and voting in the legislature. He has also started a legal investigation of Capriles and others in the opposition for “inciting” the violence that took place the day after the election. The Minister of Prisons has said publicly that she has a prison cell ready for Capriles.

My fears could prove wrong. The process of self-reflection that seems to have started within the ruling party could lead to more conciliatory responses. Members of the ruling party — and who knows, maybe even Maduro himself — could conclude that further radicalization of politics (including more belligerence toward the opposition and too much discretion in the hands of the president) are no longer as electorally rewarding as they once were. Most polls in Venezuela suggest that citizens of all stripes are fatigued by the perennial confrontation between the government and the opposition. Times have changed since the heyday of chavismo in the early 2000s, when both sides of the political divide believed that promoting hardline policies toward political rivals was an optimal electoral strategy. After 14 years of semi-civil war, Venezuelans might be feeling tired of it all, and this sentiment alone could explain why Maduro, who campaigned as a hardliner, did poorly in the April elections. These are signs that could induce Venezuelan authorities to ease the confrontation.

Nevertheless, this public fatigue with confrontation still coexists with panic among radical groups within the ruling party. It also coexists with the centrifugal forces within the chavista leadership and rising momentum within the opposition. Panic and centrifugalism are making Maduro feel politically insecure. Maduro could conclude that his best hope for survival is to forcefully counter that panic and centrifugalism rather than worry about public fatigue with confrontation. This could lead to yet another crusade against political infidels, within and without. The fundamental paradox about Venezuela’s new symmetry and asymmetries is that they might compel Maduro to launch such a crusade but, at the same time, deny him the advantage needed to prevail.

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“Danger: High Pressure” reads this sign outside the Banaven Center in Caracas.
My goal was to study women’s lives, specifically mother love and the basis for my 1992 book that I made the first of the four trips that formed the beginning of the end of the military dictatorship — which was in 1982 — during the period known as the Alto do Cruzeiro, this time as a medical anthropologist. It was not a gross exaggeration. Decades of nutritional studies of sugar-cane cutters and their families in Pernambuco showed hard evidence of slow starvation and stunting. These nutritional dwarfs were surviving on a daily caloric intake similar to that of the inmates of the Buchenwald death camp. Life on the Alto resembled prison camp culture, with a moral ethic based on triage and survival.

If mother love is the cultural expression of what many attachment theorists believe to be a bio-evolutionary script, what could this script mean to women living in these conditions? In my sample of three generations of mothers in the sugar plantation zone of Pernambuco, the average woman had 9.5 pregnancies, eight births, and 3.5 infant deaths. This was a classic pre-demographic transition pattern, one in which high fertility was driven by untamed infant and child mortality. The high expectancy of loss and infant death was so commonplace that I recall a birthday party for a four-year-old in which the birthday cake, decorated with candles, was placed on the kitchen table next to the tiny blue cardboard coffin of the child’s nine-month-old sibling, who had died during the night. Next to the coffin a single vigil candle was lit. Despite the tragedy, the child’s mother wanted to go ahead with the party. “Parabéns para você,” we sang, clapping our hands. “Congratulations, good for you!” the Brazilian birthday song goes. And in the Alto it had special resonance: “You survived you — you lived to see another year!”

When Alto mothers cried, they mourned the infant who, given up for dead, suddenly beat death back, displaying a fierce desire to hasten the death of de-selected ones, who, as Winnicott, the British child psychoanalyst liked to say, “Nothing is ever really forgotten.” If I had not been traumatized by the seeming indifference of Alto mothers toward some of their infants, I would never have returned, years later, to study the phenomenon.

Sixteen years elapsed before I was able to return to the Alto do Cruzeiro, this time as a medical anthropologist. It was in 1982 — during the period known as the abertura, the beginning of the end of the military dictatorship — that I made the first of the four trips that formed the basis for my 1992 book Death Without Weeping. My goal was to study women’s lives, specifically mother love and infant death under conditions so dire that the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano once described the region as a concentration camp for more than 40 million people. It was not a gross exaggeration. Decades of nutritional studies of sugar-cane cutters and their families in Pernambuco showed hard evidence of slow starvation and stunting. These nutritional dwarfs were surviving on a daily caloric intake similar to that of the inmates of the Buchenwald death camp. Life on the Alto resembled prison camp culture, with a moral ethic based on triage and survival.

The Alto do Cruzeiro.
who could manipulate those around them, were better off than those who were kind. Poverty doesn’t ennable people, and I came to appreciate what it took to stay alive.

It was never my intention to cast blame on shantytown mothers for putting their own survival above that of their infants. These were moral choices that no person should be forced to make. But the result was that infants were viewed as limitless, a supply of souls that could be constantly re-circulated. There was a kind of magical replaceability about them, similar to what one might find on a battlefield. As one soldier falls, another takes his place. This kind of detached maternal thinking allowed the die-outs of shantytown babies — in some years, as many as 40 percent of all the infants born in the Alto do Cruzeiro died — to pass without shock or profound grief.

“Well, it’s just a baby,” Alto women would say. Here we reach the most deeply protected of all public secrets — the violence of everyday life.

A woman who had lost half her babies told me, “Who could bear it, Nanci, if we are mistaken in believing that God takes our infants to save us from pain? If that is not true, then God is a cannibal. And if our little angels are not in heaven flying around the throne of Our Lady, then where are they, and who is to blame for their deaths!”

If mothers allowed themselves to be attached to each newborn, how could they ever endure their babies’ short lives and deaths and still have the stamina to get pregnant and give birth again and again? And they were conscious of this. It wasn’t that Alto mothers did not experience mother love at all. They did and with great intensity. Mother love emerged as their children developed strength and vitality. The apex of mother love was not the image of Mary and her infant son, but a mature Mary, grieving the death of her young adult son. The Pietà, not the young mother at the crèche, was the symbol of motherhood and mother love on the Alto do Cruzeiro.

In 2001, I was invited to return to Timbauba to help a new judge and a tough-minded prosecutor identify the more than 100 victims of the death squad I wrote about in Death Without Weeping. In the interim, the extermination group, the Guardian Angels, had infiltrated the town council, the mayor’s office, and the justice system. Several members of the group had been arrested and were undergoing trial while my husband and I worked with local activists to track down the victims whose relatives had not come forward. Many came from the Alto do Cruzeiro.

During the trip, I played a cat-and-mouse game with the manager of the public records office. I was trying to assemble a body count of suspicious homicides that could possibly be linked to the death squad, focusing on the violent deaths of street kids and young black men. Since members of the death squad were still at large, I did not want to make public what I was doing. At first, I implied that I was back to count infant and child deaths, as I had so many years before. Finally, I admitted that I was looking into youth homicides. The manager nodded her head, “Sim, triste. But,” she asked with a shy smile, “haven’t you noticed the changes in infant and child deaths?” Once I began to scan the record books, I was wearing a smile, too. Could it be true? Four?

A single afternoon going over infant and toddler death certificates in the registry office was enough to document that something radical had taken place; a revolution in child survival had begun in the 1990s. By 2001, the records showed a completed birth rate of 3.2 children per woman, and a mortality rate of 35 per 1,000 births — a drop from 110 per 1,000 in the 1960s. Subsequent field trips in 2006 and 2008 showed even further reductions. The 2009 data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics recorded 25.2 per 1,000 child deaths for Timbauba.

This could not have happened without a radical transformation of the mothers. Timbauba had experienced what population experts call the demographic or epidemiologic transition. Births and infant deaths had declined so precipitously that it looked like a reproductive workers strike. The numbers — though incomplete — were startling. Rather than the 300+ infant-child mortalities of the mid-to-late 1960s and the 200+ mortalities of the early 1980s, by the late 1990s there were only 38 childhood deaths recorded. And each had a medical cause of death — none was listed as cause unknown or simply: heart stopped, respiration stopped, third-degree malnutrition, or the mythopoetic: “infant infinitely suffering.”

Though working on other topics, I interviewed several young women attending a pregnancy class at a newly constructed, government-run clinic. The women I spoke with — some first-time mothers, others expecting a second or third child — were confident in their ability to give birth to a healthy baby. No one I spoke to expected to have, except by accident, more than two children. A pair — that was the goal. Today, young women of the Alto can expect to give birth to three or fewer infants — that was the goal. Today, young women of the Alto can expect to give birth to three or fewer infants — a number that is below the replacement rate and lower than the United States.

Unlike in China or India, this revolution occurred without state coercion. It was a voluntary transition, long in the making. I recall writing a footnote in Death Without Weeping about the most common requests that people made — could I possibly help them obtain false freedom meant having the children you wanted and a preference for girl babies. Boys, women feared, could disappoint their mothers — they could kill or be killed as adolescents and young men. The Alto was still a dangerous place, and gangs, drugs, and the death squads were still in operation. But women in the state-run clinic spoke of having control over their reproductive lives in ways that I could not have imagined.

What was happening in Timbauba was part of a national trend in Brazil. Since the 1960s, birth rates and child death rates have plummeted. Over the past decade alone, Brazil’s fertility rate has decreased from 2.36 to 1.9 children per family — a number that is below the replacement rate and lower than the United States.
A fábrica é fechada!

"A fabrica é fechada!" A woman would boastfully explain, patting her abdomen. Until recently, this was the privilege of the upper-middle classes and the wealthy. Today, tubal ligations can be openly discussed and arranged, often when anticipating a birth by caesarian section.

Many factors came together to produce this reproductive transition. In Brazil, the reproductive revolution is linked to democracy and the coming into political power of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003), aided by his formidable wife, the theologian while condemned by the late Pope John Paul II, the Brazilian Catholic Church is itself deeply divided. In 2009, the Archbishop of Recife demanded the Catholic Church by announcing their openness to the reproductive rights of women and men. Today, only 60 percent of Brazilians identify as Roman Catholic.

The Vatican approved — and then revoked — the teaching that a female's life, family size has dropped so sharply over the last two decades that the fertility rate graph resembles a playground slide. What is going on? For one, Brazilian Catholics are independent, much like U.S. Catholics, and they have been going their own way for many years when it comes to women’s health and reproductive culture. Others have simply left the Church and joined evangelical churches, some of whom compete with the Catholic Church by announcing their openness to the reproductive rights of women and men. Today, only 60 percent of Brazilians identify as Roman Catholic.

And the Brazilian Catholic Church is itself deeply divided. In 2009, the Archbishop of Recife demanded the excommunication of the doctors and parents of a nine-year-old girl who had an abortion. She had been raped by her stepfather and was carrying twins. The girl’s tiny stature and narrow hips put her life in jeopardy. After comparing the abortion to the Holocaust, Archbishop Cardoso Sobrinho told the media that the Vatican rejects believers who pick and choose their moral issues.

The anomaly is that, in a nation where the Catholic Church predominates in the public sphere and abortion is still illegal except in the case of rape and/or a mother’s health, the reproductive revolution has come to the country. In Brazil, the reproductive revolution is linked to democracy and the coming into political power of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003), aided by his formidable wife, the theologian, while condemned by the late Pope John Paul II, the Brazilian Catholic Church is itself deeply divided. In 2009, the Archbishop of Recife demanded the Catholic Church by announcing their openness to the reproductive rights of women and men. Today, only 60 percent of Brazilians identify as Roman Catholic.

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