of my people, the *seringueiros*, the rubber tapper, and those of us who were oppressed by powerful people.

One day, he said to me, ' Today the workers are being beaten down, but no matter how great the massacre, there will always be a seed which will remain and grow. One day, you will have to stand with them, even if it's eight or ten years from now.'

His name was Euclides Fernando Tavora. He got sick and decided to risk going into the city to find a doctor. He didn't think that they were still hunting him. He went but didn't come back. I never saw him again, so he must've died.

After that, I felt lost. But I began to articulate my ideas with my fellow workers, and because I knew how to read, I began to discover how much we were all being robbed by the rubber barons. That's when the seed Euclides talked about came to life in me. It was then that I began secretly working for the freedom and rights of the *seringueiro.*"

— Interview with Chico Mendes, Secretary General of the Worker's Syndicate, Xapuri', Acre State, 1988

"They murdered Chico Mendes - Syndicate leader and defender of life -- Xapuri , 12/22/88"

"*The president of the Rural Workers' Syndicate of Pedro Canario (Esperito Santos), Valdicio Barbosa dos Santos, killed last Tuesday, September 12th, is the 42nd person murdered in 1989 due to conflicts related to land reform.*

Included in these 42 deaths computed by the Movement of The Landless are the two Yanomani Indians murdered on the 11th of August in the Serra dos Surucucu, in Roraima.

The MTL has indicated that there is a proliferation of paramilitary groups who are acting in favor of the farmers and landowners. It was cited that there is an encampment of 300 hired gunmen in the Nova Cantu municipal area in the State of Para' and another group that acts in Esperito Santos."

— Newspaper article, The Sao Paulo*, September 28, 1989, page 7*

If an angel came down from heaven, and promised me that my death would strengthen our fight, it would be worth dying. But experience teaches us very differently. I want to live. Public demonstrations and burials won't save the Amazon.

— Chico Mendes, shortly before he was murdered. His work goes on.

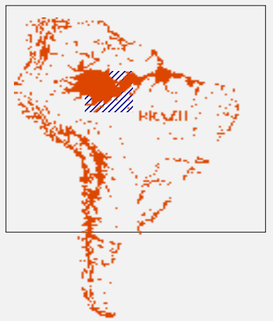
When the last chiefs die the sky will fall upon the earth. And the stars will fall and everything will be dark forever.

— Yanomami Indian Legend

Whores & Forgetting

There's only gold and women. I have no use for the rest.

— *Anonymous gold miner*



Printed August 5, 1992

I watched a man watch a whore one night. He was a white man, leaning against a street light. It made his skin look greenish-yellow. It made him look like he was going to get sick. The whores were across the street thrown up against a doorway. They were black. They had on dresses that made you crazy. Tight-assed and white and silk and running from their nipples to their knees and you wanted to run your hand the whole length of the curves. They knew it, too, those beauties. I could tell by the way they made sassy remarks and sexy gestures with their bodies. The tallest one, she had black, black, hair and her lips were too big for her mouth but you wanted to just go and smack on them. They had a sound all their own. And red. God, they were red and they kept saying to the guy looking, "Com'on over here, com'on over here," but he was afraid. Or broke. Or both. Anyway, he didn't move. He just kept looking.

He wanted her and she wanted his money. And the light was green and blue. Electric blue. Ray Charles blue. It was all iridescent blue eye-shadow and dark blue skin and wet pavement radiant-blue and red lips and tight-assed white silk dresses and smells of skin and sweat and sperm and heat and need and garbage and sewage and Brazil, Brazil, Brazil everywhere. God, it made my nostrils reach down inside and touch my soul and my sex and connect everything.

I went over there. I could feel this guy's eyes on my back. He wanted to kill me, but I didn't care. I had to get closer. They saw me coming and began moving and shaking and posing and getting ready. I was crazy,

I thrust my camera out so they could see it. I didn't care. I wanted the one in the white dress. She was mine, I thought, I'm getting her no matter what.

I raised my camera and pointed it right at her breasts. She laughed and thrust them at me, first one, then the other trying to get them both in the picture. I shot once then twice and again. I looked up and we all laughed and our eyes danced dances and then they all wanted me to fondle them with my camera. So I did. They stretched and thrust and stuck their asses out at me and pressed their secret place with long fingernails painted purple and I kept shooting. Whore's night out. The one in white, her mouth was so red and delicious and ready to suck everything and everybody on the street down into her darkness and she knew it and I knew it and I didn't look at her again.

I got scared. I was afraid they'd ask me to screw them and I wanted to and I wouldn't because they'd kill me. If not then, later.

I took one more shot and turned away and ran across the street behind the man who was still watching. He looked at me and his mouth twisted in a way that made me feel dirty. I wanted to hit him. So I left.

— Diary entry, the author, Manaus

208

Now, my husband — I don't call him my husband anymore — I don't like him. He's almost sixty and all those pretty whores, all dressed in jewelry, they've forgotten him now. He should die a terrible death.

— Laura, a woman
on Commerce Street, Manaus

210

You can always tell how rich a man is by the size of his "pipa". They keep it tied to a string down below, you know, near their penis. When I dance, I press myself against him so I can feel if he has a "pipa". If it's bigger and harder than usual down there that means he has gold. That's how you tell.

— Anonymous prostitute, on a floating whore house,
the Madeira River near Abuna

Cridola grabber her around the waist, pulling her down on his lap. She giggled, then shrieked. He pulled on her back until a small round breast popped out. She slapped him hard across the face. Everyone laughed. He did it again. Pulled on her bra. Both breasts now. Again she slapped him. He grabbed her black hair at the back of her head and pulled hard, pulled her head backwards. His head went down onto her left breast. She struggled, hitting him on the back and head. He kept going, making disgusting sucking noises as he went. Paulo, Rodriguez and Nelson were our body-guards. They sat nearby looking stoic and drinking beer.

A man got up from his table from across the bar. He walked up to Cridola. The bodyguards didn't move. They just watched poker-faced. The man pulled a gun from somewhere and stuck it behind Cridola's left ear. He didn't see it, but she did. She saw it and let out a shreik. The man pulled the hammer back and said, "Let her go." Cridola's mouth stopped what it was doing and everything went silent.

Suddenly, Paulo, Rodriguez and Nelson moved all at once, smooth, like they had practiced the whole thing. They stood up, each pulling a gun out from his belt and pointed it at the man's head. They cocked the three hammers at the same time and each one made a ratcheting sound with a loud click at the end. Cridola turned his head around slowly. She had saliva on her nipple. He grinned.

"Leave him alone," said Paulo in a calm voice. He waived the barrel of his gun toward the man's table on the other side of the bar. The man backed off, but he looked pissed. He uncocked his gun, put it under his belt and went back to his table. He stared hard at Cridola, then the girl, then in some other direction like he didn't want to see her get raped or something. She looked back at him fearlessly.

"Yeah! Leave him alone!" she yelled and then grabbled Cridola's head between her hands and pressed his face into her breasts. He laughed and said it was only for fun. For laughs. And he asked her to dance. She fixed her bra and looked shy for a second, then grabbed Cridola and they danced. The light was all green and red and purple. Paulo and the others sat down, drank their beer and watched Cridola dance.

214

When I worked in the Alvorado they'd come drunk in my bar, those whores, and they'd break bottles and stick men with them. Every night the police would come and drag a corpse out of my bar. Thank God they'd take away the bodies — what would I do with them? But then I had to pay the police. They'd come and drink free for that service. Either that, or they'd leave me with the bodies.

— "Loura", a woman on Commerce Street, Manaus

216

On the boat going to Manicore', a young girl was making eyes at a miner all afternoon, but he pretended to ignore her. That night, she went to his hammock and woke him up.

"What's your name?" she asked him.

"Antonio," he said.

"Are you alone?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

She paused. They made eyes at each other.

"Are you all by yourself?"

"That's right," he said. His voice quivered.

"My baby's sleeping. She won't disturb anyone..."

She motioned toward her hammock then looked back at him. He didn't move, but she leaned down and kissed him. He let her do it.

"Do you have a family in Manaus?" she asked.

He hesitated for a second. More eyes.

"No," He said, but his eyes dropped and he shifted back and forth in his hammock. He was lying and she knew it.

"Well..." she said in a whisper, and she excused herself.

He watched her as she made her way back to her hammock. He kept looking even after she disappeared. He turned over in his hammock and pulled it around his body until he disappeared in its dark folds. It swung gently back and forth for a moment, but then stopped and didn't move again.

— Conversation overheard on the way to Manicore' by boat

Most miners won't use condoms. They think it makes them lesser of a man. We don't care about having too many children. We just don't want the whores to get sick.

— Mayor of Creporizinho,
A gold mining town on the Crepori River

My husband. That sonofabitch. He was keeping women all over the place. He'd come to my bar at night with those women, drink my beer, take my money and disappear in the night with those whores. If only you could imagine how I suffered.

— Anonymous woman, Porto Velho

218

The whores go up an down the river on barges. The men go crazy and shoot off their guns and make a real racket. You can never get any sleep on this river.

— Paulo Sodas Nogeira, body guard for the miners, Madeira River, Airplane Beach gold mine, near Mutum

The miners drink at a bar down by where the whores wait. The ceiling is low and the place is full of smoke and glaring lights that hurt your eyes and the music is *Farro*', a regional type of music from the Nordeste. It's dying out because the radio comes from the South and fills the cities and the streets and the minds of the kids with rock and roll. Soon everyone will forget how to play *Farro'*.

Last night, there was a young couple sitting at a table. All they did was hug and kiss. Hug and kiss. You'd think that they were on a, you know, a hug and kissing show. But they were madly in love the way they held onto each other.

There was a middle-aged women sitting nearby, spiffed up like she was looking to get laid, desperate for a man. She was drinking a beer and staring at those two lovers. She looked sad to me.

A drunk sat at the next table and kept staring at her. He wouldn't take his eyes off her, like he was thinking all kinds of dirty thoughts about what he would do if only he had her. She didn't see him, though, 'cause she was still staring at those two young lovers, like she was trying to remember something.

Suddenly, in an instant, it was over. The two young lovers jumped up and ran out into the dark, the drunk put his head down on the table like he was going to puke, and the woman drank the last of her beer and lit a cigarette.

— Diary entry, the author

220

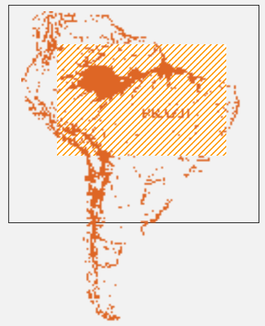
This place is full of forgetting. The bars are full of forgetting. The whorehouses are full of forgetting. The gold mines at night, the floating barges all full of forgetting. Everywhere you go, it seems, is full of whores and forgetting.

— Euclides Aparecido Cardoso "Cridola", foreman of a gold dredge, Madeira River

The Inheritors
Children of Gold

They are children without fathers, without older brothers. They are the inheritors of this madness.

— Padre Mario Zingarini,
Salesian Missionary, Manicore'



The preacher and I drove through the jungle all night so we'd reach the Serra Pelada before sunrise. The miners work only in the morning and then in the late afternoon until dark. Sometimes longer. No one works past mid-day. The sun will kill you.

Pelada means "naked" or "skinless". That's why they named this place Serra Pelada, because the heat scorches you to the bones when you're in the mine.

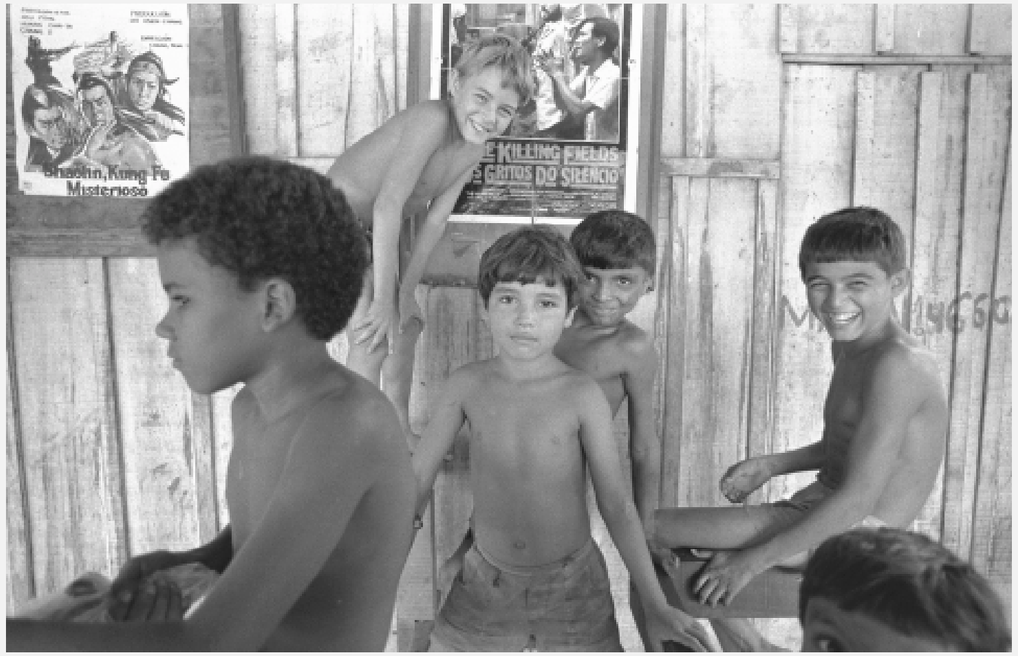
It's an open pit three-quarters of a mile long. When the gold was good, there were 15,000 claims and more than 200,000 men, women and children digging and hauling ore. They pulled out 112 tons of gold in just one year. All dug and carried out by hand. Every bit of it. They carried the ore one sack at a time up wooden ladders to the top and then a half mile away to the tailings pile. One sack at a time, until the hole was almost 800 feet to the bottom and the tailing pile was over a mile long. But they dug too deep and the hole filled half up with water. Most of the miners went home after that. Those that stayed on nick-named it *The Devil's Pit* because men died down there. Today, only about 5,000 miners are left, not counting the children.

No one knows how many children are in the Serra Pelada. Most of the younger ones, under twelve or so, don't have real fathers. Back in '84 when the gold was good, the miners brought women in so they wouldn't have to leave their claims to have sex. So there's a lot of orphans. Most of the boys over eight work in the pit, either shoveling or carrying out rock in burlap sacks that, even half full, weigh more than they do.

The preacher stood by and watched as I photographed. Suddenly, he stripped down to the waist, picked up an empty sack and started off toward the pit. I called after him, but he didn't hear me and soon disappeared into the great hole amidst a multitude of miners coming and going with their sacks.

I photographed until the sun got too high, too hot. They say that when your shadow is as long as you are tall, it's time to leave the pit. So I did. I was almost out when I turned back to take one last photograph. A boy was climbing out of the pit and moving toward me with his rock sack slung over his shoulder. When he reached me he stopped, looked up, and without uttering a word, said *I am the Beginning and the End.* Then he smiled as though he'd live forever.

— Last diary entry, the author, in the Serra Pelada mines, known as the Devil's Pit



I still don't know, after being here seven years, how these people make a living.

— Padre Bento Humaita'

We have electricity 24 hours a day, an airport, a post office, two banks, a TV station, an FM radio station 99Mhz, a movie house, hotels, two Catholic churches, 400 stores, 21 taxis, 30 trucks, a gast staion, twelve drug stores, three sawmills, a dentist, a bus line and God knows how many nightclubs and whorehouses. Only we can't drink alcohol. It's against the law here. For security reasons. But we do it anyway, you know. Unfortunately, we don't have a hospital or any schools. They say there are over 8,000 children here, but no one knows for sure. There's more everyday. We put them to work in the mines.

— Juvenal Mauro da Silva , gold miner, Serra Pelada mines

Two boys pushed their hands through the opened window of the restaurant and dangled two condoms at me.

"Safety sex, safety sex," said the smaller one. I thought they were begging for food. But they wanted money. Money for condoms. Maybe they wanted money for sex.

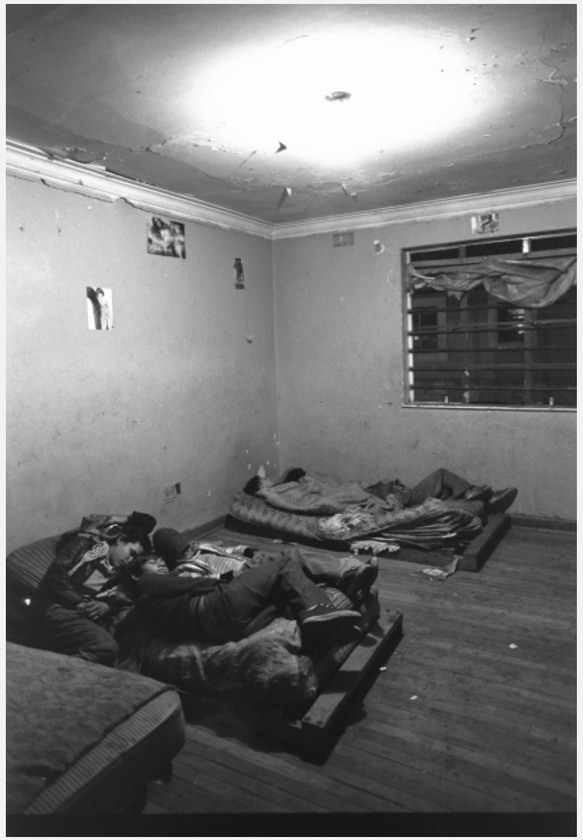
— Diary entry, the author, Manaus

They put a big snake into our attic to kill the rats. At night, when I'm sleeping, I get scared because I'm afraid the snake will eat so many rats that he'll get so big and crash down on top of me. And spiders's, too. It's hard to get to sleep sometimes, but I'm getting used to it

— Eight year old, living on the Madeira River, near Borba

What's more important? Children or gold? Everyone worries more about gold than any of these little ones. God will never forgive us for this. Never.

— Padre Bento LaFevre, Missionary, Manicore'



Their father's couldn't make it in the south. They couldn't make it in the forests. They didn't make it in the gold mines. Now they think they can make it here in the city. The won't, and their kids will starve.

— Umberto Brandoa, Filho Banker, Porto Velho

Two teenagers got on *Haley's Comet* going from Manaus to Porto Velho. They boarded in the middle of the night, at Murutinga, the last stop before the boat turns south from the Amazon into the wide mouth of the Madeira. They said they were selling encyclopedias to win a scholarship to college. They said they had to sell thirty cases of books on this trip, and they would go to Borba, Nova Aripuanha, Manicore', and Humaita' to do it. They'd even go as far as Porto Velho itself, the big city at the end of the Madeira, if they had to. That was their plan.

When they got to Borba they marched into a small general store. The owner was behind a desk doing figures in a blue notebook. The first boy went to work on him. The second boy kept stacking books up in front of the owner's face. First came two large volumes with an explanation of why those would be good for his business. Then five more followed by a speech on the importance of education for his children. Then six more with grandiose words about his son's future. The more the first boy pitched, the higher the stack of books got. He never took his eyes off the store owner. The faster he talked, the faster the second boy pulled books out and thrust them into his partner's waiting hands. They were smooth, practiced, like a gunner and a gunner's mate.

"Do I have to buy all of them?" the store owner finally asked.

"No," said the first boy. "But think of your son's future. He needs a full education, not half an education."

The store owner stared up at the stack of books. It was four feet high and wavering. He began to say something but didn't. The boy struck his last and final blow.

"Take them all and I'll throw in this one last book free, plus another ten percent off the list price," he said, and without looking around, snapped his fngers at his partner. The other boy pulled out a large hard-bound volume with red letters printed across the cover: *How To Be Successful And Make Money,* and slapped it down on the table. The pile of books jiggled and teetered to the left. There was a long silence. The boys waited. The store owner sat behind the pile, staring at it, motionless. A fly started buzzing against a window pane somewhere in the store but then stopped.

"No," said the man suddenly, and he shook his head without looking up.

"I have a family to feed. Stomachs first. Then their heads." He stood up and the stack started falling over. The boy caught the books and asked him if he was sure. The man gave him a look that said he was sure he had kids who were hungry and that was that.

The two teenagers packed the books back into the boxes and without a word went out into the heat.

"We had him.," the second boy said in whispered tones. "We had him, right to the end we had him."

"No we didn't," said the first boy. "We never had him."

— Diary entry, the author, on Haley's Comet between Porto Velho from Manaus, a five day trip.

A child crawled into the restaurant on her belly. Her legs were thin and deformed, like bone covered with skin but no flesh. She dragged them behind her like something that got caught on her body. It was polio or something worse. She crawled over to a gold miner who had just started to eat. Pulling one leg at a time under her, she half sat, half leaned against the table leg. She stared up at him but said nothing. He tried to ignore her by turning away toward the television over the bar. There was a quiz show on and people were winning money.

"They all want money," he muttered.

The crippled child kept looking at the back of his head. Finally, he turned around and looked down. His eyes rivited on hers, as though he didn't want to look at her legs, at her deformity.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Some help," she said.

"What kind of help?"

She didn't say anything.

"Do you want to eat?" he asked.

"Yes."

He said nothing. They just stared at each other. Finally, he blinked.

"Give some food to her," he said aloud, to the waitress, to anyone who would hear him. "Something, anything, to eat," he said as he pulled cruzados out of his pocket and threw them down on his table.

The waitress brought a plate of rice and black beans with some chicken mixed in. She picked the little girl up from the floor. Her legs dangled lifelessly under her. She put her on a chair at the table next to the miner's.

A little boy appeared out of nowhere and sat at the girl's table across from her. He didn't say anything. He just waited and looked at her with his tongue pressed between his lips. The girl didn't eat at first. Instead, she divided what was on her plate and gave one half to the boy, then they both ate.

Suddenly, the miner threw his fork down at his plate and stood up. He took what was left of his bottled mineral water and put in on the table between the two children without looking at them. They didn't look up either and he left.

— Diary entry, the author, Ruropolis, at the intersection of the Transamazonic highway and the Santarem-Itaituba highway

The children and the Indians. They have no choice in the matter. They get what we give them.

— Anonymous gold miner,
Paapiu, in the Surucucu', Roraima

It's to help them not feel the hunger.

— Nacelio Cavalcanti de Sousa, TV reporter from Sao Paulo explaining why the Indian children chew bene' *, a natural tobacco leaf.*

You can hear the helicopters overhead all day. They flying loaded with gold. Millions of dollars of gold everyday for the White man. And our women and children have to go six kilometers away from our village to find fish or drinking water because the miners shit and piss and dump mercury into our streams. When the sun goes down, they stop flying and so it gets quiet, except for the cries of our children who are sick and starving.

— David Yanomani, Chief of the Yanomani Tribe, referring to the Mahauteri Indian village, the Surucucu', Roraima

They're surrounded by death from the day they're born. Half the children die before they reach puberty. Mostly disease. Sometimes their fathers kill them in a fit of rage, or when they're drunk. If they have fathers. There are a lot of orphans. They lost their fathers and brothers to the mines or the jungle. Or to fighting and murder. The children that are left get used to death. It doesn't bother them so much. Those are the ones I worry about, the ones that don't feel much anymore.

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, (Padre Moses), Mutum

I first met Patria Amada on the Transamazonic highway in 1972. His real name was Adoao Merois da Rosa, but everyone called him Patria Amada -- *The One Who Loves His Country.* I photographed him together with his wife Altamira, and Tito, their eleven-year old son. Twenty years later, I went back to the Amazon looking for him.

I found him in Belem, far from the jungles of the Transamazonic highway. He was with his wife and granddaughter -- their son's only child. She was about eleven years old. She never knew her father. But she knew his name. It was Tito, she told me, and she knew he was blond and had blue eyes. She knew he was a gold miner and that someday he'd come home rich. But that's all she knew, and in the end it probably wasn't enough, so she didn't think about him much.

They told me the whole story: of how Tito grew up, found a woman before he was nineteen and married her. Right off, he got his wife pregnant and then left for the gold mines. To make money. To make a living, he said. They told of how Tito wrote the first year or so but then stopped. The baby was born, but Tito never knew it. They never heard from or saw him again. The girl was young, only fifteen, and couldn't raise the baby alone. So Patria Amada and Altamira raised her like one of their own.

I pulled out a photograph I'd shot of the family homesteading on the Transamazonic highway back in '72. Patria Amada was wearing a torn t-shirt with the words *Transamazonic Highway - Love It or Leave It* printed on the front. His hat was weathered and his black boots were covered with the red mud of the road. Altamira sat next to Tito, who was holding a dog in his lap. Except for a pair of shorts, he was naked and blond and blue eyed. He was smiling and dirty-faced like an eleven year old can get.

"That's your father," I said pointing to the picture.

She stared at the photograph for a moment.

"No, that's grandpa, " she said.

"Yes, but *that's* your father," I said and I pointed to the blond boy. "He was eleven then, just like you," I said.

She looked at the photograph again but said nothing. Thinking she didn't understand, I added, "He's much older now," but she was still silent.

I thought to myself, *He's probably dead by now,* but I didn't say it out loud, even if it was probably true.

I saw a young father pick up his child and lift him over his head. The man's eyes half closed like he was making love or something. It was almost orgasmic, and his whole body shuddered. You could see it and he let out a sigh. Then he lowered the boy to his face and kissed him on the forehead. The child made a gurgle and the father pressed him against his own face. He was a gold miner coming home from the mines. I don't think he ever saw his child before that. Not until then.

— Captain of the Haley's Comet, a passenger boat , somewhere on the Amazon River

My oldest daughter, she hung out with the wrong crowd. They got her hooked on drugs, smoking marijuana mostly. I tried to stop it, but how could I? Working all day, running home, washing clothes at night, fixing food for the two kids. My youngest was only four when I worked in the Alvorado Bar, a really bad place. I hired maids to care for the kids but they stole me blind. I took my daughter to a social worker, tried to get her off drugs, but it was too late. They failed and finally she went into the streets — if you know what I mean — they stuck her with needles. God how I suffered. Finally, she died.

-- Loura, a woman on Commerce Street, Manaus

I sat down next to a boy lying on the stone door step of the Cathedral in Manaus. His hands, feet and face were black, like he'd been in a pile of coal. His clothes stank of sweat and piss and filth. His eyes were dreamy, almost empty. He stared up at me and opened his mouth but nothing came out. I could tell he didn't see me . I don't know what he saw, but he didn't see me. He had a dead look in his eyes like he was weak and hungry. But his body didn't look hungry. It looked battered.

I photographed his face. Then his hands. Then his bare dirty feet. I dissected him one click at a time and he didn't move. He let me take him the way I wanted to take him. Completely and without feeling, without emotion.

A man walked by with three teenagers and stopped. They looked down at me. Suddenly. I felt like an *uburu'*, a kind of vulture, that swoops down and picks at the corpses of dead animals along the road. When you drive by, they stop pecking, and get ready to fly away. I couldn't fly away, so I stopped photographing and looked up.

"He's on glue," said the man.

"Glue?" I asked.

"They sniff it until they can't stand up. That's how they escape," he said.

"Oh, I thought he was hungry," I said. I felt ashamed of what I did, so I moved away.

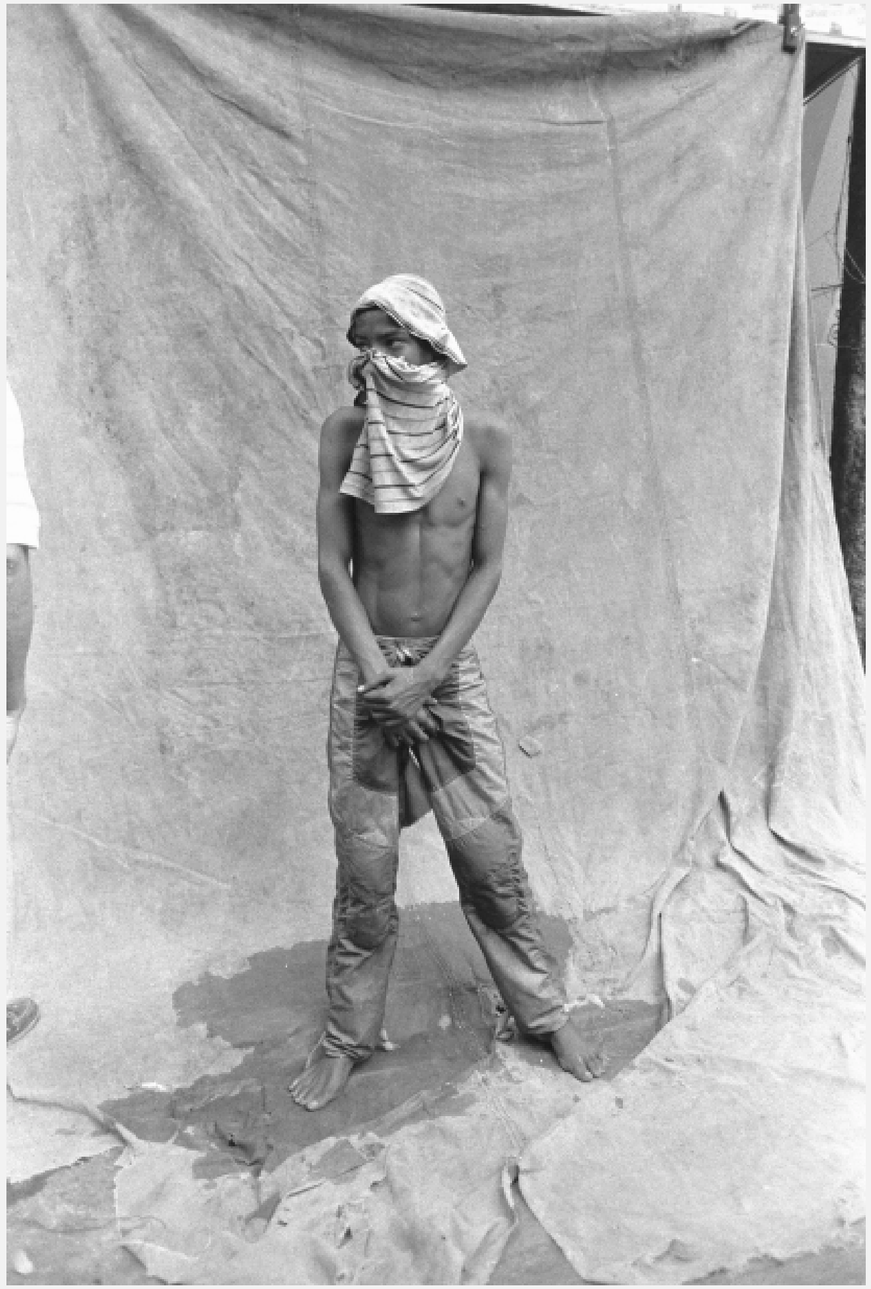
— Diary entry, the author, Manaus

Schools don't work here, not like you think. Can you imagine putting your five or six kids in a dugout canoe during the rainy season, everyday, to go three or four kilometers by water to school with all the dangers it brings?

— Padre Adolfo Rohl, Mutum, Rondonia

Politicians are all the same -- beija-beija, chow chow - *kiss-kiss, bye-bye.*

— Young man talking about the Brazilian government, Humaita'.



I know Padre Bento. He's a good man but his hard work won't make a dent. There are too many kids and it only gets worse. In my day we knew the value of work. I had eighteen kids. They all worked. So, it was okay for me to be hung like a horse. But today the only thing people do is have kids. No one wants to work.

— A colonist crossing the Madeira River by barge, Porto Velho, Rondonia

I don't want to become a criminal. I don't want to end up dead.

— Teenager, Porto Velho, Rondonia

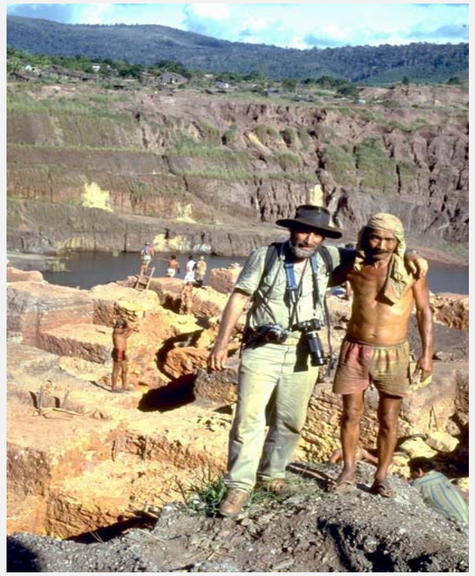
Afterthought

"So, I would really like to know what is really going on. Thank you."

— Erin Hayes, Bremerton Middle School

The Great Sleep is over. It's time to awaken from the dream. The myths and romantic notions which have shrouded the Amazon for five hundred years are evaporating like the morning mist rising in the tropical heat. The mystery of God's Green Hell, like the million undiscovered species of Amazonian life, is in danger of extinction.

Nature's last sanctuary has been violated. We must gather our tools and our wits. Time is precious. We must struggle not against Nature, but with it, to preserve what may be the earth's last Eden.



The author in the Serra Pelada Gold mines, 1990

I ventured into the deep Amazon Jungle over twenty years ago when only Indians, gold miners, road-builders and settlers inhabited *God's Green Hell.* I wanted to be part of a great adventure -- the building of the Transamazonic highway across the great Amazon jungle. I was one of the first to document the construction of the famous highway -- a dirt road cut through the heart of the jungle connecting the farthest reaches of western Brazil with the Atlantic coast. The jungle was practically untouched then. The rivers were crystal clear and full of fish. The forests were uninhabited except for gold miners, settlers and Indian tribes, many of which were still undiscovered. The land was primordial, untouched.

I heard a colonist once say, Where there's a road, there's a fire. That was most true for the Transamazonic highway, and I thought then that the road spelled the beginning of the end of Eden, as it were. When I returned to New York, I was told by practically everyone that I was naive to think that anyone, much less a handful of Brazilian gold miners and settlers, could destroy the Amazon Jungle. No-one was much interested in the story; few of them really believed it. That was in 1972. It took them, and the world, twenty years to catch up. Now they believe.

Much has happened in the Amazon since I first saw those great Forest Giant Buttress trees felled to make way for the Transamazonic highway: Hydroelectric dams have flooded millions of acres of virgin forest. Railroads have been built. Gold, manganese, iron ore, copper, nickel, cassiterite, lignite, natural gas, tin, and aluminum are being mined. The Transamazonic road which, when finished was 3000 miles long, now has less than 700 miles of passable roadbed. Indian tribes have been "civilized" practically out of existence. In the state of Rondonia, an area the size of Belgium has already been incinerated and the world waits in suspense to see if the burning will continue into the next decade and through the neighboring state of Acre. National Parks have been established. New States have been created crisscrossed with new roads. Indian Reservations have been delineated — at least on maps. Gas and oil have been discovered in great quantities. Long and short term scientific studies have been launched. Thirty thousand new species of animal and plant life have been recorded. Cultures have collided; Indians mix with Whites, impoverished homesteaders have become land barons overnight, gold miners are fighting Indians, cattle ranchers are fighting farmers who are fighting the rubber tappers who are not fighting Indians any more. New religions have been exported from the verdant forests to the concrete jungles of the south where a growing number of Faithful are following the decrees of Santo Daime, a cult built around a powerful hallucinogen used for centuries by the Amazonian Indians, and only recently discovered by the White man. Even rock 'n roll found its way into the forest in the form of Sting, an English chap who brought the savage Raoni, Chief of a tribe of 398 Indians, and the Pope, head of 300 million Catholics, together for the sake of saving Eden. The event was more ecological than ecumenical for, although it was perhaps the first time in history a Protestant led a Savage to a Catholic, it was for the sake of saving not his soul, but his soil.

The Amazon has been a busy place.

254

Construction of the Balbina Dam north of Manaus began in 1974 and took three years longer than expected to complete. It's turbines began turning in 1988. It cost $750 million and was designed to provide Manaus with 90% of its present energy needs. The man-made lake behind the dam submerged 1,400 square miles of virgin forest yet produces only 13 megawatts of electricity. The problem with Balbina is that there's not enough water in the rivers to turn all five turbines at once. Politically, it's a case of poor planning. Technically, the dam is a disaster. Ecologically it's a tragedy, since there's enough natural gas in the area to drive thermal-electrical turbines for 30 years.

"It's easy to speak now," said Miguel Nunes, president of Eletronorte, the company responsible for the dam. "However, when the project was first conceived no one knew that there was abundant gas in the area." But, did anyone look?

The mistakes of Balbina were not ignored. The Tucurui' dam was well-planned and when finished, produced a lake on the Tocantins River the size of the one behind Balbina, yet it generates sixty times more electricity.

But there were more hard lessons to be learned. Today, skin-divers armed with underwater chainsaws work day and night to harvest a fortune of wood which was submerged and left to rot beneath Tucurui' lake, as much by the blunders and disorganization of the bureaucrats as by the construction of the dam. There's still time to save most of the 1500 square miles of underwater forest; the trees behind Balbina will never see the light of day.

With each new project, Brazil learned that the only way to prevent future ecological disasters is through proper study and planning. At the dam in Cachoeira Porteira, scheduled to begin operation in 1995, the virgin wood of the future lake is already being cut down and taken from the land. An enormous clearing is growing daily which will ultimately be submerged under the waters of the Rio Trombetas.

Mining has become the focal point of the progress in the Amazon. Unlike other industries which require excessive amounts of deforestation to turn a profit, such as farming and cattle raising, mining can be done with a minimum of environmental destruction. To extract one million dollars worth of minerals per year from the sub-soils of the Amazon it's necessary to defoliate only .017 square kilometers, an area about the size of three football fields. To make the same amount of money raising cattle more than 65 square miles of forest would have to be razed.

In 1967, Breno Augusto dos Santos, a geologist, set his helicopter down on a small area of forest lost in the center the state of Para', called the Serra dos Carajas. He had heard numerous reports of pilots whose compasses would go crazy as they flew over this particular parcel of land. What he discovered hidden beneath the serene green canopy of trees was what was to become the world's largest mineral reserve. Last year the mine produced 35 million tons of high-grade iron ore. Nearby, in an area yet untouched, lies untold amounts of copper, bauxite, manganese and gold. The mining companies spent over $100 million in ecological measures to build and operate what has been called the cleanness mine on the planet, and promises to continue to provide profits well into the next century.

But not all the mining in the Amazon has been so pristine or lucrative. Six years ago, more than 14 tons of gold was carried out, one sack at a time, from the open-pit of the Serra Pelada. A multitude of mud-covered bodies crawled up the steep, red cliffs of the mine, each with a sack of earth slung over his shoulder. Every ounce of earth in those sacks contained precious amounts of the yellow ore. From a distance, the ground itself seemed to move, as thousands upon thousands of men climbed like ants up and down wooden ladders. The scene was reminiscent of the building of the great Pyramids. Today, less than five thousand men continue to labor around the great hole in search of gold, and only 800 kilos of gold was extracted last year. Less and less each year.

When an Exodus of 25,000 families from Parana' and Rio Grande do Sul reached the Promise Land of Rondonia where it was said free land and a new life would be waiting for them, they planted coffee, cocoa and beans in lands whose level of productivity were some of the poorest in the world. To increase its productivity, they cleared the land by fire. In 1989 they set so many fires it filled the skies with more carbon than all the active volcanoes on the planet.

Only 12% of the soils of Rondonia are productive. After they were all parceled out or ceased to be productive, thousands of would-be farmers turned to mining gold. Today there are over 100,000 prospectors in Rondonia. Last year they produced fifteen tons of gold by dumping over eight tons of mercury into the Madeira River and another twelve tons into the atmosphere.

The White man is not the only one who has profited from the yellow ore. There are 10,000 Yanomami Indians in the North who have all but sold out to the 20,000 gold miners. These miners land 450 planes daily on seven-dozen airstrips, guaranteeing the flow of gold out of, and all the trappings of modern society into, the Indian Reserve.

The legal limit of gold allowed to be taken from the land is 700 kilos, or 1500 pounds per month. In actuality, over four tons of gold leave the region in the same amount of time. Some say that this is progress, the ultimate integration of the Indian into Brazilian society. Others watch in dismay as the cultural identity of whole tribes is irreversibly altered or lost completely to modern society. Today it is not uncommon to see a tribe of "good savages" sitting naked in front of a television watching soap-operas.

These are just a few examples of the progress and growing pains Brazil has experienced in the Amazon. There are many more. The mistakes of the past — indiscriminate burning of land, drowning of large tracts of virgin forest behind dams, the uncontrolled influx of colonists to the north, the pollution of rivers and sky with mercury and carbon — are difficult lessons from which Brazil, and the world, must profit.

The statistics are impressive. They can also be alarming, misleading or informative, depending on where you get them and how you read them:

More than 90% of the soils of the Amazon are deficient in nitrogen and phosphorous making agriculture practically impossible.

Only 13% of the state of Rondonia has been burnt to the ground.

Less than one-tenth of a percent of the deep forest has been cut down.

To make one McDonald's hamburger you have to destroy seven square meters of virgin forest to make room for the cattle.

One-thousand square hectares of cattle ranch can support only five workers. The same amount of land can employ 1500 employees if the land is used in other ways such as mining or industry.

All the dams built so far, and those planned to the end of the next decade, will cover only .02% of the region. Piled all together, the wood taken from this amount of land would exceed 430 million cubic meters — enough wood to fill over 200 Shea Stadiums.

To make one megawatt of electricity 10,000 trees must be inundated.

There are over two million kinds of animal and plant life in the Amazon. Of these, we have recorded less than 30% so far.

256

Five hundred years ago, there were over 2 million Indians in the Amazon forest. Today there are less than 136,000. They are dispersed in an area larger than 83 million square hectares.

If you spread out the entire Indian population throughout the three million square miles of Amazon, each Indian would own 6 square kilometers of land. If every white man in Brazil owned that much land, the country would have to be larger than all the continents put together.

The United States pollutes the atmosphere with 1300 million tons of carbon each year. All the burning in the Amazon for the past ten years has not exceeded 336 million tons.

An area of virgin forest the size of your boot-print contains over 1500 species of plant and animal life — counting fungus and micro-organisms.

It takes four-hundred square kilometers of forest to provide enough wood to furnish a ten-story building. That's an area one-third the size of the city of Sao Paulo, the world's second-largest city.

The World Bank appropriated only 3% of the $320 million loan used to build BR-364 for ecological study and preservation of forest along the road.

More than 25% of the world's pharmaceutical drugs are made from ingredients extracted from plants and animals in the Amazon forest.

An area of forest the size of the state of Sao Paulo has been burnt down in the past ten years. That's like burning down Montana border to border.

Only 3% of the land mass of the Amazon is designated as National Parks and protected by law from any form of exploitation.

I could go on, but why bother? The mathematics of the forest tell us little about how to proceed.

While most scientists may agree that over 90% of the ecosystems of the Amazon jungle are still untouched, the controversy begins just here: What parcel of forest will be decimated next for the sake of economic gain? Studies like the one started by Thomas Lovejoy ten years ago have shown that the smaller an area of forest shrinks the faster the animal life and bird population becomes extinct. According to one model, 80% of the deep Amazon should be left completely untouched. That's an area equivalent to the Eastern Seaboard of the United States.

The international scientific community continues to fight for the establishment of laws which will regulate and protect the vast natural resources of the Amazon valley without prejudicing the demands of National progress. But it's difficult for the Brazilian government to defend the interest of foreign conservationists when its own people are starving and living in misery. To them, the Amazon signifies a solution to the abject poverty of millions and the possible normalization of a floundering economy which has plagued Brazil for years.

Cutting down on square acre of virgin forest before studying the extraordinary life it contains is like tearing up a book before reading it. "Burn down an entire forest and you will have burnt down an entire library," said Daniel Janzen of the University of Pennsylvania. Not to make light of the analogy, it would be nice if we could go into the forest and, as with a library book, sign out the vast wealth it contains. The only problem is that we would not be able to return it, not in two weeks or two lifetimes.

The Amazon is a fragile place. It needs us as much as we need it. Worldwide attention has been focused on the Amazon jungle precisely because of a growing awareness of planetary ecology and the need for wisdom and concern for our environment. The time has come to correct the mistakes of our past.

When I return to the Amazon -- and I will -- I hope that it is still shrouded in primordial mist and mystery. I hope it will always be what it was from the start: a big place filled with giant trees and rivers so wide you can't see the other side; with birds and fish and insects of infinite variety; with strange sounds in the night, in the day, always; with wonder hues and shades of color that make rainbows poor; with mist and towering clouds, with rain and great winds. With deep silence. With Presence. The Amazon is filled with Presence.

Forty-four ouces of gold, 95% pure, worth about $15,000, dredged from the Madeira river in twenty four hours.

It is presumptuous to think we could "develop" the Amazon. It is already perfect. Its perfection lies in its terrible beauty, its timelessness, its life. Along the rivers, there are so many butterflies that you can't see ten feet for all the fluttering of design and color about you. My favorite is the Morpho, whose iridescent blue wings are brighter than the backsides of kingfishers. It doesn't flutter like most butterflies. It glides until it loses altitude and then, with one intermittent flap of its great wings, catches another current and soars until it loses altitude again. It looks more like a bird in a thermal than a butterfly. And that's what I love most about the Amazon: nothing is really the way you imagine it to be, the way you were told things were. It's always bigger, brighter, more beautiful.

Twenty years ago, the idea of man destroying the forest, the entire Amazon Jungle, was as absurd as the possibility of polluting the Pacific Ocean. Who could ever cut it down? By the time we got to the other side, it will have all grown back again. How could a thousand, or even a million gold miners make a dent in the forest? It would swallow them up in no time. Afterall, the Amazon was immortal. That's what I thought, then. That's what everyone thought.

Well, almost everyone. But the truth is much different. Once cut down, once burnt, once polluted, it will never be the same. It will never grow back again like before. Never.

There's a majesty about the jungle. Torrential storms rage across the sea of green trees like land-locked hurricanes. From the air you can see two or three, even four at a time, rolling over the flat plains of the green canopy, like great tall ships, driving all manner of birds and animals before them. In the rainy season these isolated storms gather together and fill the sky with clouds so thick and dark it blots out the sun for weeks. Thunder rolls back and forth and lightning ignites the skies with frightening regularity. This goes on for weeks until the heavens open up. In the Amazon it doesn't rain. Water simply falls from the sky in biblical proportions.

On the eve of the Third Christian Millennium, and the one-hundredth since the advent of man on the planet, Brazil is faced with what may be the greatest challenge of its history. But the responsibility Brazil faces in protecting the Amazon while utilizing its natural resources are not Brazil's alone, they are everyone's. Perhaps Thomas Lovejoy's words are more true today than ever before: *Where Brazil goes, there goes the world.*

258

June 28, 1989
1340 Shorewood Drive
Bremerton, WA 98312

United States Ambassador for Brazil
Brazilian Embassy
Washington, D.C. 20013

Dear Brazilian Ambassador:

Hi, my name is Erin Hayes. I'm a student at Bremerton Middle School. I'm very concerned about how you are allowing your rain forest to be cut down. Recently my friends and I have had a walk-out protesting the cutting of the Brazilian rain forest. We all got suspended. Some for 2 days, some for the rest of the school year. Those of us who got suspended had to go to summer school (or extended school). About 180 were suspended. So I would really like to know what's really going on. Thank you.

Sincerely yours,
Erin Hayes

Erin Hayes is not alone. The entire world is protesting and would really like to know what is going on in the Amazon. Her letter, which was published in newspapers all over the world, speaks eloquently of the confusion, alarm, and dismay which is growing daily over the cutting and burning of the Amazon forest. Brazilian embassies around the world are being inundated with letters like this one. Most of them come from the United States, but an increasing number of letters are being sent by concerned citizens in other countries like Italy, Russia, England, France and Pakistan. Their anxiety belies an expanding consciousness about the ecological problems of our fragile planet.

"If Erin is so worried about forests being cut down, why doesn't she write a letter to her own Governor and tell him to stop cutting down the trees in the State of Washington where he lives!" said my friend after I showed him Erin's letter.

My friend's indignation is shared by every Brazilian who, feeling unjustly accused for the ecological ills of the planet, cite other man-made disasters around the world like Valdez, Chernoble, and Three-Mile Island, not to mention the killing of whales, the burning of fossil fuels and the unending flow of styrofoam into the food-chain. All this, however, seems to fall on deaf ears and the world continues to point an accusing finger at Brazil.

The irony is that if Erin knew about the forests being cut down in her own backyard she might indeed write a letter to the Governor of Washington State. The fact that she doesn't may cause astonishment for some but, like all of us, she is a victim of the media. The Amazon has become the "hot spot" of the world, something worth writing home about. There's something more dramatic about burning down the world's greatest tropical rain forest than cutting a few trees on the slopes of the Cascade Mountains. The trees of the Amazon aren't just any old trees. They are the arboreal Giants of the Primordial Forest, the forest we all know and heard about since childhood, the greatest tropical rain forest on the planet. Somehow, it's the biggest and greatest and oldest things which command our attention. The Amazon is no exception.

If all the pages of tall tales, exaggerations and outright lies written about the Amazon were piled up and set afire, the world would be in danger of another ecological disaster. The speculations, beliefs and absurdities perpetuated about the region are no longer part of the great tradition of legend and lesson given to us over the years by poets and pioneers. Now, they are grounded in pretentious scientific arguments, bursting with copious numbers, complicated and confusing statistics and, worse yet, formidable names like the Ozone Hole or the Greenhouse Effect.

The Amazon is immediately associated with the Greenhouse Effect for reasons other than the obvious parallel with growing plants. The theory holds that increased levels of CO^2 in the atmosphere creates a barrier of gas which traps infrared light, raising the earth's temperature which, in turn, will melt the polar ice-caps and swamp the world's coastal cities. Since burning trees spews carbon dioxide gases into the atmosphere, the world continues to throw stones at Brazil for the great fires which rage across the Amazon. The accusations are sometimes comical, such as the one that Brazil is accelerating the eventual flooding of New York City under ten feet of Arctic run-off.

It's estimated that 25% of the world's total carbonic emissions is caused by tropical forests burning around the globe. That figure may cause alarm for some, but for most

of us, it's an meaningless statistic which has little real significance in our everyday life. Not many of us have set fire to a tropical forest or even seen one burn. Most of us can't imagine what it's really like, and having nothing to compare it to, we pretend we really understand what it all means: Brazil is out to destroy the world.

It happens, however, that most of the CO^2 put into our atmosphere comes not from the tropical forests, but from the industrialized countries of the world. The United States alone is responsible for more than 22% of all the CO^2 in the atmosphere, followed by the Soviet Union, with 18.8%, and then Western Europe, with 14.7%. Brazil's share, including all the industrial pollution and the fires in the Amazon, accounts for only 5% of all the CO^2 in the atmosphere.

Figures such as these do little, however, to calm the growing fear that Brazil will destroy the earth's atmosphere if it continues to burn down the Amazon forest which, in the minds of many, is the "lungs of the planet." Even Jacques Yves Cousteau's recent revelation that the oceans, not the rain forests, produce the world's oxygen, has had little impact on international opinion. But opinion is not always rational and the hysteria which surrounds the ecological issues in the Amazon may allow us to deflect, if not ignore, our own responsibility for the problem of pollution by other means throughout the world. In the USA, the major sources of CO^2 come from everyday necessities like heating houses (14%), industrial manufacturing (23%), thermoelectric power plants (32%), cars, trucks, buses, trains, planes (29%) and a periodic volcano (2%). Unfortunately, these are figures we've learned to live with. Indeed, we have learned that we can't live without them.

"Let ye who is without sin..."

The Brazilian Amazon jungle has become a metaphor for the ecological woes and human-rights abuses of the planet. Cutting a tree down is as much an emotional as it is an environmental issue. A tree is the symbol of life; whoever destroys a tree destroys Life itself. This is not to belittle the seriousness of the situation in the Amazon. But the world is tired of hearing how we are polluting the planet with nuclear waste, oil spills, plastic, chemicals, fertilizers, and everyday garbage. That's boring stuff. Cutting down a tree, now that's another story. It makes for good press and congenial conversation.

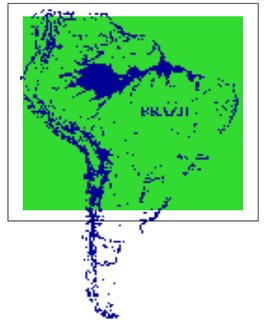
The image of an isolated Indian tribe being threatened with extinction by either a raging inferno or an advancing civilization causes indignation in even the most jaded of us. Perhaps the haunting memory of abuses to our own Native American has made us a nation of Human Rights Activists. Perhaps it's more than our own history: the world has suffered millenniums of man's inhumanity to man, and now it's time to speak up. The Amazonian Indian, like the virgin forest he lives in, stands as the supreme example of the Natural Man, the last Innocent, the Good Savage, the incarnation of Adam. The Indian, like the Amazon itself, has become a metaphor and a powerful symbol in the eyes of the world. How else could a mis-matched pair like the rock star Sting and the savage Raoni get an audience with the Pope? The idea would be ludicrous if it weren't so newsworthy.

It has been said that the dead are sometimes more useful than the living. This is certainly the case of Chico Mendes, the leader of a group of Rubber Tappers in the state of Rondonia. To some, he was one of many unknown unionists, a trouble-maker, a "nobody going nowhere" until a bullet landed him in a grave and on the front page of practically every newspaper in the world. His story scandalized and then electrified the world. His life, and death, have become synonymous with man's struggle for justice and freedom in a hostile environment. Chico Mendes is no longer a "nobody going nowhere". He's a hero who, posthumously, is headed for Hollywood.

In the end, we're left with myths and stories which make for good reading but tell us little about really what's going on in the Amazon. And while all this provides us with sufficient fuel to kindle the flames of social, ecological and political indignation,— and an excuse to walk out of school — in truth we really are only reacting out of fear and ignorance.

The real tragedy isn't that forests are burning or that the rivers are being polluted, or that Indians are being swallowed by the modern world, or even that some have met an untimely end. The tragedy is that, with all the hysteria and our penchant for sensationalism, Erin Hayes and millions like her may never find out what's really happening in the Amazon jungle until it's too late.

The author, age 23, on the Front Line of the Transamazonic highway, October 1972, between Itaituba and Jacareacanga, 200 km south of the Amazon River.



Signature Not Verified

Anthony Boccaccio

Digitally signed by Anthony Boccaccio
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Date: 2008.01.25 18:47:57 -08'00'
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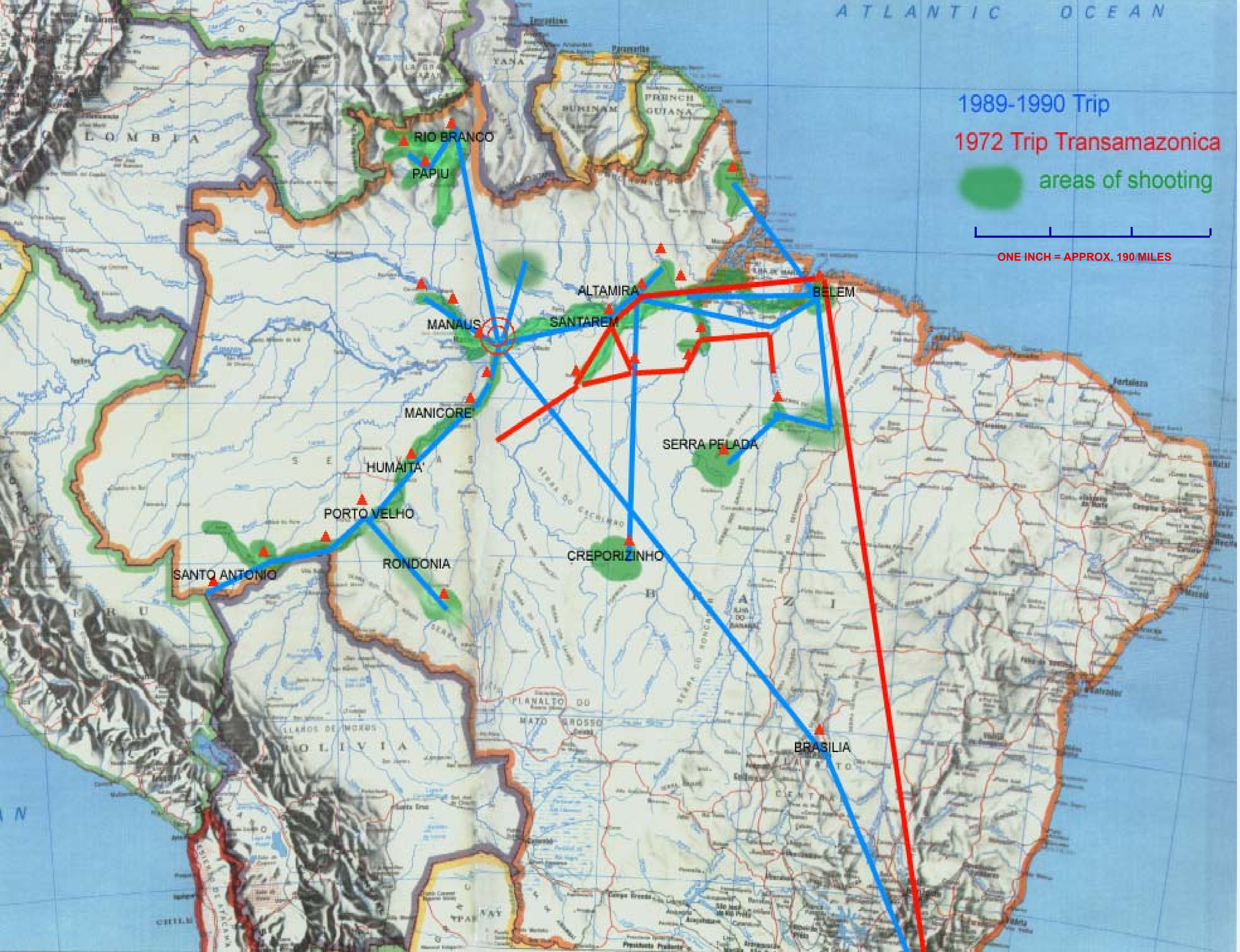

Map of Brazil showing the trips taken by Boccaccio and the areas where photographs were taken. The first trip, in 1972, in shown in red. The second, taken in 1989-90 is in blue.