
# 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.*

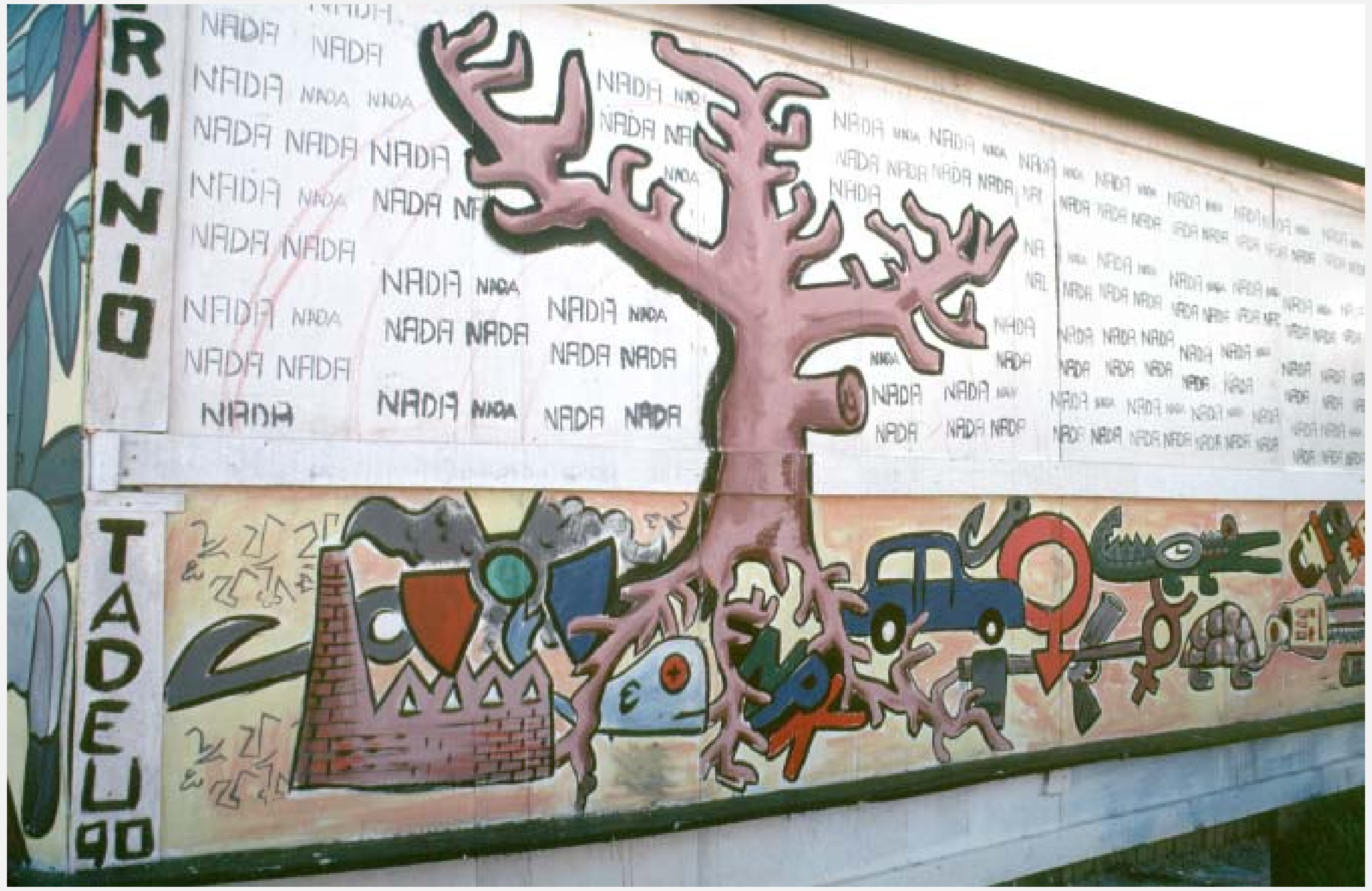
*"Chow," he said, and he shook my hand gently.*

*— 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, nothing..."*

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*"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)*

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*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, 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 my brother 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, that 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.

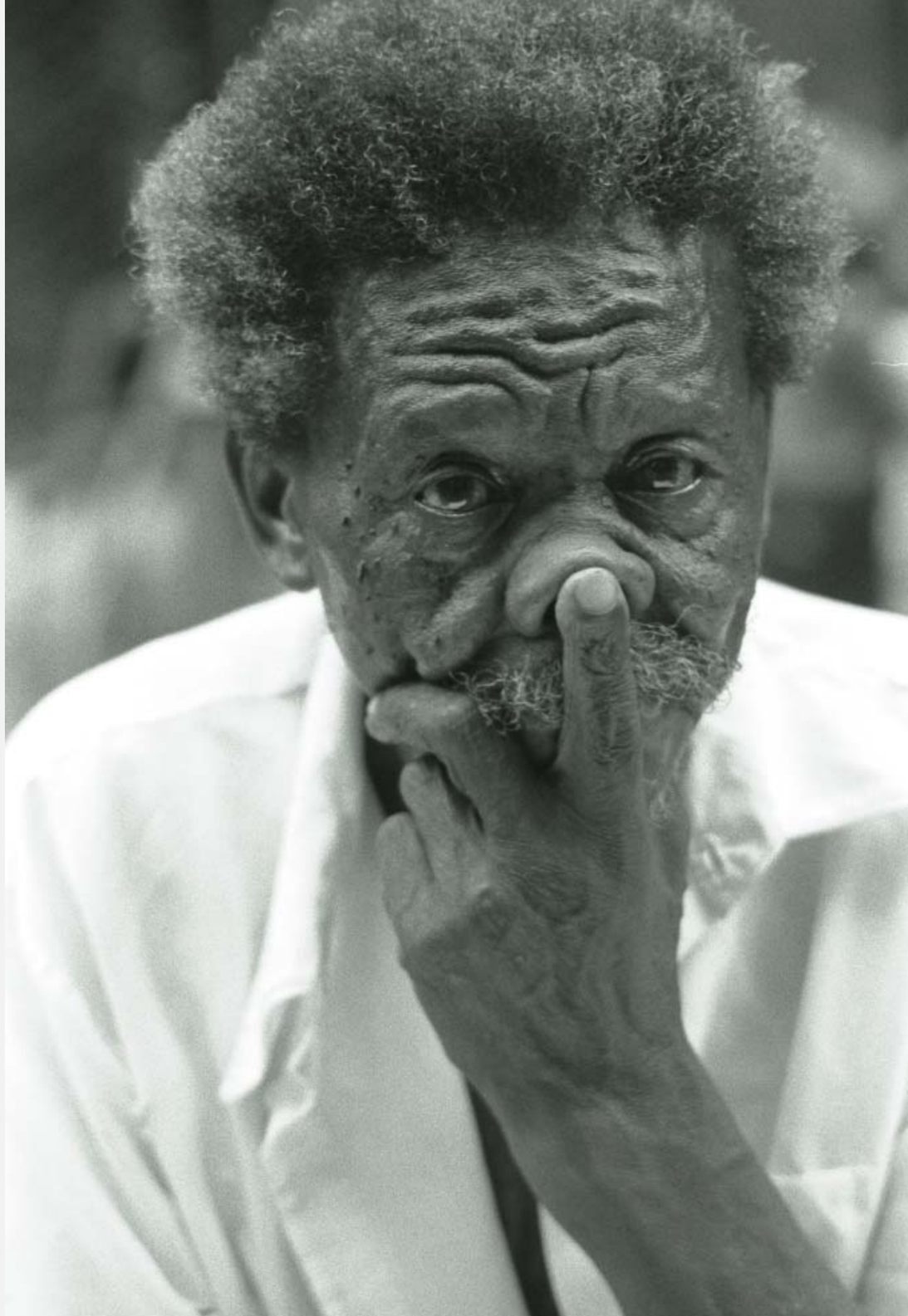
So he went West but he never made it to Acre. He made it as far as the Madeira River near Abuna, on the Bolivian border. He made it as far as the famous *Vai-Quem-Quer* gold mine. He took up mining to feed his family. Cutting and burning and planting was too dangerous. If the rains didn't get you, the 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.

*— Told by a taxicab driver, Manaus*



*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*

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*An old woman came up to me and took the photographs from my hands. They were photos 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*



*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.*

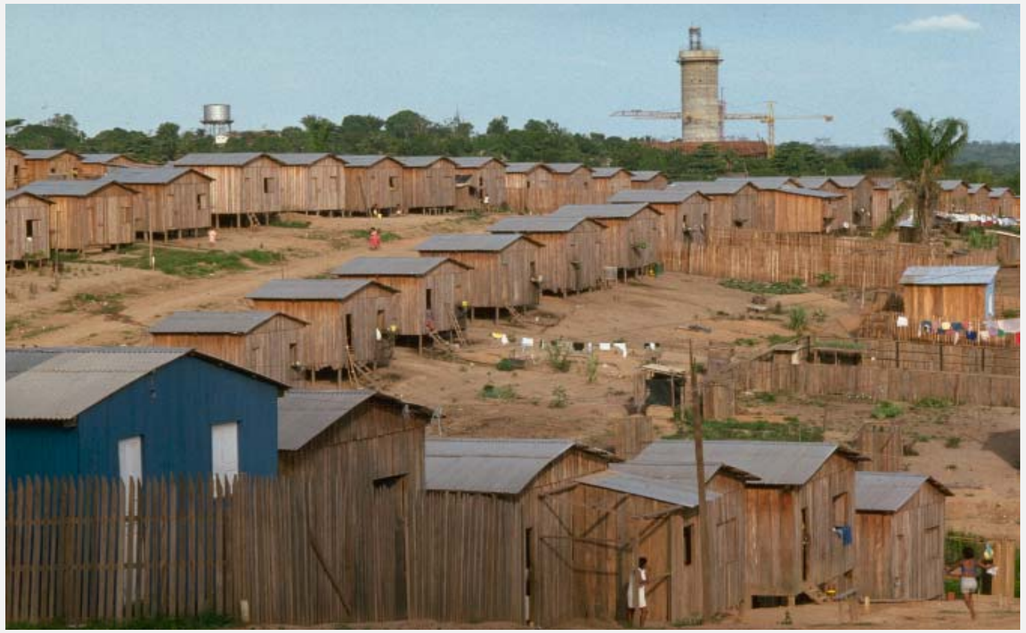
*I've had this birth certificate for more than five months. I promised the woman I'd bring it back in two, but the rains came earlier this year. Now she has to wait. Maybe next year. It's too bad for her. She can't do anything, can't go anywhere without identification. This is all she has. Without this 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'*



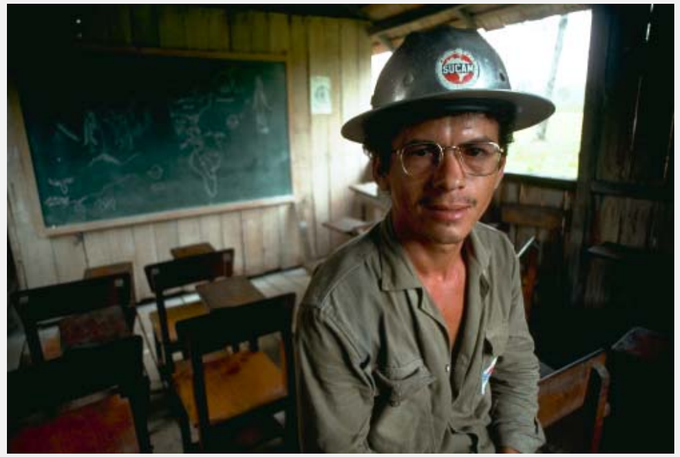
*Look at those houses. It makes me sick. They all have tin roofs. In the summer they turn into ovens. They're unlivable. And they have no water, yet the government is building a new water tower within sight of this housing project. But the water is for the rich, not these people. We call them the ballot 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'*

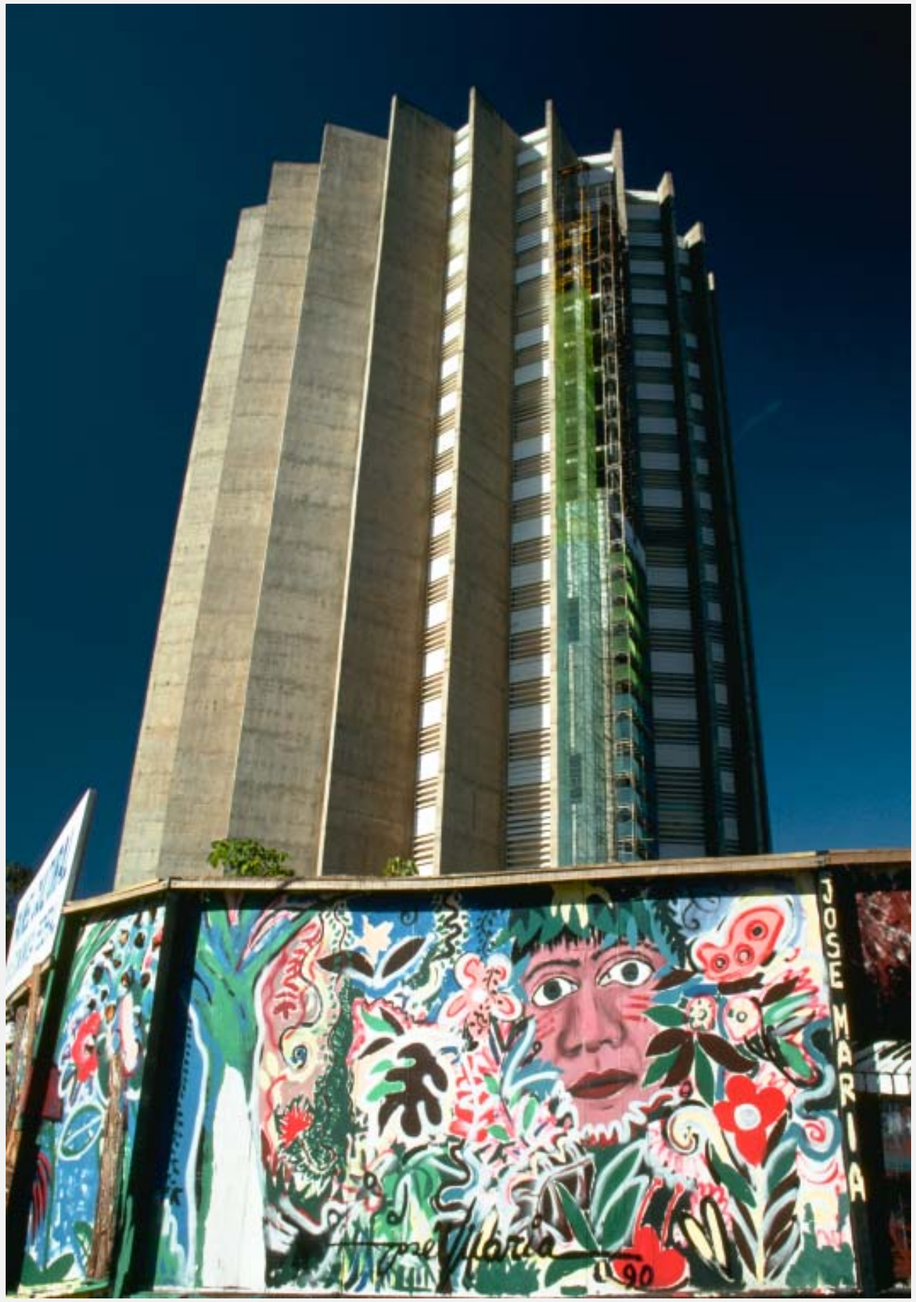
*Balbina dam is a disaster. It drowned almost a quarter million square kilometers of forest, destroyed the ecosystem of the area, buried over 150 archeological sites, displaced hundreds of Indians, and in the end, what do we have? A lake 250 kilometers long filled with hundreds of kilometers of mud, 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*