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LIFE IN THE SPACE RESERVOIR

Brazil and race

It seems to me madness that a revolution for liberty should try to maintain slavery.
SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, *DECRETOS DEL LIBERTADOR*

São Paulo

Brazil is an island. Agreed, on a map it might not look like one. In addition to Paraguay, the regional colossus has nine countries butting against its borders. Nor is its size that of your typical island. Ireland would fit a hundred times into its ample bulk with room still to spare. As for the wildlife swimming down its rivers and bouncing through its trees, it makes the Galapagos Islands look like a cash-strapped city zoo.

No, its island qualities lie altogether apart from its geography. They have to do with how the country sees itself, its state of mind. History and happenstance have landed it in a continent of strangers. The rites of the Mass and the small print of the Football Association rule book represent the sum of its shared interests with Hispanic America. Everything else is different: how Brazilians talk, how they walk, how they make music, how they dress, how they sing, how they flirt, how they move and how they dance – especially how they dance.

Not that differences don't exist between other South American states. Yet there's an affinity between Spain's old colonies that Brazilians don't share. At continental shindigs, Brazil is the lonely outsider – no one's special enemy, but no one's special friend. Imagine the British delegation at European Union meetings and you have the Brazilians on the South American stage: aloof, apart and

funny-sounding. Not that they mind terribly. They quite like it that way.

But there's another stark peculiarity about Brazil. For the continent's Hispanics, skin tone matters. Brazil, by contrast, is officially colour-blind. There's no tune to which the samba nation won't dance, or so they say.

I take a room on Rua Dom Jose de Barros just off Praça da República. Located in the heart of downtown São Paulo. The hotel came recommended. The area did not.

Feeling filthy and exhausted after the night bus from Paraguay, I take a quick shower and flick on the television. Without satellite, the choice is limited: a lottery game show, a couple of *telenovelas* and a dubbed cop movie. I switch the set off and instead listen to the hushed chatter of early risers eating breakfast on the floor below. Within seconds, I'm asleep. Waking an hour later, I feel fresher and ready to check out the neighbourhood. Down to my last set of clean clothes, I pack a week's worth of washing into a bin liner and go in search of a launderette.

Life outside has grown busier since I checked in. A maze of market stalls now winds along the pedestrianised street on the hotel doorstep. Between the racks of cheap Bermuda shorts and denim jeans squeeze stalls of sunglasses and pirated DVDs. Half a block to the right lies the Rua Barão de Itapetininga, a street of low-budget clothing stores already buzzing with window-shoppers and people heading to work. I turn left.

The temporary market stretches to the corner and peters out. Looming above the ground-floor shops runs a row of featureless tenement blocks. They obstruct the morning's slanting sun, throwing the whole quadrant into gloomy shadow. I take a right down a confining corridor of darkened doorways and broken rubbish bags. The blanketed bodies of the city's homeless fill the empty alleyways. Some are just beginning to rustle. Around the next bend, a tawdry, four-storey shopping centre presents itself. Reckoning it might have a launderette, I venture inside. I'm not

in luck. There are shoe-repair shops and hairdressers and tattoo parlours and key-cutters and heavy-metal music stores, but no launderette.

The tacky, low-budget mall exits onto the other side of the block, bringing me out into Largo de Paiçandú. A cement-clad square squashed in between ugly office buildings and yet more unloved high-rises, Paiçandú houses a plain but attractive chapel. Built by black Brazilians at the turn of the twentieth century, the church's wide triangular spire marks the only patch of its custard yellow exterior that has escaped the graffiti artists.

Aerosol cans contend with urine as the dominating feature of downtown São Paulo. The urine, I reckon, has the edge. Carried on the stagnant, humid air, its sickly stench overrides even the smoggiest of traffic fumes. Feeling as if I'm trapped in an odorous underground car park, I flee up the traffic-choked Avenida São João and away from the Paiçandú square.

My flight leads me to the corner of the car-clogged Avenida Ipiranga. I am standing, my tourist map informs me, on immortalised ground. The unexceptional metropolitan intersection is referred to in the song, 'Sampa', a quintessential classic about São Paulo. Looking up the lyrics later, I'm disappointed to discover that the hit brushes over Habbib's fast-food store and the twenty-four-hour triple-X cinema. Perhaps it didn't fit with his rhyming scheme, but the omission strikes me as an unfortunate oversight, especially the cinema. Compared to the ornate but empty Municipal Theatre four blocks away, the República's thriving adults-only movie halls look to be meccas of popular culture. Tatiana's sex shop might be a novelty in Santiago, but São Paulo's old town has Buttmans, Butt Sellers and other similar erotic (mostly rear-end related) emporia on every other corner.

Crossing the three-lane Avenida Ipiranga, I pass into Praça da República. At weekends, the tree-shaded square fills with a hippy market of ethnic jewellers and handicraft vendors. During the week, though, it's the realm of down-and-outs, drunks and drug pushers. Brightening the day for the park's habitués is a four-man indigenous

ensemble. They are led by a pot-bellied recorder player in a feathered headdress. The Brasil Inkas are playing hits from their cosmologically inspired woodwind album, *Magic Mountain*. The audience listen with polite attention, tapping their feet to the rhythm and emitting the odd drunken burp in encouragement. A barefoot mulatta then takes to the floor and engages in a hip-shaking two-step with her carton of wine.

I walk on, through to the far side of the park towards a group of tall, African-looking men wearing colourful kaftans that float down to their shins. The five friends are sitting on a bench by one of the park's stagnant emerald ponds, arguing in a coarse Portuguese. A Chinese woman rushes past. Spilling from her hands are two Styrofoam burger boxes of steaming noodles, freshly ladled from her portable food cart. Beyond them, in a second pond, two dark-skinned boys splash noisily, indifferent to the scum-green sludge floating to the surface.

Leaving the park, I head up Rua do Arouche, stopping briefly at a kiosk stocked high with women's magazines and the day's newspapers. To move on requires sidestepping a butch female bouncer patrolling the entrance to a busy pavement café. I swerve round her and take the next right. The turning opens onto the quieter Rua Aurora. A dim, litter-strewn street, it leads me past a series of open yet unmarked doorways. Each gives way to a steep staircase manned by a bored sentry sitting on a stool. Heavy curtains drape across the windows on the floors above, an oddity in the morning's stifling humidity. The shady Aurora is empty of other pedestrians, substantiating my growing suspicion that its usual clientele might be of a more nocturnal disposition. A few streets down and the names of cheap hotels begin appearing above the same threadbare staircases. I walk by a restaurant with a sign claiming to have the 'Best Brazilian Italian Food in São Paulo'.

Reckoning that so many flophouses must have a launderette in the vicinity, I begin scanning the side streets with a more avid eye. Three buildings down Rua Guaianzes, I eventually spot the word *lavanderia* above an open-fronted store. Leaving the plastic bag

with the friendly, fair-haired laundry woman, I agree to pick it up the next day.

Resolving that República's rough-edged reputation is well earned, I cut my sightseeing short and head back.

Of São Paulo's nineteen million inhabitants, I have one good friend. Back in the hotel, I waste no time in telephoning her. I first met Gisele when she was a poor university graduate studying English in London. Seven years later, she's still a poor university graduate, only now she spends her days thinking about shoots for an ad agency rather than irregular verb forms.

It is good to hear her voice again, although its shrillness at the news that I'm staying downtown is mildly disconcerting. Convinced I'm going to get mugged, stabbed or otherwise assaulted as soon as I step outside, she orders me to remain barricaded in my room until the next day. Tomorrow she has some time off work, she says, and can chaperone me around the city.

Fear of crime is a guiding sentiment among most Brazilians. São Paulo's municipal government seriously discussed changing the traffic laws a few years ago to protect motorists from being robbed at traffic lights. Drivers, it was proposed, would not only be allowed to run a red light after dark, they would be encouraged to do so. However bad the crime rates, the idea of petite Gisele – barely taller than a prepubescent twelve-year-old – acting as anyone's personal security is as cutely preposterous as it is kindly proposed. I promise to take care and make arrangements to meet the next day.

Before our date, there's one sight I particularly want to check out: the Hospedaria dos Imigrantes. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, thousands of poor migrants – most of them European – boarded ships and headed to the New World. Many set off with one-way tickets to São Paulo, Brazil's largest city and its industrial capital.

As the city grew more prosperous, it became the natural jumping-off point for the growing flood of foreign fortune-seekers. Not that the new arrivals managed to jump too far. As soon as they stepped

foot on the quay, most were corralled onto a steam train and whisked off to the Hospedaria. A mega-boarding house of sorts, the service was bankrolled by large landowners in need of cheap manual labour. In exchange for a health check-up and a roof over their heads, the new immigrants were presented with an ink pen, a work contract and a line on which to sign. For the majority, it was then off to the coffee fields.

More than two and a half million people passed through the Hospedaria's doors between 1886 and 1915. Not all new immigrants came to São Paulo. A large population of Germans settled in the south, while hordes of Dutchmen headed north. Even so, the ledger of the immigrant hotel contains surnames from more than seventy different nationalities. Some escaped their backbreaking contracts and realised their dream of becoming rich. Most did not. Rich or poor, though, nearly all got on with one job in common: procreation. It's that genetic melting pot that today adds so many different layers to South America's rainbow nation.

Bearing Gisele's words of caution in mind, I empty my pockets of valuables and head with a confident stride to República metro station. In spite of her predictions, I survive the five-stop journey to Bresser without assault or battery. Disembarking at the overground station, I follow the train tracks back along a quiet suburban street until I reach a huge two-storey barracks. Spotting two tour coaches parked up against the kerb, I take it to be the Hospedaria. Paying my entrance fee, I cross a well-kept lawn towards the building's arched portico. Men with brilliantined hair pasted flat against their scalps stare out from a grainy photo on the wall of the entrance corridor. Beside it are other images taken by the hostel's turn-of-the-century cameraman: a doctor holding a stethoscope to the back of a bare-chested labourer, three women sitting on a bunk bed in a starched dormitory, children eating bread and soup at long wooden benches in the Dickensian refectory.

Along the front runs a shaded colonnade. Tucked underneath it on the ground floor, I come across a small visitors' bookshop. Browsing the shelves gives a feeling for Brazil's diverse gene pool.

Beside the accounts of Bulgarian and Belarusian migrants is nestled a dictionary of Japanese names and a book of Arabic sayings. The next shelf carries the memoirs of an English exile, a survey of Spanish coffee farmers and tales from Jewish colonists. The first floor spells out the same in more graphic terms. The ledger's surnames have transformed themselves into life-sized dolls with eyes as big as saucepans and comic-book lips. Trussed up in the costumes of their native lands, the flag-waving crowd starts with an Orthodox Jewish couple in Russian felt hats and finishes with two doe-eyed Arabs wearing white headdresses.

Leading away from the multicultural exhibition are the former starched dormitories of the photos. One contains a theatre set depicting São Paulo at the turn of the twentieth century. Downtown, I conclude, could do with winding back a century: the mock pharmacist has the lab coat of a true professional, the tramway boasts an air of efficiency, and Café Girondino is free of scary doorwomen.

Another exhibition space in the second dormitory traces the story of the coffee boom. I stroll slowly around the exhibits until a reproduction painting draws me up short. It depicts a corpulent plantation owner dressed in a three-piece linen suit. Sporting a carefully lacquered moustache, the Portuguese potentate is sitting in a wicker chair on the veranda of his grand estate. Between his chubby pink mitts, he's grasping a delicate china cup of freshly roasted coffee. Beside him is a severe-looking white woman in a buttoned-up dress and two silent children in similarly stifling attire.

What catches my eye is not the painting's main subjects but a forgotten figure in the corner. Looking on at the family scene, with her back straight and a tray in her hands, stands a diminutive black maid. She too is immaculately dressed, in a pressed pinafore and braided bonnet. Yet the indentured servant girl hails from a different world.

Brazil's history of slavery barely gets a mention in the Hospedaria's exhibits. Admittedly, the museum is dedicated to the memory of the hostel's migrant residents. But Brazil saw two major

influxes of foreigners, one voluntary, the other not. No refectories or dormitories awaited the latter.

Shackled together in the holds of slave ships, over three million Africans made the month-long journey across the Atlantic. A cruel life on the plantations of sugar and coffee barons awaited most. Not until 1888, on the eve of the Republic, did this sad chapter in Brazil's history eventually close – more than six decades after Bolívar ordered freedom for the slaves of Gran Colombia.

Brazil's immigration patterns are given a fuller airing in the metro than the museum. On the ride back from the Hospedaria, I pull out my notebook and make a note of my fellow passengers.

Sitting next to me is an elderly black man with white, closely cropped hair and the wizened, knotted face of a mahogany sculpture. On the seat in front of us sits a teenager, also of African descent, but several shades darker. He has a voluminous Afro and is wearing a chunky silver chain around his neck, long basketball shorts and a black vest with 'Hip Hop' written on the back. He could be from Brooklyn. Sharing his bench is a thin white girl with straight, marmalade-tinged hair and sunburned shoulders. Her eyes are hazel and her skin freckly.

Across to my left stands a pensioner, with shallow cheeks, bony pianist's fingers and an olive face shadowed by half a day's stubble. Beside him is perched a thin, middle-aged woman with sparrow eyes and the skin of a wrinkled walnut. Bulging across from the next-door seat, an overweight twenty-something girl in a clinging T-shirt is speaking with a companion. The two could be twins, both pasty white, both light-eyed and both crowned with tresses of mouse-brown hair.

República metro stop is called, curtailing my crude exercise in phenotypic documentation. Every other South American country feels racially monochrome all of a sudden. With more time, I'm confident I could have worked my way through a paint store of skin colours.

Official figures use blunter language, but their message is the

same. According to the Institute of Geography and Statistics, around half of Brazilians classify themselves as 'white'. Another two-fifths tick the 'brown' category when asked. A mere one in sixteen (6 per cent) consider themselves 'black', while fewer than 1 per cent reckon themselves to be 'yellow' (to borrow the institute's terminology) or 'indigenous'.

Not all bureaucratic investigations are so imaginatively restrictive. A brainstorming session at the census office once came up with one hundred and thirty-five separate descriptions for Brazilians' pigmentation. Among the options to choose from were *alva-rosada* (white with pink highlights), *branca-sardenta* (white with brown spots), *morena-canelada* (cinnamon-like brunette) and *tostada* (toasted). Such poetry is rare in today's politically correct circles. Today, Brazil's African descendants have just two categories to choose between: *preto* (black) or *pardo* (mixed race). Most identify themselves with the second.

I'd like to see an immigrant neighbourhood, I tell Gisele when we meet the next day.

'A *what?*' she says, a frown of confusion creasing her forehead.

Does she know what the English word 'ghetto' is? Yes, she thinks she does.

Well, does São Paulo have any migrant ghettos? In such a large, diverse city, I imagined there must be a Chinatown or a Little Italy or a Jewish Quarter. Her brow still puckered, she says I may be able to see some Orthodox Jews if I go out to Luz district on a Saturday afternoon. It's Wednesday.

Does she have any other ideas? Another option might be Rua José Paulino, a street of clothes stores in Bom Retiro. She thinks it's run by Koreans. People say Italians used to live in Bela Vista, but, other than perhaps having a few more pizza restaurants than elsewhere, she doesn't think that is still the case.

Our best bet, she reckons, is Liberdade. She's never been but knows it to be very Japanese. Within walking distance of República, it doesn't take us long to find our way to the congested canton.

More frying wok than melting pot, oriental shops line the bustling thoroughfare.

We pop into a dress store called Minikomo. Gisele holds up a kimono to test the fit, while her boyfriend, Ale, eyes up a pair of 'ninja slippers'. In the Marukai supermarket next door, we find everything from Kani sticks and Ajitaka fish paste to samurai swords and chopsticks. We settle on a lucky-cat fridge magnet.

Later on, over ice cream, I ask Gisele if she can fill me in on Brazil's race-related slang. While not taboo, talking about race head-on runs against good manners. In a racial democracy, the subject of skin colour is officially a non-issue. Brazilians are indoctrinated to be race-indifferent in public. White, brown or black, it doesn't matter. Bringing the theme up, therefore, is as likely to brand you a bore as it is a bigot.

Gisele's brow wrinkled in furrows at my question. Reading her discomfort for confusion, I set out to clarify my meaning.

'You must have names for people of different races. What do you call those of Japanese descent, for example?'

'*Japonese*,' she says without humour, as if answering a vocabulary test.

I'm not after words that I'll find in a dictionary, an objective I sense she understands but is shrinking back from. Running the risk of appearing both boring *and* bigoted, I ignore the hint and press on.

'No, what's their nickname? They must have a nickname. In England, for example, we might call them "Japs".'

'But isn't "Japs" rude?' she asks, the eternal English student.

'Yes, you're right. "Jap" is generally considered pejorative. And while I wouldn't use it, others might.'

Comforting herself that I'm no closet racist, she warms a fraction to the theme of my questioning.

'Well, we also use *China*,' she admits, her cheeks reddening and her voice dropping so those around us won't hear. 'But that's for anyone from Asia. It's not meant in a bad way, but the Japanese don't really like it.'

'So *China*'s the strongest you've got?'

'Umm. People might use *Bruce Lee* sometimes.' Her embarrassment seems to lessen. 'Or *Jaspion*, which is the name of a Japanese cartoon character, although that's not polite at all.'

'And *negros?*' I enquire, careful to shorten the first syllable [*né-gro*] as in the Portuguese for 'black', and not to lengthen it [*knee-grow*] as in the Ku Klux Klan for 'lynching material'.

'*Negros* are *negros*,' Gisele says straightforwardly. 'There's a movement now to call them *afro-descendentes* as well, but most just use *negro*.'

'And what do blacks call each other?'

'*Negro* too. Although there are lots of other derivatives too, like *nego, neguinho, negão, negraço*.'

'And do white people use them too, or is that taken to be racist?'

'Maybe not *negraço*, but the rest, sure. Why not? They're seen as terms of endearment. Of course, it depends on how you say it. If you say, "Watch your bag, there are lots of *negros* in this area," then sure it's racist. But generally, no, *negro* is just the term we use for "black".'

'But there are outright racist terms, right?' I can't believe Brazil is so racially harmonious that stronger prejudices don't exist.

Gisele hesitates before answering and then asks for a pen and paper. Never having vocalised the terms before, she refuses to start now. She writes down half a dozen words with their English translation in brackets: *tissão* (very black), *macaco* (lemur), *Pelé* (black, as in the famous Brazilian footballer), *meia-noite* (midnight) and, lastly, *escravo* (slave).

She's insistent that I never, ever consider using any of them: 'We have very strong anti-racism laws here. If you don't get beaten up first, then you stand a very real chance of getting locked up by the police.' Again, I find myself promising her that I'll be attentive.

'And whites? Is there a pejorative term for them?' The question occurs to me just as we're finishing our cornets.

'No, they're just *brancos*,' she replies, 'Unless they're foreigners, of course.'

'And in that case?'

'What, like you? We call you *gringo*. It doesn't matter where you're from. If you're white and foreign, you're a *gringo*.'

Later in the week, I catch a local bus down to the prestigious University of São Paulo. The traffic is so bumper-to-bumper that the logjam streets would make a dodgem track seem roomy. After almost an hour, the bus pulls up outside the social-sciences faculty and I climb down with the longhaired students.

Along a corridor of metallic doors, I find a door with Professor María Ligia Coelho Prado's name badge nailed to it. Visiting the professor came at the recommendation of a student friend of Gisele's, one of the professor's ex-pupils. I knock, and a well-dressed white woman with a sensible haircut and the air of an academic invites me in.

Wearing my new status on my sleeve, I explain my *gringo* fascination with Brazil's apparent interracial harmony. I was hoping that, as a historian, she could spare me a few minutes to explain how the phenomenon came about. The professor is only too happy to help, but I've caught her between lectures. I'm to forgive her if she's a little brief. She'll cut to the chase.

The easiest way for a foreigner to understand the country's racial democracy is to consider what Brazil is not. It is not, in short, the USA. Slaves in Brazil, for example, were able to buy their freedom. Even before the formal end of slavery, therefore, a black man walking the street could feasibly be either slave or free. That's very different from how the situation was in the USA.

Brazil's colonisers were also more pragmatic than the Puritans. To exploit the natural wealth of their New World discovery, the Portuguese required a workforce. As the royal accountants pointed out, begetting one was a good deal more practical than buying one. So from the outset, the Portuguese crown consented to its subjects siring children whenever and with whomsoever they could. Having sex with their slaves or indigenous servants became nothing short of a patriotic duty.

Another difference with the USA: after emancipation, Brazil never had any segregation laws and, therefore, no ghetto-mentality. Tough anti-racism legislation in the past two or three decades has strengthened the notion that everyone is equal, regardless of colour.

She checks her watch. The lecture hall beckons.

'How long are you here for?' A month or so, I tell her. Have a look around, she encourages me.

'You'll see that being black doesn't mean just having black friends. Society is more mixed here. It makes life easier, more pleasant.'

She places her lecture notes in a satchel. 'Don't let me mislead you. All this doesn't mean Brazil is *truly* a racial democracy.' She's heading for the door. 'We might be different from the United States, but silent discrimination is still deep-rooted here. Five minutes in a *favela* will show you that.'

Before taking my leave of São Paulo, Gisele and Ale take me to the upmarket Iguatemi shopping centre on Avenida Faria Lima. My friend is adamant that the dinginess of downtown not be my lasting impression of her home city.

She parks her ten-year-old Fiat between two newly licensed station wagons and we ride the car park lift down to the ground floor. It's the beginning of December, and the main entrance area has been converted into a lavish Santa's grotto. Manicured mothers push three-wheeled prams through the children's fantasy, stopping occasionally to let their little darlings admire the miniature train and fairground games.

We turn to a map of the mall in an attempt to orientate ourselves. Every other store, it would seem, houses a luxury brand: Tiffany & Co., Versace, Salvatore Ferragamo, Prada, Christian Dior. Wandering round, we discover an embroidered leather shoulder bag for US $3,265 in Louis Vuitton, a US $645 Léoville-Las-Cases 1994 Bordeaux in Expand Wine Store and a three-kilo, thick glass chalice of Belgian truffles in Chocolat du Jour priced at an astronomical US $1,537. The closest item to our price range is a pair of Armani briefs. A snip at US$250.

'For that price, I'd wear them outside my trousers,' says Ale, who earns roughly that amount per month working as an assistant in a film studio.

Leaving the window-shopping aside, we head to the food court to grab a bite to eat. The restaurant selection reflects the cosmopolitan tastes of São Paulo's moneyed classes. Gisele chooses some falafel from Arabian Express, Ale a spaghetti dish from Spazio Pasta and I a beef stroganoff from Bon Grillé.

The parting words of the professor are occupying my thoughts, and I ask my two dining companions if they too think Brazil is silently discriminatory. Ale, who's of mixed-race ancestry, looks up from his spaghetti and slowly casts his eye around the room: 'What do *you* think?'

I follow his eye. Other than the tan-skinned Ale and a young black man with a shaven head eating at Sushi Dai, all the diners in Iguatemi are white. Those who are darker-skinned are either holding a dishcloth or an order form. It sounds crass. But that's the way it is.

Rio de Janeiro

There exist several ways of seeing a *favela*. The easiest and by far the most common is to pull out your Speedos, take yourself down to Copacabana beach, hire a deckchair, turn it away from the water and look up at the hills.

Nowhere is South America's wealth gap more evident than in Rio de Janeiro. Five-star hotels and penthouse apartment suites wrestle over every inch of Brazil's iconic beachfront. Above them, in contrast, clutching precariously to the hillsides, are the homes of the have-nots.

Slum-dwelling is not new to Rio. In a downtown bookshop, I pick up a copy of Aluísio Azevedo's late-nineteenth-century classic, *O Cortiço* (*The Slum*). The story plays out in the choking confines of the fictitious São Romão *favela*, a heaving slum created by a Portuguese tavern-owner, João Romão, 'who never wore a jacket

and slept and ate with a Negress'. Stealing planks and bricks and sacks of lime from his neighbours, the avaricious immigrant and his black lover-housekeeper throw up one rental shack after another. Soon, a bustling community is born.

The slum's impoverished residents provide Azevedo with his colourful cast: Leandra, the washerwoman with 'haunches like a draught animal'; the half indigenous, half crazy Leocádia; Florinda, the black teenager with lustful eyes who 'stubbornly preserved her virginity'; Rita, the sensual Bahian mulatta who wears vanilla flowers in her hair and smells of clover; the steadfast Jerônimo, who played sad *faros* and yearned for home until he 'became a Brazilian'; plus a roll-call of quarry workers, prostitutes, shop owners, policemen and peddlers, as you'd imagine in a turn-of-the-century slum.

More than a hundred years later, it's Azevedo's creation that I picture when I look up from the sandy beach to the hillside shacks: the archetypal *favela* from whose 'sultry humidity, a living world, a human community, began to wriggle, to seethe, to grow spontaneously in that quagmire, multiplying like larvae in a dung heap'.

Azevedo and beach binoculars can only reveal so much about the realities of contemporary *favela* life. I resolve to take a closer look. Packing up my deckchair, I head off and book myself onto a 'slum tour'. I do so reluctantly. The prospect of ogling at other people's poverty with a group of camera-touting tourists makes me feel distinctly uncomfortable. But so too does going it alone. Gun battles with police result in over one thousand deaths a year in Rio's seven hundred or more *favelas*. The tourist option, I decide, represents the better of the two evils.

At two o'clock the next afternoon, an unlicensed taxi picks me up at my hotel and bunny-hops southwards through Rio's afternoon traffic. In the front seat is an Irish backpacker who's 'along for the craic'. Squashed into the back with me, meanwhile, are Bob and Brenda, a retired Chinese-Canadian couple of unrelenting enthusiasm.

Leaving the palm trees of the Ipanema seafront, we drive past the Jockey Club and the Flamengo football stadium and finally through

the Dois Irmãos road tunnel. Emerging on the other side of the mountain, we pull up beside a minivan of other tourists and are collectively ushered out towards a row of waiting motorbikes. Within seconds, we're dodging oncoming traffic and breaking into hairpin bends as the taxi-bikes speed full throttle to the top of the Rocinha *favela*.

Our guide is called Daniel, a handsome thirty-something Brazilian with an Americanised accent and a word for all the women that we pass. He's been in the job ten months and appears to be a popular face in the *favela*. He groups us together, counts us off and launches into his spiel.

Rocinha has an estimated two hundred thousand inhabitants and is reckoned to be the largest of Rio's *favelas*. The settlement's origins date back to the 1920s, when poor farmers from the north-east started flocking to Rio in search of work. Almost 50 per cent of the *favela*'s children are not in school. Family incomes are around 400 *reals* per month, less than half the average for Rio. Rents range between 150 and 700 *reals* (roughly £45 and £200) per month, with the cheaper housing found on the hill's lower reaches where the sewage and garbage tend to collect. Two health centres serve the entire population. Only those living on the main street that we drove up pay for water and electricity. Everyone else steals from the grid.

That's as far as he gets before the heavens open and a monsoonal deluge tips down. Cutting off his speech, he beckons us to follow him. Shoving my rain-drenched notebook into my back pocket, I tag onto the line now filing towards a tapered passageway leading off the hillside's principal street.

At first, it's difficult to determine who is observing whom most keenly. Rocinha's residents are accustomed to tour groups, but the sight of eleven foreigners splashing through the mud in flip-flops, wetter than a litter of drowned kittens, is entertaining enough for them to drop what they're doing and stare.

Our *gringo* grouping, on the other hand, shuffles forward with heads down, like prisoners in a chain gang. I feel awkwardly self-conscious, as if heading out to a fancy-dress party in the middle of

the day. How much my fellow tour-goers share my discomfort is difficult to tell. Perhaps they're looking down to avoid losing their step on the uneven path. Only Bob and Brenda appear entirely unperturbed. They stroll along waving eagerly at the children and issuing a loud 'How ya doing?' at their mystified parents.

Once off the main street, I feel less conspicuous. Most people are inside their homes waiting out the rainstorm. Those caught by the downpour rush along under cheap umbrellas, not stopping to talk. Only a straggle of young boys and girls are outside, splashing in puddles and playing games with empty plastic bottles in the rainwater.

Within minutes, a rushing torrent several inches deep is cascading down Rua 1, the tapered alleyway along which we're descending. The zigzagging path carves its way down the mountainside, slicing a passage through the warren of Rocinha. So closely pressed together are the houses that Rua 1's residents can reach out of their top windows and exchange things with their neighbours across the street. The only public infrastructure is the occasional telegraph pole, every one of which is weighed down with a disordered jumble of illegally rigged cables.

Every few hundred yards, we stop under an overhanging doorway to shelter briefly from the rain and to allow people to regroup. On one such break, a skinny man strolls by. Oblivious to the rain, he's wearing surf shorts and a soaking vest. Hanging by a strap over his shoulder swings an American-made AR-15 machine gun. He acknowledges Daniel with a nod of the head and continues on his way up the hill. Open-mouthed, we watch him pass and disappear around a bend in the path.

A day-care centre for toddlers and small children further down the hill provides us with our next stop. It's funded by Daniel's tour agency, and he's anxious we all know what a wonderful job they're doing to provide for its upkeep. We listen patiently, but it's not long before someone asks about the man with the machine gun.

'Oh, him. He's just patrolling the neighbourhood,' Daniel explains casually. 'Rocinha, like almost all Rio's *favelas*, is policed by the drugs gangs.'

The Pure Third Command currently rules the roost in Rocinha. The gang is an offshoot of the Third Command, which itself is an offshoot of the Red Command. The three together control the majority of Rio's slums. Our visit to the *favela* is conditional on the gang's prior approval. The day-care centre, I have no doubt, contributes towards our entrance ticket.

Two hours later, waterlogged and weary, we arrive back at the bottom of the hill. We hail two taxis, and Rocinha's rickety residences are soon fading behind us. Within minutes they've disappeared entirely, obliterated by the tunnelled outcrop that conveniently keeps Rocinha out of sight and out of mind for Rio's richer residents.

'Ever noticed what great feng shui Rio has?' pipes Bob's perky voice from the back as we emerge out from the tunnel. The storm has eventually let up, and the sun is shimmering across the glass-topped bay.

'It hadn't occurred to me, dear, but now you mention it,' responds Brenda, her capacity for cheerfulness not in the least abated by our rain-saturated excursion. 'It's just like Yosemite.'

As the taxi weaves along the coast road, their conversation moves seamlessly from the city's harmonious symmetry to its yin and yang: the ocean and the mountains, the beauty and the beastliness, the sea-view suites and the sordid slums.

Tuning out, I think back to the professor's comment about silent discrimination. Very few of the faces I saw in Rocinha were white.

It's not necessary to go all the way to a *favela* to appreciate Brazil's unspoken apartheid. A trip to the government's public databases would suffice just as well. In a dingy cybercafé later that evening, I search out some statistics online.

The headline facts are indisputable. Seven in ten of very poor Brazilians, for example, turn out to be non-white. In contrast, nearly nine out of ten (86.8 per cent) of Brazil's richest 1 per cent are white-skinned. If you're born black and poor in Brazil, not only are you more likely to remain poor than a non-black, you're also more

likely to suffer ill-health and die younger.

I click through to the Ministry of Education website, figuring that access to schooling might explain some of these incongruities. Typically, the child of a mixed-race or black couple receives two years less education than their white peers. At university, the difference becomes even more marked. Over a third (37.3 per cent) of whites between eighteen and twenty-four years of age are enrolled in university or an equivalent institution. That number drops to one in twenty (4.9 per cent) for Brazil's black population. Little wonder that Afro-Brazilians are more than twice as likely to be illiterate as their white contemporaries, and have half the earning power.

Driving back from Rocinha, though, it is Rio's social ladder that captures my attention. Its rungs are unmistakably inverted. To move up requires climbing down. From the bottom rung on the highest hilltop to the top rung on the beachfront, the journey spans decades of discrimination.

The bad-tempered taxi driver grows progressively more irritated as we ascend Rua Tavares Bastos. 'What's the exact address, son?' he barks back at me as we turn yet another corner up the steep incline.

I recheck the scribbled details in my notebook and ask again that he take me to the end of the street. Not believing that a foreigner would be heading off into the night with such vague directions, he asks to see the notebook for himself.

Annoyed by his incredulity and general gruffness, but reluctant to lose my ride, I hand over the information. He reads my scrawled handwriting.

'Tavares Bastos, to top. The Maze, ask. Tel: 2558 5547.' Muttering something about 'bloody *gringos*,' he turns the next bend and finally blows his top.

'It's a frigging *favela*. Are you crazy? I'm out of here. Go on, get out.'

He slams on the brakes, hurls open the door and practically shoves me onto the kerbside. Throwing me a two-*real* note in change, he crunches his gear stick into reverse and speeds off blindly down the hill.

I'm left standing there, alone, in the dark, my rucksack and laptop bag lying in a heap on the road. Momentarily, I ponder if a four-night break in Rio's premier *favela* hotel was such a good idea after all.

Forcing the thought aside, I continue with the instructions. Scanning the dead end for someone as unlike a gangster as possible, I catch sight of an elderly lady manning a kiosk.

'Could you direct me towards "The Maze"?' She can, and points to the entrance of the *favela*, indicating for me to follow it up the hill. 'You should find it no problem. If not, just ask.' I thank her and step into the cramped quarters of the Tavares Bastos slum.

It's late, and I pass no one as I venture up the pinched, shadow-strewn passageway. It's as threadlike as Rua 1, but better paved and not as steep. The houses are similarly constructed, one on top of the other with no concern for plastering or building regulations.

With each step deeper into the *favela*, the nagging doubts begin to reassert themselves. I feel ready to bolt back down the alley just as I stumble across seven large concrete letters fixed against the wall of a house. 'The Maze', the blocks read. Relieved, I dart through the open door and off the street.

'Ah, so you made it then. Good show,' booms an old-school London accent across the room.

The imposing, white-haired figure of Bob Nadkarni strides towards me. The place is extraordinary. Large oil canvasses cover the walls of the multi-level lounge area. Off each of these angled walls, rooms sprout like false leads in a labyrinth: cubbyholes, bathrooms, a bar, door-less gaps, storage spaces, a kitchen. Stout pillars of reinforced concrete and beams of demolition wood keep the chaos from collapsing. A carved quote from Oscar Wilde reminds revellers that work is the curse of the drinking classes.

Bob takes me to my room, which is located up two flights of winding stairs, across a courtyard paved with broken multicoloured tiles, under a curved archway and through a small, gabled doorway. The bed is made from recycled plastic bottles covered by a thin layer of concrete. The tiled bathroom is hyperbolically misshaped and

has a window in the form of a human eye. Two French doors give way to an outdoor corridor, which leads through to a spacious rooftop terrace. Behind, up the hill, is the dense foliage of an urban rainforest. All that remains is for Gaudí himself to float down through the skylight.

'Not having to ask for building permission has its advantages,' Bob remarks, luxuriating in his architecturally eclectic dream house. 'Imagine trying to do all this with some bureaucratic twerp around.'

I'd heard about the unconventional hotel through a local journalist friend a few days before. It's been almost three decades in the making. Bob laid the first brick after walking his sick maid home one sunny afternoon. Dropping her off at her wooden hut, he turned to see the picture-postcard view of Rio that she enjoyed from her front door. He's not stopped building since.

A British-born documentary-maker and one-time BBC cameraman, Bob is now onto his eighth floor. It's soon to be nine once the twisting turrets on the rooftop are completed. I'd figured sleeping in a *favela* would be an altogether more authentic experience than the tour bus.

I quickly settle into a routine. In the early mornings, I watch people locking the doors of their self-built homes and setting off to low-paid jobs in the city below. I eat breakfast looking out at the cable cars shuttling tourists up Sugarloaf Mountain. When Bob pops out to run some errands, I tag along. I discover that the teenage assistant in the fruit shop is writing a film script and learn from the hairdresser in the barber shack that my hair needs cutting. Lunch is a concoction of rice and ribs at the local café. The afternoons I spend on the terrace staring down at the yachts in Rio's sky-blue bay and waving at the bikini-clad neighbours on their roofs. Come night-time, I chat with Bob and listen to *favela* funk bellowing up from Bilo's Bar below.

The authenticity of Tabares Bastos has its limits though. It looks like a *favela*. It smells like a *favela*. Its residents are predominantly non-whites like in other *favelas*. But it's no Rocinha. There is no

drug-dealing and no gang presence here. That means no gun-touting patrol men, no armed police raids, no drug-related executions and no lying under your bed in fear of being hit by a stray bullet. Only once do I wake to the sound of gunshots. Then, when they start up again moments later, I realise they're really just the builder hammering at the turrets above.

The reason for Tabares Bastos's tranquillity lies in the abandoned casino hotel located on the hill beside The Maze. In 2000, a ruthless, highly trained division of the Rio police moved four hundred men into the hotel's empty rooms. Bob claims it was all his doing. During a televised press conference, the bolshie Brit suggested that the then governor use the redundant building as a police garrison. A few months later, the police squad arrived, leaving Bob to take the credit with the locals. The crack squad's reputation for shooting first and asking questions later persuaded the drug-dealers to pack up and seek out safer territory.

Today, Tabares Bastos is so safe that film crews come to 'shoot without being shot at', as Bob likes to say. A few months before my visit, he'd rented out his house for the filming of the Hollywood blockbuster, *Hulk II*. One local boy even landed a minor role, travelling back to Canada with the film crew.

'Imagine it,' Bob said, recounting the story with a belly-shaking laugh one morning, 'his first job outside the *favela* and he had to thwack Edward Norton on the nose.'

Life hasn't always been as sedate in Bob's backyard. Soon after he moved in, gang members from a nearby slum entered the *favela* and shot a small-time drug-dealer. The victim's family went in search of the perpetrators. On finding them, they made them dig their own graves and buried them alive. Now, with the police marksmen looking down from the casino's balconies, Bob feels comfortable enough to invite his friends over for live jazz nights. House prices are also rocketing now the views can be enjoyed without gunfire.

'You know what people call it now?' my reporter friend joked. '*Favela* chic!'

The phrase is apt, even if the taxi-driving community doesn't yet believe it.

Taxis won't take you into Vigario Geral either. A huge slum on the northern outskirts of Rio, it's sometimes referred to as 'Rio's Gaza Strip'. It used to be the hub of the Red Command, Eve Belanger explains to me as we head out on a municipal bus.

I'd met Eve the previous day at AfroReggae's headquarters, located in a staid government building by Rio's domestic airport. AfroReggae is a non-profit, black-inspired arts project working in the *favelas*. Its dull surroundings do the organisation a disservice. AfroReggae is about as hip and happening as it gets when it comes to inner-city youth work. Eve, in contrast, is a blonde, blue-eyed thirty-something from a middle-class suburb of Montreal. Somehow, the two gel perfectly. To show she belongs, they even call her *neguinha*, 'Little Darkie'.

We sit in the office of Junior, the appropriately named director of Rio's most successful youth programme. The obligatory poster of Alberto Korda's Che Guevara adorns the wall. Framed next to it is the blown-up release cover of *Favela Rising*, an award-winning documentary about AfroReggae's work in the slums. Wedged between the two hangs a photo of a grinning Mick Jagger. The ageing rock-star had popped in to see Junior and his crew when the Rolling Stones were last on tour in Brazil.

'Lots of musicians and singers have supported AfroReggae over the years,' Eve says. 'They like the idea that through music and arts these kids can escape a life of crime and do something worthwhile with their lives.'

Public recognition came later though. AfroReggae began back in the early 1990s with just a handful of dedicated volunteers. With their drums tucked under their arms, they ventured into the no-go lands of Vigario Geral and started making music. Soon they were running workshops for the *favela* children. As novices, the youngsters proved fast learners. From those early percussion classes, AfroReggae has given birth to ten separate bands, one of which –

Banda de Reggae – has a record contract and tours the world. Youth dance groups, theatre companies and circus acts also add to its creative mix.

'If they weren't involved in AfroReggae, most admit that they'd be in jail or dead,' says Eve in her French-accented English.

It sounds a little alarmist. That's until she tells me about a video documentary AfroReggae produced shortly after starting out. Of the twelve boys featured, only one is still alive today. It's a lucky drug-dealer that sees it to his twenty-fifth birthday, she says. Many don't even reach adulthood.

Aged twenty-six, Rosalí Nunes has so far made it through in one piece. She's more than made it through, in fact. Earlier this year, she became the first of AfroReggae's two thousand participants to obtain a university degree. The municipal bus, now almost empty as it nears the end of the line, drops us opposite her house.

Rosalí lives in a three-roomed rented house with her parents and two of her five brothers and sisters. There is little room to sit, let alone study. Yet we find her lying on her bunk bed with her nose in a book. She is swotting up for an entrance exam with the state energy company, Petrobras. Down from her bed she jumps and sends off her brother to buy bread, cheese and Coca-Cola.

Strictly speaking, the economics graduate no longer lives in the Vigario Geral *favela*. The family moved out two years ago after her mother had a minor heart attack during a gun battle. They made it three blocks, setting up their new home within sight of the high brick wall that surrounds the slum.

A rival gang took over the *favela* in May, Rosalí explains, making the situation inside Vigario Geral extremely tense. We phone ahead to see if it's possible to visit but are told we're not welcome. Outsiders are more or less banned for now. Only AfroReggae still gets in.

Eve and I sit on the worn sofa in the middle room of the house, while Rosalí parks herself on the floor. A member of one of AfroReggae's theatre troupes, she speaks fluidly and confidently. Instinctively, she uses her hands to express the full sense of what

she wants to say, pausing only to laugh – something she does with regular, deep-throated alacrity.

Just staying in school is hard enough in the *favela*, she starts, when I ask about her school life. The education in the private system is obviously much better, but, with her father selling plumbing parts on the street and her mother a cleaner, her parents didn't have enough money to send her. The teachers in the public schools are either under-qualified or off sick with psychological traumas. Excessive pupil numbers is also a problem. Pressure for spaces is so high that mothers often camp out overnight before enrolment day for the new term.

Most students last until they are about thirteen or fourteen before dropping out. I ask why. The girls often get pregnant, and the boys start with the gangs.

It's as basic as that? Unfortunately, yes. Being a mother means girls can have something of their own, someone to love them exclusively. Being a gang member, on the other hand, means the boys can have all the clothes and all the women they want.

'They can eat all the things they dreamed of eating as young kids,' she says, 'like yoghurts and hamburgers.' Bling and burgers seem poor compensation for an education. To a teenager from the *favela*, though, gang life pays handsomely. Going straight, Rosalí points out, means spending your days shining shoes or selling chewing gum on the street. Most prefer the bling.

How did she stick at school then? She has her parents to thank for that. They feel like they're nobodies because they didn't go to school: 'That is why they make us study – so that my four siblings and I might have a better future.'

And AfroReggae, did they help too? Sure, she admits. Her older brothers got involved first. Then later she joined a theatre troupe. She thinks being an actress is probably the profession that gives a person the opportunity to be whoever they want: one day she can be rich, the next poor; one day a beggar on the street, and the next a lady. Acting, she says, has taught her to open her mind to possibilities outside the *favela*.

Junior and his colleagues also have a broader education agenda.

'They don't just give workshops. They teach us what being a citizen is as well.' Rosalí's a top-grade student in the subject. 'Being a citizen signifies that we have rights – rights we have to go after because the State doesn't teach us what they are.' She starts enumerating them on the fingers of her hand.

The first on her list is access to education. A part-time job, several bursaries and what her parents contributed from their meagre salaries meant she could pay to go to a private university. Under a new law, federal universities are now obligated to take in a percentage of black students every year. All the same, for most of her peers in the *favela*, university remains a pipe dream.

Funding her university studies turned out to be just the first of several hurdles though. Next came the prejudices.

'You live in a *favela*, you're black, that makes you a hick,' Rio-based writer Patricia Melo has one of her gangster characters say in her novel, *Inferno*. In a class of sixty, Rosalí was only one of six non-whites. Just one other student came from a slum. The wealthy students presumed the drug-dealers were covering her fees. She had to prove to them that she wasn't involved in drug-peddling or prostitution to pay her way.

And why did she opt for economics? Wouldn't acting be more fulfilling for her? Brazil has few economists, she answers, and so the job opportunities are better. It's the sensible answer and the one that concentrated her mind during six years of lectures. But she confesses to a secondary impetus too: the stylish women from the soap operas. Growing up in her *favela* shack, she'd watched them on the television wearing their power suits and high heels and leaving every day for a job in an office. She dreamed of being like them: 'I could have chosen to become a doctor, I guess, but to be able to wear those nice suits I preferred to study economics.'

From a chipped wooden sideboard, she pulls out a black-and-white family photograph of a muddy street. Children are playing in the puddles between two rows of half-built wooden huts. Plastic

sheeting is flapping in the wind. Rosalí has yet to find a job. But she's already chosen the picture for her office wall.

Back at Bob's, the ragtime tunes are playing. The one-time lead singer for the Crouch End All Stars is on the mike. Two German brothers who squat somewhere in The Maze's muddled floors are paying their rent on the sax and clarinet. Other practised musicians drift in and out.

After midnight, the jazz gives way to a faster, livelier samba. Couples take to the dance floor. The lime caipirinhas are flowing. Neighbours sit out on their rooftops to listen. The night is cool, still young. The *favela* is breathing quietly.

Sitting on the low brick wall of the terrace, I gaze out at the circuit board of Rio's twinkling lights below. Angela, a black tour guide whose husband is friends with Bob, is also admiring the view. We fall into conversation.

She's one of only a handful of black guides working in Rio. She used to be a model in Argentina. There were hardly any blacks there, so she had plenty of work.

Is Brazil racist? Yes, no doubt. Direct prejudice is not common though. It's hidden, more subtle. She has suffered a little. Her mother suffered more. And her kids, she hopes, will suffer less. But what are we doing talking? The samba is calling.

Pernambuco

'Black is Culture.' The phrase appears on T-shirts and banners across Brazil. The country's Afro-Brazilian population might be kept out of the law courts and the universities, but they've made the cultural space their own. No carnival float is more eagerly anticipated than the Blocos Afros. No footballer is more highly vaunted than the 'next Pelé'.

I take a flight to Pernambuco to test the phrase for myself. Jutting into the Atlantic Ocean along Brazil's north-eastern shore, the coastal state is holding a month-long cultural festival. Having

survived for centuries on its slave-driven sugar trade, Pernambuco's African roots run deep.

I spend my first afternoon wandering around the flint-paved streets of bohemian Olinda, drinking in the weather-beaten colours of the town's crumbling colonial façades. The best view is to be had from the sixteenth-century Igreja de Sé, stationed resolutely on top of Olinda's highest hill. Worming their way down from the cathedral parapet, the town's spiral streets twist towards the sapphire-blue sea. Draped over the houses lies a blanket of earth-stained terracotta tiles and tropical green palm fronds. Punctuating the fired clay mantle, the spires and bell-towers of the town's ecclesiastic trinity poke up: convent, church and monastery. On a clear day, the tower blocks of neighbouring Recife can be seen down the coast. They shiver in the haze of the afternoon heat, apparitions awaiting an Atlantic gale to carry them off.

According to the cultural festival's flyer, carnival practice is scheduled for the next evening in Recife's old town. Arriving in good time, I'm primed for the sight of colourfully dressed percussion bands and seven-foot-tall dancing busts. It's not to be.

An unnerving quietness surrounds Rua da Moeda and its parallel streets, the supposed venue for the practice. I enquire with a lady in a grease-stained apron grilling chicken kebabs at a pavement stall. She tells me there's normally a small carnival band about this time, but she's not seen any sign of them so far. Perhaps they changed the date, she proffers, unhelpfully. Disappointed, I hang around for another half-hour and make my way back towards the bus stop.

As I stroll through the old town's backstreets, all boarded up for the weekend, I hear someone testing a sound system. 'Uno, dois, uno, dois.' It's coming from somewhere off to my right, and I make a detour to investigate. The noise brings me out into an expansive, handsome square, separated from the ocean by a man-made breakwater. Backing onto the water's edge, final touches are being added to a concert stage. I approach the technical engineer, who's fiddling with various knobs on his soundboard as his assistant counts to two on a microphone. I ask if there's going to be a show tonight.

'What?' He takes off his earphones and comes over towards me.

A show? Tonight? He's a smiling Afro-Brazilian in his late twenties.

'Sure. Eight o'clock. *Forró.* Come along.'

I'd read about *forró*, but never heard it. Along with *frevo, marakatú, coco, maculele, afoxé, ciranda, seresta, caboclinhos* and *cavalo marinho*, it's one of the many distinctive Afro-Brazilian genres associated with Pernambuco. I thank the sound engineer and assure him I'll be back to check it out.

Walking off, I throw the programme in the first bin I pass. Brazilian culture is tremendously vibrant and expressive but spontaneity, not forward planning, is its forte. Guide-less and map-less, I decide to continue following my ear and see where it leads me. I've not walked fifty yards from the stage in the Praça do Marco Zero before I'm stopped short by the unexpected, but unmistakable, sound of carol-singing.

Waking to bright sunshine every morning, I'd almost forgotten that Christmas was approaching. I push open the glass door to the floodlit Banco Real cultural institute and take a seat. For an enjoyable hour, I listen to winter classics such as 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo' and 'Jingle Bells' being sung in Portuguese by black gospel choirs.

Back outside, I breathe in the ocean air and look around for what to do next. There seems to be some activity at the end of the adjacent Rua do Bom Jesus and I amble in that direction. The road runs to a stop just where two open-air cafés, crowded with evening drinkers at plastic tables, spill into a cobbled square. Positioned beside an open-air excavation of the city's original foundations, a quintet is playing *charinho*, yet another Penambuco invention. A few of the audience are swaying their hips to the gentle, guitar-led ensemble. I order a beer and listen a while.

My drink finished, I set off again in search of more distinctive Pernambuco creations. Half a block away, in the courtyard of an observatory tower, I discover a costumed troupe performing a traditional samba. Unlike its contemporary equivalent, this has a more

hard-edged, backcountry feel to it. A white-haired black man wearing a cloth hat and playing a fiddle heads the musical accompaniment. Joining him are a tambourine player and man with two maracas shaped like rolls of wallpaper. A fourth man is playing an *agogo*, a conical iron instrument connected by a U-bend and struck with a metal baton.

In between their musical interludes, two clowns dressed in tinsel wigs and polka-dot trousers keep the audience amused. Joining them is another comic duo in rough-hewn jackets and trousers tied up with twine. A slapstick game of cat and mouse around the stage plays out between the foursome, during which the clowns thump their counterparts with balloon-shaped containers. Each hit inspires guffaws from the crowd. One by one, the samba's main act takes the stage, and soon there are seven or eight dancers twirling and jumping across the small courtyard. Over the next hour, a loosely knit story based around plantation life unfolds. The full sense is lost on me, but it involves more indiscriminate hitting by the clowns and a dancer dressed as a horse. I wait until the perplexing spectacle draws to a close and make my way back to the main square, figuring the *forró* show must be well under way by now.

An hour late, the main act has just turned up and is beginning his set. A fusion of traditional, percussion-heavy, accordion-led rhythms overlaid with splices of rock, jazz and heavy electronics, the aesthetic appeal of the eclectic Recife beat is hard to pinpoint. But the crowd love it. The elderly lead singer, wearing dark glasses and resembling an old Ray Charles, has no problems coaxing his audience onto the open-air dance floor. Not that Brazilians need much persuading. Old or young, fat or thin, rich or poor, everyone is soon up and shaking their stuff.

Never is the country more equal or more united than when it's bumping and grinding on the dance floor. Only the beach and the football pitch compare as spaces of genuine democracy. Mid-dance, Brazilians of every creed and colour exude a joyful, bubbly, almost spiritual aura. Even the most inexpert appear free of the awkward self-awareness that inhibits other mortals.

I stand with my back against the stage and watch in awe at the sight of so many rhythmic bodies hypnotised by the *forró* beat. Closest to me, a late-middle-aged couple is lost in a feverish, hip-shaking embrace. The woman's thin, blue slip is stained with sweat, revealing a bulky pair of underpants and generous rolls of fat underneath. Her short, slim-built husband couldn't care less. The transforming power of the music has made a spellbinding temptress of his humdrum wife. Beside them dances a thin-hipped man with a jaunty cap. He too is under his partner's magic. A huge black lady with buttocks the size of water balloons and a bosom to match, she presses up close against him. The man is contentedly subsumed, his tiny frame completely enveloped but for two tiny feet kicking happily below.

Not far from them, a mixed-race couple is dancing. This time, it's the man who's setting the pace, his waist, hips and legs all writhing in different directions simultaneously, enticing his girlfriend to follow. Across from them is a beautiful *mulatta* with light-tan skin and a svelte, sexy figure hidden seductively beneath a low-cut dress. Thigh to thigh, she gyrates up against her partner. One arm around her waist, the other touching her leg, he smothers her thin neck with soft kisses and whispers sweet seductions in her ear.

Commanding the dance floor, though, is a stout black grandmother. She is boogieing by herself, agile as a teenager. Skipping from foot to foot, she holds out her arms as if embracing a lover of long ago. Round and round she spins, never pausing, never breaking stride, only her and the beat of the *forró* band.

Neither the music nor the dancers show any signs of letting up. If I'm to catch the last bus back, I need to pull myself away. Not that Olinda has put itself to bed either. Near the Praça de Aboliçao, Abolition Square, just by the bus stop, I come across a carnival band practising a percussion sequence. Ten Afro-Brazilian teenagers are laying into hide-bound tambours with a tribal enthusiasm. Recife's old town, I discover, has saturated my senses, and I pass on by.

Climbing with tired legs up the hill to my hotel, my path is blocked by a procession of clapping merrymakers. I walk behind, watching as the strumming guitars of a *serestra* medley drive them

along like sheep before a sheepdog. Reaching the crest of the hill, the musicians steer their dancing flock back to the town, their romantic ballads and midnight cheer growing fainter and fainter as they dance away into the night.

I lie in bed, the windows open, kept awake by the stereos from neighbouring bars. Just as the collective drone grows quiet, the sound of a child practising a clarinet strikes up from the next-door house. To the sound of a tuneless B-flat scale, I finally fall asleep.

At dusk the following day, I head out to take some photos of Olinda's postcard colonial houses in the changing light. While I'm sizing up the monastery in my viewfinder, the sound of drumming curls up from somewhere further down the hill. I put away my camera and head towards it. Fifteen minutes later, I find myself opposite the Fernando Santa Cruz theatre, a warehouse-shaped building at the insalubrious end of town. Obedient to the call of the drumbeat, I go inside.

Annexed to the back of the theatre, I discover a sizeable dance hall. Inside is a small stage and what looks like a drum-pounding mob of Congolese warriors. A poster on the far wall announces the eighteenth anniversary of the Nação Pernambuco Carnival Group. To celebrate their coming of age, they are performing a *marakatú*, the longest-standing and most Afro-Brazilian of all the region's cultural traditions.

There is no one at the door, and I sneak in without any questions. The room is stiflingly hot. Packed around two dozen tables, drinking rum and beer and eating off paper plates, sit friends and family. I spot a spare seat at the back and head for it as inconspicuously as possible. It's like the Iguatemi shopping centre, but in reverse: now all the faces are black but mine.

Curious eyes watch me to my seat, and I fix my gaze on the backing singers, pretending to be absorbed by their vocals. Behind them, relegated to the back corner of the stage, hide the Old World concessions: a saxophonist, guitarist and trombonist. Any residual interest in who the *gringo* gatecrasher might be is soon overtaken by an explosion of sound from the stage.

Leaping from the wings at the climax of a manic drum roll bounds a flamboyant company of barefoot athletic dancers. The tasselled troupe is adorned with pointed golden headbands and lustrous chest plates of loose-hanging necklaces. Guiding them is a princely figure decked in a gilded crown and golden armbands. A black bantam belt stretches across his taut stomach, holding up a pleated regal skirt of heavy, cerise cloth. Prowling up and down the stage, microphone in hand, his melodious voice beguiles the spellbound audience, wooing them to join his homesick song in a journey across the oceans.

A glittering coronation scene concludes the gala. The singing prince beckons forth a sword-carrying king and his elegant queen. Surrounded by courtiers and the sounding of trumpets, the regal procession laps the stage in one last marching dance. The king is crowned, the dancers retire, the backing singers slip off, and only then, when the stage is empty, do the drums cease their pounding. Ecstatic, the audience clap and whistle and head off to fill their glasses with more rum.

First thing the next morning, I determine to find someone to teach me *marakatú*. Renato, I'm told by the hotel receptionist, is the man to speak to. I knock on the door of his house, located just down from the hilltop cathedral, and an imposing black man more than double my body weight comes to the door. I inquire about the possibility of a lesson, but it seems I've caught Renato on a bad day. His wife is due back from a trip, and he's behind on the domestic chores he'd promised to do. He gives me the number of another instructor and wishes me well.

As I turn to go, I notice he's wearing a T-shirt advertising an equal-opportunities conference. I ask him about the event and discover that Renato is Olinda's representative for Unegro, a black rights movement. Breaking from his household tasks for a moment, he pops inside and reappears with a map he bought in Rio. It depicts the location of Brazil's *quilombos*, the settlements established by escaped slaves. Most are located along the north-east coast, where the sugar plantations were once most concentrated.

Renato takes the map with him to the *marakatú* workshops he runs for the town's young people.

'Like the music, it reminds us of our history as Afro-Brazilians – or Brazilian-Afros.'

What's his message to the children? That as black Brazilians, they are not descendants of slaves. That they are the descendants of Africans.

'Here we were enslaved. There we were free. Some of us were even kings and princes.' The coronation scene suddenly makes sense.

Later the same day, I meet Carlos, the alternative instructor, in an airy practice room of the Henrique Días music syndicate along Veira de Melo street. We kick off on the wrong foot, arguing about the cost of the ninety-minute session. He is asking more than I am willing to pay. Feigning affront to his honour, he tells me that he respects my profession as a journalist. I, in turn, should respect his as a dance instructor. So rare is it to hear the words 'respect' and 'journalist' in close conjunction that I immediately quit my bartering and cough up.

Carlos suggests we begin with a relaxed warm-up. As I gently stretch, my new teacher busies himself tying his waist-length dreadlocks into a knot at the back of his head. His hair in order, we are ready to start. The CD player's 'on' button is pressed and a traditional, percussion-led *marakatú* booms out. Carlos turns the volume down, but not before the noise has drawn several onlookers to the open window. I ask if we can close the shutters, but my teacher gives me a scathing look, ordering me to stop fretting and to take up position opposite him.

'We'll kick off with the Queen's dance, OK?' The Queen's dance? This is not what I had in mind. He's going to have me in a skirt. The onlookers are going to be in hysterics.

'Relax, the Queen is an easy one. She just walks up and down. Like this.'

Carlos takes two steps forward, stops, brings his lagging leg square with the other, and then repeats the motion backwards. No skirts. No swirls. This I can do. Falling into step with the beat and

keeping my knees high, as Carlos instructs, I soon get the hang of it. I feel my body relax.

'Think fluid.' Fluid it is.

Now for the top half. Contemporary *marakatú* has a range of flourishing arm movements, he explains, but it's perhaps best we stick to the old-fashioned version.

'It's simpler.'

I thank him. Holding his thumbs to his chest, as if gripping hold of a pair of braces, Carlos thrusts one elbow sharply upwards. With each step, he alternates arms: right leg, left arm; left leg, right arm; and so on. He encourages me to copy. It takes me a few steps to pick it up, but I master it without too much trouble. My confidence swells.

A polite clap comes from the window. I look up to see an unshaven man with a beer can in his hand and a sarcastic smirk on his face. I follow Carlos's lead and just ignore him. It feels liberating not to care what the stranger thinks.

The next step also belongs to a female part.

'This is the *Bahiana*,' Carlos says, shifting into a slow sidestep. 'She forms part of the royal cortège and dances before the King.'

As well as a change of direction, the new step also requires a new arm movement. No longer punching the air with my elbows, I cross the room back and forth, sculpting the imaginary shape of a narrow-necked Chinese vase.

Ridiculous though I must look, the simple, repetitive motion exerts a pull on me that's hard to explain. The same, hypnotic drum rhythm plays on and on:

Leão Coroado
With his strong arm
Who was born in the north,
With his drum,
Who beats his drum wherever,
When he meets another nation,
With its cortège,
Our Dona Isabel.

An hour has flown by. Our onlookers have grown bored with their *gringo* entertainment and have moved on elsewhere. The *dama de paso* concludes the class. We're back to the same flapping-chicken motion with our elbows, but now Carlos is skipping between the heel of one foot and the tiptoes of the other. To complicate matters further, he adds a pelvic thrust into the mix, ramming forwards with one step and pushing his bottom back with the next.

The multipart choreography is beyond me. I'm either skipping or thrusting, but never in sync as the dance demands. As for my elbows, they're flailing like a frightened battery hen on a slaughterhouse conveyor. Carlos claps in time with the music and makes the rattling *chhh chhh chhh* sound of the maracas to get me back on track, but the *Leão Coroado* has abandoned me. Carlos thinks it best we finish the session perfecting the Queen and Bahian woman. I agree readily.

Before leaving Pernambuco, I travel back to Recife. Once a week, different bands gather to perform African-influenced music in the quaint colonial square of São Pedro. I'm hoping 'Black Tuesday' will provide the opportunity for me to give my new dance moves a public airing.

Regrettably, *marakatú* isn't on the programme the week I visit. I wait out a rock band and a reggae group, until an *afoxé* singer takes the stage. The beat is much faster, more rave than royal coronation. Young, hip and almost all black, the crowd throws itself trance-like onto the dance floor. I see no sign of braces or Chinese vases, only jiving hips and vibrating buttocks. There was nothing else for it; the *dama de paso* it would have to be.

Salvador

Africa's cultural traditions were not all that Brazil's slaves brought with them on their tortuous passage across the Atlantic. The continent's gods came too: the ancestral spirits of the Bantos, the divinities of the Inquices and the voodoo lords of the Yorubá. The slavers' frigates were not just prison ships; they were floating pantheons.

I took a night-bus down to Salvador, the capital of Bahía and initial centre of this expatriated spirit world.

Unleashed onto Brazilian soil, the African gods mingled and mixed, creating hybrid forms of worship for their slave devotees. Of all these syncretistic creations, Candomblé is the Afro-Brazilian religion that has won widest appeal. Spreading out from the overwhelmingly black province of Bahía, the voodoo-influenced belief system now counts tens of thousands of followers across Brazil. There are even groups in Lisbon.

Yet it's the Catholics who are celebrating when I arrive in the Bahian capital. The toll of Salvador's cathedral bells is calling the faithful to Christmas Mass. In the cobbled Terreiro de Jesus square, carol singers compete with capoeira performers for the tourists' attention. Broad-hipped Bahian dames in voluminous skirts pose coquettishly on the corners of Pelourinho. Down in Barra, the lighthouse is resting out the festive season, ceding its tasks to the fireworks department. Everywhere, the smell of spicy seafood stews and bean fritters doused in *dendê* oil carries on the air.

The Candomblé places of worship lie far from Salvador's historic centre and the hubbub of Pelourinho's pastel walkways. Hidden down the alleys of the city's working-class districts, their *terreiros*, or meeting halls, have no bell towers or noticeboards. Through the National Federation of Afro-Brazilian Culture, I locate a gathering place in the poor northern neighbourhood of Vasco da Gama.

Before I pay a visit, though, there are two black-rights activists I've been waiting to meet.

Silvio Humberto is caught up in a staff meeting at the Steve Biko Institute when I climb up the wooden stairs, past the Dutch Consulate, to his second-storey office.

I sit by an open window facing the ocean and wait for him to finish. Fishing vessels bob at anchor in the bay below. A pink trim licks the wispy clouds that still linger in the late afternoon sky. The last shuttle boat of the day sets off for its final run to Itaparica Island across the rippled water.

From the classroom across the hallway, the sound of scraping chairs and young people's chatter wakes me from my reverie. The institute doubles as a crammer, providing black high-school students with tuition towards their university entrance exams. The group of satchel-bearing students, now heading down the stairs and talking about the weekend ahead, are the future of Brazil's black-rights movement. At least, that's Silvio Humberto's hope.

Done with his meeting, the institute's young director invites me over to sit with him. A black academic with a doctorate in economics, he asks me how I am enjoying Salvador. Loving it, I tell him, enthusiastically recounting my trip that morning to the Afro-Brazilian Museum.

The dreadlocked director is pleased. This is his home city. What can he help me with exactly? I fill him in on my recent trip to Pernambuco. The news of my *marakatú* class also seems to gratify him. We talk briefly about AfroReggae. He too thinks they're doing a superb job of using culture creatively. The conversation then turns to the *favelas* and so to the bottom-rung status of many Afro-Brazilians.

'And your question?'

'Yes, sorry, my question.' I open my notebook to the page where I'd scribbled it down earlier: 'How is culture helping Brazil's black population break the social and economic barriers that they face?'

It sounds like an exam question when I read it aloud, but Silvio chuckles: 'It's not just *your* question. It's *everyone's* question!'

He sets to answering it: '"Culture is black," that we all know. Naturally, black music, art and religion remind the country's Afro-Brazilians who we are and where we came from. In this sense, culture is a vital tool in self-identity.'

The cultural director then cites another saying in Brazil, one he says isn't printed on T-shirts: 'We love black culture. It's the black people we can't stand.'

Like a good exam student, he clarifies his meaning: 'They say there are no ghettos here, yeah? Well, culture is the black person's ghetto. It's like a jail without bars. Sure, they let us sing and dance

and party during carnival. But let a black person try stepping out of the culture space and into the business world or into the political arena or into the lecture theatre. Then you'll see the fiction of Brazil's racial democracy. Culture is a space reservoir for blacks here. It hems them in.'

Space reservoir. I like it. As a concept, it zings off the page. My examiner's pen hovers over the page, keenly awaiting the conclusion. It arrives with verve and attack:

'Yes, culture is the base. Yes, it's essential to the black-rights movement. But no, it won't break the barriers of prejudice. Only politics can do that. Slavery might have disappeared more than a century ago, but slavers continue to run things. In Salvador, Brazil's blackest state, there are only three non-white representatives in the State Assembly. Three out of sixty-three! Affirmative action is what's required.' Pens down. Silvio finally draws breath. It's an A+ performance.

I glance out of the window. The boats are still bobbing, but the world outside no longer looks so idyllic. There's an ugly, unseen element to the scene, as if the shuttle boat had sunk silently beneath the waves or an invisible oil slick were spreading across the bay.

The director shares a quote with me as he shows me to the door. It's from Steve Biko, the late South African anti-apartheid activist after whom the institute takes its name.

'Black consciousness is not just for blacks. It's for whites too.' The words loll heavily on his tongue like a boiled sweet he doesn't want to finish. 'It frees them from their superiority, you see? It gives them back their humanity.'

My one question multiplies into many others as I head across town to meet Vilma Reis, a sociologist at the Centre for Afro-Oriental Studies.

It's the Christmas holidays, and the faculty building is empty of students. It's also empty of Vilma. I wait outside in the sun, on a bench in the Largo Dois de Julho square. From my bag, I pull out a copy of *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*. I'm a third of the way

through Jorge Amado's Bahian masterpiece and still on husband number one.

I open it at the bookmarked page and re-read how Amado's madcap hero fell lifeless one tragic Lenten Sunday during carnival. He'd keeled over amidst a 'samba group of drag queens and masqueraders'. As coincidence would have it, the tragic event occurred in the same square where I'm sitting. Dona Flor's first spouse had been in the embrace of a heavily rouged Romanian at the time. Times have changed, or my luck's out. Half an hour waiting, and the only rouge I see is the sunburned flesh of a potbellied American couple from the cruise ship in the bay.

When Vilma eventually turns up, the Afro-Brazilian academic leads me into her office and presents me with some questions of her own.

'How were race relations perceived outside Brazil?'

'Excellently,' I tell her. Racial democracy. The antithesis of the USA. The model state.

My upbeat answer meets with a frostier reception this time round: 'Thirty years of activism, and the old myth still holds true. How persistent are the white man's lies.' From the start, racial democracy was a 'FARCE'. She writes the words in capitals on a blank piece of paper in front of her.

'Brazilians are all equal, they say. Because we're all equal, if a white man succeeds and a black man doesn't, they say it's the black man's problem. He's too stupid or too lazy or too fond of fiestas. In Brazil's racial democracy, racism could never be the cause. Oh no, NOT RACISM.' More capitalised scribbles.

Discrimination in Brazil is very sophisticated. The national censuses are a perfect example. Did I know the categories they use in the census? Yes, I'd heard about them. Whites have only the *branco* box to tick. Blacks are divided between *pretos* and *pardos*. There's no *negro* option. WHITES come in at around 46 per cent. BLACKS amount to 49.3 per cent.

'If you lump the *pretos* and *pardos* together, that is. Of course, the authorities never do. So, whites remain the official majority. All

the state policies are therefore orientated towards them. The rest remain INVISIBLE.' She underlines the word until the ink begins to blot through the page.

White academics are finally accepting that Brazil is not as racially harmonious as they'd once maintained. Vilma reckons this is a major step forward. But they deny that affirmative action is the right solution: 'Reparations and specific pro-black policies will create divisions in the country, they say. It's ironic. The white elite finally recognises the problem, but rejects the obvious answer. Brazil needs EQUITY, not equality. Equity for blacks in the health service, in the education system. Across the board.'

Her comments take me back once again to the professor's study in São Paulo. Brazil never imposed segregation laws as in the USA. As Vilma is speaking, I wonder if that is why Brazil has never had a powerful civil-rights movement? No Brazilian has ever been banned from a restaurant because of the colour of his or her skin. Explicit racism therefore cannot explain why a food court in a posh shopping mall should remain a whites-only zone.

Official segregation gave Afro-Americans in the USA something tangible to fight against. In Brazil, black-rights activists are flailing against a shapeless, secret phantom. Affirmative action will certainly help their cause, but not unless the myth of the country's colourblindness is shown for what it is.

Vilma gets up to take a phone call. The pile of books balancing unsteadily on her desk suggests she's been doing some reading of her own. I scan the spines. All are by left-leaning academics or black authors. Balanced above a paperback edition of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the top volume has a marker pen wedged in the centrefold. It's a collection of lectures on race by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, entitled *Society Must Be Defended*.

In the middle of the circle, an outstretched black woman lies flat on the ground, convulsing epileptically. Her nose is knocking hard against the concrete floor. Her arms pushed out far in front of her, quivering, as though tied to a torturer's rack. Every part of her is

shaking: her knees, her toes, her legs, her chest, her head. From some primordial corner of her being, animal-sounding grunts rise to the surface. She rolls over onto her side, her fists and feet suddenly lashing out. An agonising wail erupts from her lips. Then, as if struck by a stun gun, she falls totally motionless.

The fit lasts a full five minutes. The Candomblé devotees continue dancing around her, ignoring the juddering body, now deathly still. All are dressed in free-flowing garments of white cotton, men and women alike. They accompany the beat of the drums with the low-pitched murmuring of an ancient African tongue. Round and round they dance, dizzying even the icons that line the shelves of the whitewashed room.

Into the circle steps the Babalaxé. High priest and master of ceremonies, the cotton-clad celebrant is wearing a fawn-coloured leather hat and smoking a sausage-sized cigar. In one hand, he holds a bottle of Nova Schin beer. In the other, he grasps a grey-painted wooden trident three feet in length. A young female novice drops to her knees and rolls up his trousers until they're just below the knee.

I watch from a bench at the edge of the ceremony as the barefoot Babalaxé strides towards a dancer in the circle. He hits her softly on the shoulder with his devilish grey fork, discharging some invisible current that sends her toppling back towards me. I budge up the bench just as the hypnotised black woman collapses beside my shifting foot. An Orixá god from the temple of Candomblé's divinities immediately pounces on the stricken victim, infusing her prone body with violent body jerks and trembling. Soon the inculcated spirit has her barking like a dog and frothing at the mouth. When her lathered spittle begins gathering in a pool on the floor, I judge that I've seen enough.

Standing in the yard outside, the smell of cigar smoke clinging to my clothes, I wonder what Silvio and Vilma would have made of the ceremony. Were the prostrated dancers juddering and thrashing in a space reservoir? Was the Neptune-like Babalaxé perpetuating un-EQUAL power structures?

The next morning, I climb the steep wooden stairs to the first-

floor office of the National Federation of Afro-Brazilian Culture. Located down the hill from Pelourinho square, it's close enough to the cathedral for the sound of church bells to carry on the breeze through the open window.

Antoniel Alaide Bispo, the Federation's elderly and elegant secretary, ushers me towards his desk. Dressed in white right down to his goatee beard, the Condomblé priest explains the various stages of the purity ritual from the previous night.

'And the cigar and trident?'

'These are the symbols of Exú. Every Babalaxé has their own Orixá. His will have been Exú.'

'And who's Exú?'

Antoniel smiles: 'Why, Exú is the first son of Iemanjá and Oxalá. He's associated with sorcery and mischief. You Christians know him by another name: the Devil.'

I gulp involuntarily, thinking back to my night of devil worship in Vasco da Gama.

'These are just labels that the early missionaries used though,' the federation secretary assures me. 'Candomblé wasn't legalised in Bahía until 1989. So, before then, we'd link our gods with the Christian saints. As a cover-up, sort of.'

He runs through some of the better-known examples: Xango, the god of justice, is compared to Saint Jerome; Iansâ, the god of wind and storms, to Saint Barbara; Omulú, the god of health, to Saint Lorenzo.

'And who's Jesus Christ?' I butt in.

'Oxalá, our god of creation.'

Now Candomblé is legal, it's not necessary to hide behind the white man's religion, Antoniel continues. But the tradition has stuck. Ironically, it's the Catholics who now encourage the association. The saints' days give the Church an excuse to encourage Candomblé followers to come to Mass: 'I don't see the need to go but many others still attend.'

For the Catholics, there are bigger battles to fight. Across South America, church pews are emptying as the faithful migrate to new

brands of worship. The Reformation has arrived, and it plays guitar. In the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, Brazil boasts the largest and most lucrative of these ecclesiastical upstarts.

Candomblé finds itself in the firing line, Antoniel maintains: 'On their television channels and in their pulpits, the leaders of the Universal Church are always denouncing us as Satanic and our religion as black magic.'

As a Babalaxé himself, the cotton-clad secretary claims not to be overly concerned. His African Orixá is a match for any white man's god: 'Ogum, the god of war, will come to our aid.'

In the square above, the bells toll the hour. Meanwhile, across the mighty Amazon, high in the plateaus of the Andes, the gods of the Incas are stirring too.

6

HOLY DISORDERS

Peru and religion

God has destined man to be free; he protects him so that he can exercise the divine faculty of free will.

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, BOLIVIAN CONSTITUTION

Ayaviri, Altiplano

In Ayaviri, a drab town of greys and browns, the locals think Dante and I are Mormons. The mix-up is understandable. My companion is six foot three and I am a white-skinned European. Both features mark us out in this remote Andean settlement of short-legged Incan descendants.

Spending the day door-knocking only compounds the confusion. Unlike the pavement-pounding preachers from Salt Lake City, our mission is not to proselytise. At least, not overtly so. Instead, it's fallen to us to help map Ayaviri's religious profile. Dante is one of thirteen seminary students drafted in by the local parish for census duties. Originally from Arequipa, Peru's second city, he's accustomed to the highlanders eyeing him suspiciously. Before I joined him, people mistook him for a travelling salesman.

Setting off on our afternoon rounds, Dante charts a finger along a photocopied map. Ticks in orange highlighter pen mark off the houses that he's already covered. On the first block, it's just the tailor's shop that still requires surveying. Clipboard in hand, Dante strides down the unswept, sun-baked street towards the outfitter's one-room workshop.

'*Buenos días*. Could we possibly bother you for a couple of minutes? We're from the parish. Just a couple of questions.'

The lanky trainee priest has an endearing, almost puppy-like