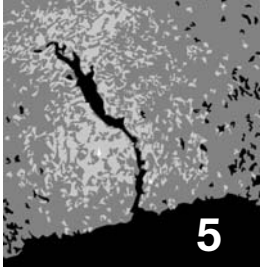

Gold as a Woman

From the outside, Angela Maria's modest stucco home looks like twenty others on the sun-drenched side street just a few minutes' walk from Tô Pereira's shoe repair shop. The inside, however, is different from any other in the neighborhood. Two bright-blue brocade sofas with protective plastic covers on the cushions vie for space in the living room with a massive, modern grandfather clock. The tile kitchen boasts a slightly rusted cherry-red refrigerator atop of which sits a set of cookie jars shaped like an eggplant, a glossy pepper, and a plump tomato. The money for these uncommon luxuries, Angela Maria is quick to inform anyone who shows the slightest interest, reflects the year, seven months, and eight days she spent working as a nurse in a gold camp called Lucky River. The Tapajós River, on which the camp is situated, was a major mining center in the 1980s, when high gold prices and a relative abundance of surface gold kept its tiny airport humming. Although the region has since been eclipsed by the state of Roraima (in northern Brazil near Venezuela) and by Suriname and French Guiana, it is still an important source of gold in the Brazilian Amazon.

More than ten years have passed since a then thirty-three-year-old Angela Maria cashed in the last of the handful of pea-size nuggets that she had managed to smuggle past federal police in the frenetically busy Itaituba airport by packing them into the hollowed-out heels of a pair of high-heeled shoes. Although the shoes now gather dust on the floor of her bedroom closet ("I can't bring myself to throw them out!" she confesses with a sheepish chuckle), her store of tales about gold camps and gold miners appears as fresh as ever. Detailed accounts of the people and places that were part of her daily life in Lucky River mesmerize me and Lucinha as we slump comfortably in the well-worn plastic deck chairs that Angela Maria has set out for the three of us on the narrow strip of sidewalk before her front door.

"Gold," she informs us as she tugs a comb through her short auburn-tinted hair in the sudden cool of this June evening, "is always a woman for the miner. Now then, 'she' can take very different forms. Sometimes, Gold appears as an old lady. But more often, she is a beautiful woman in white who tells men where to dig. Sometimes, too, she can take the form of an ugly snake or caiman, which a miner dare not kill or all the gold within the ground will disappear. But even as a snake, Gold remains a woman. Because she is the *mãe* [mother, tutelary spirit] of what looks to us like shiny metal, but which the miners believe is a living thing."

When we look incredulous, Angela Maria lowers her voice and proceeds to tell us how she too once found herself face-to-face with a mysterious woman all in white. "It doesn't seem possible," she admits, "but I swear that this really happened. Late one night when the moon was full, just days after I first arrived in Lucky River, I was returning from giving one of the men an injection when suddenly I saw a tall, blond woman in a long white dress at the edge of the woods. She raised her hand and beckoned to me, but when I started to go toward her, she disappeared into the shadows of the trees. 'That's odd,' I thought. 'Who could she be?'

"Early the next morning, I asked Seu Luiz [the owner of the mine] about the beautiful woman who had disappeared into the woods. 'Ah, my dear,' he said, 'you have seen the woman all miners long to see. Had you not spoken to me of her, she would have reappeared to you this very night and shown you where to dig for gold. But the Woman in White does not allow anyone to speak about her to another human being.' And so, if I had known this, I could have been very rich today."

Lucinha frowns. "And so you're sure it was a woman you saw there in the shadows?" she asks skeptically.

"I'm absolutely sure," Angela Maria says. "If someone had told me all this beforehand, I wouldn't have believed him. But the gold camps are full of strange and marvelous things."

In its unmistakably female identity, the Gold that meanders through Angela Maria's accounts of her own eventful, often trying life in Lucky River recall the warrior women and their various descendants. Irresistibly rich, this often grotesque Gold can be as headstrong and independent as any sixteenth-century Amazon. Unwilling, like the Amazons, to submit to any man, she fills her pursuers with both an intense desire for conquest and sense of deep unease. "Every man wants to meet the Woman in White, because she will show him where to find gold," Angela Maria tells us. "But the miner who meets her is no longer the

owner of his life, because for her to help him, he must do exactly as she says."

To the extent that the Gold she describes is every bit as dangerous and alluring as a warrior woman, it is a giant who contains and deflects attention from a larger, all-devouring nature. However, despite its more gigantic aspects, this Gold is a consummate shape-shifter who reaffirms a protean nature's power. The object of a quest for personal fortune in which each miner competes against his fellows, she unites men well aware of her capriciousness.[1] ("Ah, brother, don't take it so hard, she dumped me too," one miner may declare by way of consolation to another who has been drilling for weeks in an apparently promising location, only to come up empty-handed.) The enduring mutability that finds expression in Gold's multiple identities underscores at least some miners' sense of nature as a living being that permits and even invites momentary intervention but defies full conquest and control. Ostensibly about a willful Nature, these stories about Gold also permit the men to express their anger and frustration at powerful outsiders. In their tales, the government, commercial gold companies, and foreign environmentalists with good intentions but little knowledge of regional realities all emerge as usurpers bent on destroying a poor man's only chance at a better life.

Present-Day Gold Miners

Mining has long been one of the very few avenues to riches open—at least in theory—to even the very poor. Thus it resembles a sort of hands-on lottery in which people accept slim odds for the chance at a bonanza. As in the lottery, part of mining's appeal lies in the aura of possibility that comes to surround even the least favored participants. Whereas one's investment in a lottery may be minimal, however (a dollar here, a dollar there, on trips to the corner market), the miners routinely risk their lives. Gold mining is hard work, and the men often labor from dawn to dusk seven days a week. Mining is also dangerous, since accidents, diseases, and acts of violence are rife. Most of all, gold mining is psychologically taxing, since a man must cooperate with others without ever letting down his guard.

Reports of gold and gold mining in the Amazon (Amapá, Rio Branco, and the neighboring Andes and Guianas) date back to the sixteenth cen-

tury and the early tales of El Dorado.[2] In colonial Brazil, gold was primarily associated with the center-west (often pictured as an extension of a fabulously rich Peru on sixteenth-century Spanish maps).[3] Amazonian gold became a focus of international attention only in the twentieth century, with the discovery of gold in the Tapajós area in 1958.[4]

A dramatic spike in the price of the precious metal in 1979, and the discovery of the giant lode at Serra Pelada later that year, converted the search for gold into a veritable fever.[5] It was during this time, in which Brazil emerged as the world's fifth-largest gold producer, that Angela Maria signed on as a nurse in Lucky River. Young and single at the time, she had never dreamed of working in a gold camp until a chance conversation in a Belém dentist's office with a seemingly unexceptional older man changed her life. The man, Seu Luiz, turned out to be the owner of Lucky River. "Two days later," Angela Maria recalls, "I was on a plane for Itaituba. He even offered to pay for a gold tooth to replace the one that I was having treated, and though I find gold teeth ugly, I was impressed—he was so rich!"

Despite the later drop in gold's value and the increasing need for expensive machinery to extract ore from deposits ever more difficult to reach, mining continues to attract sizable numbers of men to the Brazilian states of Pará, Rondônia, and Roraima.[6] There are also mines and miners in portions of the Spanish-speaking Amazon (above all, in Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia), as well as in Suriname and the Guianas.[7] Although current population estimates are more often in the tens of thousands than the hundreds of thousands, mining, with its sense of adventure and lack of need for formal qualifications, remains an important occupation in the Amazon.

The gold camps are known in Brazil as *garimpos* after the verb *garimpar,* which means "to scratch or dig," "to prospect," and also, colloquially, "to pick one's nose."[8] Their single most outstanding characteristic is their variety.[9] Some, known as *fofocas* (rumors), are mere flashes in the pan. Others are small cities complete with a fleet of single-engine airplanes, a police force, and one or more computers. Mining may take place directly in rivers, but the majority of sites are placer mines situated near or beside rivers. Although most mines presently employ rudimentary hydraulic drills much like those used in the California gold rush of 1849, the level of technology may range from highly sophisticated machines (rare) to a simple metal basin (even more rare today in many areas, given the increasing lack of readily accessible alluvial gold).[10]

The system of ownership in the mines also varies, with some *garimpos* in the hands of a single owner and others offering a complex patchwork of competing claims. During the 1960s, for instance, the Tapajós gold fields were almost all "closed," or "wild" *garimpos,* which meant that the mine owner (most often a gold buyer, merchant, supplier, or pilot) controlled access to the area. With time, however, and with the advent of more expensive technologies, differences in ownership and administration began to appear.

Because *garimpos* rarely take up large areas of land, they are not a major, direct cause of deforestation. However, the runoff of silt and overburden may choke roots and undergrowth in the forests where men have carved out a *garimpo,* thereby indirectly causing considerable destruction. Those *garimpos* that employ machinery may tear huge piles of earth from mountainsides, clogging rivers and severely eroding the land. However, the greatest destruction caused by mining is a direct result of the massive and almost completely unregulated use of mercury in the mines.

Common as well in nineteenth-century California, mercury is used as an amalgam to which the gold clings. In the last stages of the collection process—be it manual or mechanized—the amalgam is usually tipped into a piece of finely woven cloth (which can be something as simple as the miner's T-shirt), and then twisted hard enough to expel any excess mercury, which usually runs into the river, killing fish and contaminating a food chain that includes humans as well as birds and other animals. The miners then heat the amalgam with a butane torch, causing the remaining mercury to evaporate in a toxic white gas, which they inhale nonchalantly, unaware of the nerve disease, impotence, and eventual death that sustained exposure causes. ("They say it's bad for you," one miner says fatalistically, "but here I am, here is the gold, and what would you have me do?") The same negative effects may be visited in somewhat attenuated form upon nonminers, since the pollution of streams and rivers can affect hundreds and even thousands of miles of waterways.

Generally poor, and often illiterate or semiliterate, the miners vary in terms of their geographic origins. Some are Indians or blacks, but most are of mixed blood. Although many are from within the Amazon, some are from neighboring states. In the case of Brazil, a large percentage of the miners come from the northeastern states of Maranhão and Ceará, or the south-central states of Goiás and Paraná. During the height of the rush on Serra Pelada in the early 1980s, and the ensuing frenzy in the

mass media, the Amazon became a magnet for fortune seekers from a host of the most diverse locations.[11]

Most outsiders' image of the Amazonian gold rush *is* Serra Pelada, which became a symbol for an entire region thanks in good part to Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado's striking portraits of antlike men winding their way up and down an abyss that was once a mountain.[12] A media spectacle from its very start, the mine was anomalous in various other ways as well.[13] Far bigger than most *garimpos* (at its peak in 1983, Serra Pelada, situated in southeastern Pará, produced more than a metric ton of gold a month and contained a population of close to a hundred thousand miners and related merchants and tradespeople), it was also distinguished by its hillside, as opposed to riverine, location. The Brazilian military government's decision to place control of Serra Pelada under Major Curió in 1980 was another differentiating factor, and the ensuing prohibition of mercury and the almost complete exclusion of women from the mine were two important direct results of this control. The politicization of the miners in the *garimpo* was another. Curió, for example, was elected to the Brazilian Congress when he ran in 1982, and his allies took eight out of nine seats on the city council in neighboring Marabá.

What was depressingly similar about Serra Pelada to other *garimpos* was the small number of people whom it benefited. About a quarter of the gold production there was controlled by just over a hundred persons. Likewise, fewer than a thousand people—about 2 percent of the total registered *garimpeiro* population of 48,000—pocketed more than 70 percent of the income from the gold during Serra Pelada's boom period.[14]

The punishing routine associated with gold mining has led the *garimpeiros* to describe themselves as "penitents" forced to atone for the "sin" of nonconformity with the poverty into which most of them were born. ("The priest says that the poor are blessed," says one young miner, "but what would he know about the man cheated out of his land by a pack of lawyers or the young girl who becomes a prostitute in order to feed her little brothers?") When the hot sun does not beat down upon their heads, heavy rains convert their camps into a sea of slime. Moreover, even the rare man who manages to escape malaria and hepatitis—no easy feat in settings where logs jam rivers that look more like curdled milk than water—often finds himself succumbing to a contagious solitude. Because meals are often staggered so that the digging, hauling, and sifting of earth can continue without interruption, and the racket of

machinery makes conversation all but impossible in any case, most men have little direct contact with their coworkers by day. When night finally comes, many head for makeshift bars *(cantinas)* where they drink, dance with prostitutes, and talk for hours. These conversations may continue in the tents and lean-tos located just above the gullies, called *barrancos,* where the men drill for ore.

Barring the so-called *peões rodados,* or men who move from mine to mine in an eternal pilgrimage, prospecting tends to be an on-again, off-again occupation. Likewise, many of the women who work as cooks, laundresses, and shopkeepers in the *garimpos* and surrounding settlements, called *corrutelas,* spend only a certain amount of time there before returning home.[15] As a result, it is just as easy to hear the sorts of stories miners tell in places where there are no mines, and it is certainly easier to tape-record outside the *garimpos,* where the racket of machines, dynamite, and tractors drowns out voices and the men are usually too busy or too exhausted to converse by day.

After Angela Maria first got me interested in gold miners, I went on to record large numbers of tales on the boats that serve the cities of Santarém, Itaituba, and, later, Maués. I also spent day after day in the crowded malaria wards of public hospitals and clinics in these cities, where virtually all of the patients are from *garimpos.*[16] Although it was unnerving to record a person who might suddenly start shaking with a fever I had no way of assuaging, a thick ring of miners regularly formed about me in the outdoor courtyards where many patients milled about, waiting for a doctor. "It makes the time pass," one man with almost yellow skin said when I nervously asked if he ought not to be lying down instead of talking. He had just flown in to Itaituba from a gold camp on the Tapajós River and looked very ill. "Besides, where would I lie down if there aren't any beds here?" he asked, causing the other men to laugh sardonically.

I recorded other stories in the gold camps themselves, which I visited with the pilots of tiny planes who regularly supply the camps, above all in the Tapajós. Usually friends or acquaintances of friends, these men allowed me to perch atop sacks of potatoes on runs that usually began at dawn and ended just before nightfall. ("There's no way you'll find me there when the mosquitoes and the men start drinking," declared one grizzled pilot with whom I often traveled.)

In Rondônia, where most mining sites are situated on or directly beside rivers, I spent almost a month accompanying an engineer friend who regularly serviced machinery in the camps. Although he laughed at

the flowered cotton dresses I wore on these outings ("You look as if you're going to a garden party!"), the long skirts gave me the freedom to clamber over hills and into muddy gullies while warding off the insects. They and the small silver cross I wore around my neck also served to immediately establish a respectable identity for me in locations where women who are not mistresses or wives tend to be "secretaries" (a word that may refer to domestic help, but is also a common euphemism for prostitutes).[17]

"You sure don't look like a missionary, miss," said one young man, after surveying me from the top of a rusted tractor. "But then again, you don't look much like those girls in the *cantina,* either."

Some miners were understandably suspicious of an outsider with no immediately apparent motivation for being there. ("You expect me to believe that you came all this way just to hear a bunch of men tell stories?" one sunburned miner growled. "Lady, everybody here is peddling something—don't you think that I don't know!") A few men worried that I might be a spy sent to find out who was hiding gold from government tax collectors. Many, however, proved poignantly eager to talk about their lives. Despite my protests that it was I who remained indebted to them, many storytellers would offer me a gift of an orange or banana, a shot of rum, or a wildly expensive Coca-Cola, sold in *cantinas* with an added charge for every ice cube. Occasionally, one or another miner would present me with a pinch of grainy powder that looked less like gold than ground ginger. ("No, no, take it," one man said when I protested. "You remind me that there is a world beyond these miles of mud.")

It was Angela Maria who led me to spend several weeks in Lucky River. Her stories of the Woman in White, who promised men great fortunes; of a black man whose bleeding body vanished into thin air when her husband, Paulo, left him to get help; and of Maria Gasolina, a prostitute who swallowed gasoline in order to abort an unwanted baby, made me want to see firsthand the people and the places she described. Now estranged from Paulo, whom she left behind in the *garimpo* ("He loved me, but he couldn't leave that life even when I had my baby"), Angela Maria was initially hesitant to contact the owner when I said I'd like to visit Lucky River. However, her own curiosity about the changes that had taken place in the years since she had left the camp eventually led her to telephone one of Seu Luiz' sons. When the son reported that he would be heading for the mine in a few days, should the "*professora gringa*" care to tag along, I saw my opportunity.[18] Armed

with a suitcase full of the woolen socks and heavy work shirts that Angela Maria had pressed upon me as protection against the cold nights that she shivered to remember, I set out for Lucky River.

First founded in the late 1950s, the camp was, at the time of my visit, one of the oldest still-producing gold mines on the Tapajós.[19] I found myself tape-recording a long string of stories there from men who had spent ten-hour days knee-deep in tepid, insect-infested mud. An antidote to the grim routine they followed day after day, which was conspicuously absent from the catalogues of horrors with which my nonminer friends had regaled me, these stories portrayed a world distinguished by its resistance to fixed definitions.

The wool socks, by the way, turned out to be totally useless. The freezing nights that Angela Maria remembered turned out to be an unrelenting steam bath. Likewise, her stories often turned out to be very different from the tales of enchanted snakes and disappearing corpses that people regularly recounted at Lucky River. Even veteran miners looked quizzically at me when I inquired about the hapless Maria Gasolina and her unborn child. "Never heard of her, ma'am," said one old man, pausing in the midst of pouring a mixture of cashew juice and rum into clouded plastic glasses for the patrons of the *cantina* he had set up in his tiny living room. Stirring the thick yellow mixture, he shrugged his shoulders. "But then again, there are so many ghosts around here that it's easy for a person to lose track."

Stories about Gold

Not surprisingly, a large number of the stories that miners tell focus on the precious metal that accounts for their own presence in the *garimpo*. In part oral histories, many of these frequently first-person narratives include lengthy descriptions of different gold camps, as well as of particular people and events. They also are often rich in detail. "It was Mané Pé Grande [Manny Big Foot] who found three and a half pounds of pure gold there, two feet from that clump of trees just down the road from Boa Aventura exactly a week before Ash Wednesday," a man may declare.

And yet, while the particulars vary, the general outlines of these stories—many of which deal with lucky strikes, or *bamburros*—tend not to. It is a rare storyteller, for instance, who does not deal in superlatives.

The nuggets that the happy miner encounters are inevitably as big as oranges, if not watermelons. The strike does not simply make him rich, but transforms him overnight into a millionaire. "They say that this Mané now flies in his own airplane to an apartment in São Paulo every weekend," the storyteller may declare with something between envy and jubilation.[20]

In everyday life, the owners of the mines or the machines (not always one and the same) are by far the most likely to be the beneficiaries of a major find. However, the protagonist in the vast majority of miners' stories is a "Joe Nobody." Although the storyteller may acknowledge the extraordinary character of the occurrence ("Today, these things almost never happen"), the tale nonetheless centers on Joe's ability to overcome all odds.

The following story is a clear-eyed description of the growing dominance of technology and hierarchy in gold mining, in which poor men may end up as day laborers or as *porcentistas* who reap scant advantage from a major strike.[21] It is also an expression of the narrator's hope that he may yet find himself among the lucky few. A young man with an easy smile and stiff black hair that stands straight up on his head, he begins by declaring how unlikely it is to strike it rich, then unleashes a flood of the marvelous details so common in these tales.[22] While his comparison of gold to an underground river is as old as El Dorado, the conditions he describes are thoroughly contemporary.

> Look, finding gold today is really hard. Because gold comes from a river that runs beneath the earth, and that is always changing course. In the past, miners were able to find places where the river ran very near the surface of the earth where they could seize the gold. Today, one needs machines, one needs a whole team of men in order to extract it—and so, the person who gets rich is the one who already has a lot of money. Really, the ones who make big fortunes are the ones who sell the food and medicines, the ones who own the hydraulic drills, the computers, the airplanes and who can charge outrageous sums. Still, sometimes, Gold takes a liking to some poor man, but it's not every day; you have to be really lucky. [Here the young man flashes a winning smile.]
>
> In the past, yes, everything was easier, a man might find gold on the ground, people filled whole tins of Leite Ninho [a brand of powdered milk] with enormous nuggets. Back then, in those old days [the 1950s and '60s], there was a man named Inácio who struck it fabulously rich. Look, the gold he found filled two whole airplanes. One plane almost fell out of the sky because it was so heavy. And with this gold, he bought apartments in Rio de Janeiro, in Brasília, in New York, and Paris. Even his dog got a house of his

> own. This man would have lunch in the *garimpo* and dinner in Belém. He'd sleep in a bed of real wood with gold decorations and then, early the next morning, he'd be back here again.[23]

In part a catalogue of gold's rewards, the young man's story is also a description of a personal relationship. The Gold in his story is every bit as alive as the sun-colored, plantlike metal that inspired Diego de Ordás to roam the steamy equatorial zone in search of El Dorado. Moreover, as Angela Maria notes, this Gold is distinctly female. The language of these stories is often one of courtship and seduction. Although *gold* is a masculine noun in Portuguese *(o ouro)* as well as in Spanish *(el oro),* a man occasionally may employ the feminine pronoun (*ela,* as opposed to *ele*) before making a quick correction. The existence of a feminine variant, *bamburra,* on the masculine *bamburro,* further underscores the gendered identity of Gold.

"Gold, yes, it is a woman," says Carlinhos, a short, friendly man who has worked almost five years as a machinist for Angela Maria's estranged husband, Paulo. "It would have to be, ma'am. Because it is always growing, always giving birth to more gold. It's true that it can appear as a big, black snake too. But," he adds, with a mischievous wink, "it is more apt to appear to us as a pretty woman—tall, white, blond, and blue-eyed."[24]

Gold's ability to command respect sets her apart from the women in most miners' daily lives. ("Men like to order women around, but it is Gold who tells them what to do," explains a moon-faced woman who has been working as a cook in Lucky River for "two months now, but this is my fourth time here and I swear by all the saints that it will be the last if I come down with malaria again.") The same man who brags that he would never take "no" from any woman may find himself meekly submitting to a deceptively fragile-looking Gold. While miners laugh and roll their eyes at tales of how a once fearless *garimpeiro* meekly obeys the Woman in White's instructions, they grudgingly agree that they would do the same in his place. "We swallow the toad [a colloquialism that refers to putting up with something] because we all want something better," says the youngest man in the camp, who is counting the days until his sixteenth birthday.

> Look, this fellow was the bravest of all the miners for miles around. No one dared to cross him, see? Because if he were to get angry, there would be some mother weeping [for her dead son] before the day was through. But when this Woman in White began to appear to him, he'd become tame as a little child.

> [Here, the men snicker a bit uncomfortably.] He'd go down there by the river around midnight and only return at dawn. Now then, everybody talked behind his back, but no one was ever fool enough to ask him where he'd been.[25]

The welter of taboos surrounding men's behavior in the mine underscores Gold's power. A man, for instance, should never spit or urinate in a gully that miners are excavating. He should refrain from cursing or from speaking in a loud voice and should not clean the mud from his rubber sandals until after climbing out of the excavation pit.[26] Menstruating women are expressly forbidden from so much as looking at a gold site, and even "healthy" women should be careful not to touch any of the miners' tools. Thus, although my status as a foreign guest gave me access to excavation sites, a number of the miners looked uncomfortable when the owner's son invited me to examine a hydraulic drill. They went on to offer a series of excuses as to why I should not do so. "It's too heavy for her," objected one older man with a red bandanna around his forehead and a tarnished medal of Saint Barbara on his sunburned chest. "It's very dirty," chimed in his slightly younger, copper-skinned companion. "You don't want her to get her hands all full of mud."

Above all, a man must take care not to attack Gold directly. The present-day belief that the precious metal may assume reptilian form recalls colonial chronicles such as Juan Rodríguez Freyle's account of his search for a pair of golden caimans rumored to lie at the bottom of a lake. The man who kills a snake or caiman that turns out to be one of this Enchanted Being's various manifestations brings catastrophe not only upon himself, but on the community at large.[27] Even if the miner and his fellows quickly move on to another site, they may remain *panema*—an indigenous term that most commonly refers to a lack of success in hunting or fishing brought on by disrespect for carefully defined taboos.[28] The drills and sluices in use in the particular locale where a miner kills one of Gold's reptilian manifestations may remain similarly jinxed. In a few cases, these machines may even require purification by a healer.

"Yes, miss, I can say that I have seen this," pipes up one normally shy young miner with a thickly bandaged index finger caught earlier that morning in a wayward gear. The good-size gold camp on the Tapajós in which we find ourselves has been in existence for only a month.

> In the last *garimpo* where I worked, a fellow killed a very big snake in the excavation pit and all of us became *panema*. No one could find so much as a fleck of gold for weeks. Even the machine became *panema*. No, no, don't laugh [he says this to several friends of his who are listening to the story].

> There wasn't a mechanic who could fix it. One of them would come and repair it and immediately afterward, it would break again. Finally, we had to pay one of these *pajés* [shamanic healers] who really knows what he is doing to come and blow smoke over the machine so that it would begin working. [Here one of the other men laughs, but the others don't join in.][29]

Not simply strong-willed, Gold is often frankly capricious. There is little a man can do to secure her continuing favor. Once Gold tires of a particular individual, she discards him, Angela Maria says, "like a banana peel." As a result, while miners tell countless stories of lucky strikes, they are even more likely to recount instances of *blefes,* or busts. A word with strong connotations of deception and betrayal, the verb *blefar* awakens a sense of rueful amusement, at least when it applies to others. Beyond losing all of his money, the man who is *blefado* has been "swindled," "duped," or "screwed." In contrast to the noun for lucky strike, which, as already noted, may be feminine in colloquial usage, a *blefe* (or, less frequently, a *blefo*) is always masculine.

Willful and capricious, Gold is also profoundly strange. Indeed, she has an attraction to human blood that makes her as grotesque as any warrior woman, if not more so. The man whom she favors has to have "*sangue bom para o ouro,*" or good blood for gold.[30] Although in some stories Gold favors those with particular skill or virtue, the great majority of tales eschew any sort of moral. Failure or success is ultimately a question of destiny. A man may labor for months in one spot without finding so much as a single nugget, while a newcomer may hit pay dirt in the very same location on his first or second try. Reputed to have a murderous temper, the seventy-year-old man who tells this story looks like someone's sweet-faced grandfather as he squints up into the early-morning sun and speaks reverently of Gold and the men on whom she smiles.

> Everybody wants to get rich. No two ways about it. But Gold is mysterious, she does exactly as she wills. Look here, there was a miner who spent more than three months working in a gully. Genisvaldo was his name. A very good person, very hard working, but he had bad blood for Gold. So then, he couldn't take it any longer, he went away. And another came, a very young man who didn't know a thing about mining. So then, he began to work Genisvaldo's gully. Look, on the second day, this other fellow hit pay dirt. In other words, he had good blood for Gold. There are people who said, "What a shame that Genisvaldo left too soon!" But I say that Genisvaldo could have stayed there another three months or another three years, and nothing would have happened, he would not have found a thing.[31]

Gold's customary failure to reward hard work or personal virtue does not discourage most miners. The belief that it is blood more than actions that determines if one will be lucky provides a degree of consolation in the face of disappointment. At the same time, because blood's true character is not always immediately evident, the miner who has not hit pay dirt need not surrender hope. Unlike the economic system about which the men are unhappy but can do little to change, Gold remains supremely unpredictable. The men complain bitterly about this unpredictability, but it is actually a prime source of Gold's appeal.

"Do I believe that men have good blood or bad blood for Gold?" asks Seu Luiz, who began his life as "a *caboclo* just like any other." A short, sinewy man, now almost seventy, he has been regaling me with tales of his last trip to Paris as we drink a fine merlot with a lunch of freshly caught fish. "No, I don't believe in this business of good blood versus bad blood. But I do think that some men have a better head upon their shoulders and that Gold respects both courage and intelligence." He says this as he refills my glass with the wine whose crimson color is not lost on either of us.

"Tell me," he says, "how is Angela Maria?"

"Oh come on, I bet you have good blood for Gold," I say.

Gold as Enchanted Being

Gold's identity as an at once hostile and alluring female recalls the Amazons and their various descendants. Unlike them, however, she is not a person. Nor is she, at least technically, a personification, since she takes on various forms, not always human. Even the Woman in White, who does assume the shape of a particularly beautiful female, comes and goes in ways that defy physical laws.

Gold is also different from certain familiar embodiments of Amazonian nature; though she might still boast her maidenhead, Ralegh's Guiana did not appear impervious to conquest. Bates' bountiful nature turned out to reveal many different facets, but "she" exhibited an underlying logic that the patient naturalist, at least in theory, would eventually grasp. Likewise, even though Lévi-Strauss' bejeweled Eden stubbornly refused to divulge her secrets, he made no suggestion that the secrets were themselves incomprehensible. Gold is not so easily grasped.

Because of Gold's deeply mysterious nature, her relationship with the miners is neither a simple contest on the order of the Spaniards' armed

confrontation with the Amazons, nor an enduring union such as that which Bates envisioned between tropical nature and European civilization. As in the case of other Enchanted Beings, Gold holds out the possibility of an alliance that brings overwhelming benefits to humans. The fact that this partnership inevitably crumbles confirms the precious metal's identity as an Encantado and sets it apart from its more gigantic counterparts even in those moments when it seems to act most like a giant.

Less openly hostile than giants such as Carvajal's Amazons or Theodore Roosevelt's clawing, biting wilderness, Gold is far stranger and more frightening. Her strangeness is nowhere more evident than in her attraction to human blood. Although Gold actively shuns murderers in a number of stories, she inspires a greed that triggers acts of violence which may result in death. Moreover, even though Gold never directs one man to kill another, she displays a disturbing propensity to show up in places where blood has been shed. This means that although the man who kills another does not profit by his actions, others unassociated with the crime may benefit from the unhappy event.

Born in the interior of Amapá, the following man, a heavyset card player in a purple tank top, had recently arrived in Lucky River following a stint in Suriname.[32] He recalls how a gully that had never yielded anything before the brutal assassination of a young miner begins producing large quantities of gold immediately following the man's bloody death.

> People call me "Tião" [a common nickname for Sebastião but also the word for *top* in Portuguese] because I spin from one place to another like a children's toy. An itinerant miner such as myself has seen a lot in this world, and he has a lot to tell. And look, it's true that Gold likes human blood. Because once when I was working near Maués, there was a *garimpeiro* of a very bad sort who picked a fight with a young man. So then, the young man went to defend himself and the first man fell upon him with a knife. He stabbed him so many times that the body looked like the sides of meat that you see hanging there in the market. The dust beneath our feet turned into a crimson mud. And the very next day, an enormously rich vein of gold appeared in that very spot. Yes, yes, I swear that what I'm telling you is the solemn truth. Now then, the murderer himself never touched a bit of it. He too met a bad end.[33]

The profound and abiding strangeness of Gold means that a man can hope for little more than a passing alliance with her. Unlike early tales of an El Dorado whose treasures eventually would be seized once and for all, accounts of Gold are charged with a sense of bemusement and

resignation. "Gold comes and goes like smoke," says a young prostitute with bleached blond hair and eyes the shade of cinnamon who has worked in a dozen camps along the Tapajós for the last two years. "It can remain with a man for an hour or a year, but one day it disappears." Born in Belém, she regularly returns home with bundles of purchases for her mother, who believes that she is working in a bank in Santarém.

Even when Gold is with a man in her form as the Woman in White, her presence is provisory. As Angela Maria suggests in her account of her own encounter with this woman, the person whom the Woman in White favors is expressly forbidden to breathe a word about her to anyone. "Procópio, poor thing, wasn't used to keeping to himself like Gold demanded," says one older man with large, freckled hands, who enjoys recounting how he was born on a boat on the Amazon in the middle of a storm. "He got rich, for sure, but he was never again quite right in the head. By day, he was like you or me, but when night came, he would suddenly start talking out loud to people whom no one could see." By the same token, even the man who strikes an enormous vein of gold must take care to act in a way that will ensure Gold's favoring him again.

"Oh, yes, a man can do things to make Gold return to him," a young man in a World Cup shirt assures me when I ask. Dissipating the proceeds of a lucky strike in a thoroughly flamboyant manner, for instance, signals the lucky *garimpeiro's* confidence that Gold will one day reappear. Thus, while outsiders dismiss miners' penchant for conspicuous consumption as proof of their ignorance or profligacy, the men in question often see these actions as an investment in the future. "Why would a man spend all his money if he weren't sure that this were the best way for him to get more?" Angela Maria asks ruefully. She is almost certainly thinking about the breakup of her marriage following Paulo's refusal to quit mining after making the biggest *bamburro* of his life.

And yet, if the Gold of miners' stories often hints at the dark side of nature, her defiance of fixed forms and limits is part of her allure. Moreover, even at her most capricious, Gold is usually more even-handed and more generous to miners than are the representatives of a system in which they see themselves imprisoned. "I personally prefer life in the *garimpo* to life on the streets of Manaus," says one man who has wrapped a lime-colored towel around his head as protection from the sun. "Because Gold comes and goes, but she is not like the rich man who will never help the poor man no matter what. Besides, she does not ever pledge her word, and then go on to break it."[34]

Like one of Carvajal's warrior women, Gold's allure lies partly in her

spirited refusal to submit to any man, no matter how convinced he is of his own superiority. Unlike the Amazons, however, who prove vulnerable to the Spaniards' harquebuses, Gold inevitably turns out to be stronger than human will. Indeed, she is even stronger than the economic hierarchies that weigh down miners. Because of this, the stories about her are not simply expressions of a fluid nature that interacts with humans, but protests against a social and economic system that pushes people toward the gold camps.

"The man who says he understands Gold is a liar," one older miner from the interior of Itaituba says with a deep sigh, waving his straw hat at the sand flies that buzz about our heads at the end of a stifling afternoon in Lucky River. "Of course," he adds, "if anyone did understand her, he would be a very rich man, and there would be no hope for the rest of us." [35]

Violence as a Link between Competing Worlds

The central role that violence plays in many miners' stories suggests, at first glance, that the tellers are blithely unaware of a larger world that is quick to regard them as both ignorant and savage. Certainly, for those men and women who find themselves stranded in the midst of the forest, the *garimpo* can seem a world apart. The frequent lack of the most rudimentary comforts intensifies the sense of isolation. So do debts to the mine owner that may make men virtual prisoners in camps far from any road. Furthermore, the use of the word *perna* (a leg of a flight) as a standard unit of calculation for goods and services in many gold camps on the Tapajós and in Roraima emphasizes the *garimpos*' dependence on the sporadic presence of tiny—and expensive—planes.

Nonetheless, despite the isolated quality of many camps, residents of even the most remote *fofoca* keep an eye trained on the larger world. Only dire necessity would cause most miners to miss the TV or radio newscast that gives that day's gold-price fixing. Their well-founded fears of being cheated may lead men with no more than a year or two of grade school to master complex currency conversions. At least some *garimpeiros* speak as casually and knowledgeably of international financial markets and gold futures as they would of last night's soccer game.

The Brazilian government's decision to seize direct control over Serra Pelada during the gold fever of the 1980s did much to politicize miners, who have since begun to elect local legislators and to participate in po-

litical parties. *Garimpeiros'* success in forcing government authorities to modify, when not rescind, a number of their directives in Serra Pelada brought home to them their power as a group.[36] One obvious result of this growing political consciousness and participation is the election of a number of miners to state and local offices. Nilson Pinheiro, who discovered the Tapajós gold fields, was later elected a state deputy in Pará. Angela Maria's estranged husband, Paulo, has served as a local representative and has dreams of entering politics, should he ever succeed in tearing himself away from the *garimpo*.

A second look at the actors and the actions in many tales involving violence reveals the ways in which miners regularly rework others' negative images of them to their own purposes. While, for instance, *garimpeiros* inevitably figure as the villains in newspaper accounts of gold mining ("In the Gold Rush, Nature Is Viciously Trampled," exclaims one set of headlines), they are apt to emerge as victims in their own narratives.[37] Stories about an unquiet soul who roams the gully where a too-trusting miner fell into an ambush are often warnings as much to oneself as to others that a man, even when he feels most lonely, should not confide in anyone. "That young fellow was a hard worker, everybody liked him, but he was much too trusting," the narrator—himself a very young man, with a frayed blue ribbon around his wrist reading "Souvenir of Our Lady of Sorrows"—concludes with a shake of his head.[38]

> It happened like this, it's a sad thing, I don't like to talk about it: There was a young man from Maranhão, very hardworking, a friend to everyone, who hit pay dirt one day. A great big block of gold, I saw it with my own eyes. But he didn't know how to keep the good news to himself. So then, they killed him. Because he didn't know how to be suspicious. He was walking up there on that ridge where you see that tree early one evening when they fell upon him. They stabbed him so many times that his own mother would not have known him. Even today, we see ghosts, hear cries, and I become sad. Because he had no guile, poor thing, but the others did.[39]

This focus on the solitary individual who must confront violence all alone would appear highly alienating. Nonetheless, these accounts of brutal actions may exert a paradoxically humanizing effect by attributing to flesh-and-blood actors fears and anxieties far harder to fix on invisible microbes and abstract social hierarchies. In recounting these stories, the miners make more comprehensible and even perversely glamorous what otherwise might appear a stultifying, if genuinely perilous, routine. They also create a peculiar sense of community. Certainly,

the storytellers remain well aware on some level of the odds against them. "The problem is not the *garimpo,* the real problem is the world that makes Brazil, Brazil," says one young man whose faded orange visor shades his large, dark eyes. Nonetheless, the common caricature of the violent *garimpeiro* gives men the courage to go on. To the extent that this caricature serves as a focus for false fear (since one can confront another miner in a way that one cannot an unjust social system or a malarial mosquito), these villains serve as giants within a larger narrative of ongoing metamorphosis.

The villains are not always fellow miners. They are often unscrupulous mine owners in the mold of old-style rubber barons, or investors in faraway São Paulo, or a government that tries to prohibit *garimpeiros* from exercising what they feel is their legitimate livelihood. A confirmation of the violent character of *garimpos,* the following story is also, first and foremost, a stinging condemnation of the system in which gold miners find themselves enmeshed. The narrator is a middle-age shopkeeper with two gold front teeth, whom Angela Maria once nursed through a bad case of food poisoning. Born in Itacoatiara, he moved to Santarém while still a baby. "All my family is there," he says, "but somehow, I keep finding my way back to Lucky River. Tell Angela Maria she was right—mining is like a disease!"

> It happened this way: The man came from Maranhão to do battle in the *garimpo*. He went on for some seven months without finding anything until one day he struck pay dirt. But when he went to sell the gold, the owner of the *garimpo* only wanted to give him a pittance. So then, he got angry and said, "Fine, I'm going to do my selling in Itaituba." Well then, the owner said, "That's OK with me, but no one leaves here except in one of my planes, and the price of the flight will be half of all the gold you've found." So, the man left in a huff. "The hell with that guy's airplane, I'll make my way by water," he said to his friends. He waited for night to come, he set out upon the river, but the owner sent two hired assassins after him, and they killed him in the hour. Because he should have pretended to agree with the owner and then fled. The rich man always wins in contests of force, so the poor man has to be smarter. Now, his soul still wanders about here. The other day, a new arrival asked, "Who is that tall, thin man with the sad face whom I see wandering down around the river?" Well, everybody knew, of course, but no one had the heart to say.[40]

The strained laughter that follows the tale's conclusion confirms that this story strikes a raw nerve in the listeners. "Oh yeah, they're are all in cahoots with one another," asserts one young man who flips through a

comic book and flirts with a woman in a very short green dress. "The mine owner pays off the government malaria prevention workers so that they do not come here. Then, when a man gets sick he has to pay three, four, five *pernas* for a remedy that costs pennies in the city. The same thing with food, with machine parts, you name it. The owners have a monopoly on all these things so that even when the poor man makes a lucky strike, most of it goes right away to paying off his debts. Then too, today half of the *garimpo* owes money to the crack and marijuana dealers. You probably owe them too, eh, sweetheart?" he says to the young woman, who frowns and studies a peeling crimson fingernail.

Aimed in part at outsiders, images of the miners as trigger-happy outlaws are intended in part to deter corporate interlopers who otherwise might be quick to horn in on what remains a largely unregulated and technically clandestine and illegal operation.[41] The prospect of having to deal with a horde of wild-eyed miners has effectively slowed the entry of extraregional commercial ventures into gold extraction. Unfortunately, it also has often led government agencies and nongovernmental environmental organizations to dismiss miners as beyond the pale of education, thereby further marginalizing them. To the extent that the miners actively encourage a vision of themselves as hopelessly unruly, the nonminer friends who had cautioned me about the dangers of the *garimpo* were playing admirably the role scripted for them. And they were by no means alone in this respect. Over time, I came to recognize my own place in the supporting cast.

On an initial stroll down the dirt street of one of the first gold mines that I visited in the Tapajós, for instance, I noticed a dark stain in the dust. Even before I asked, my hosts volunteered the information that I was witnessing the last traces of blood from the knife wounds inflicted on a young miner who had gotten into a fight with another man almost a week ago. Primed by innumerable stories about the ferocity of *garimpeiros,* I was spellbound by the horrific details of how the first man had stabbed the other "seventeen times right in the heart, the blood gushed out all over" in an altercation over a woman said to have eyes only for a third man. ("The woman over whom that man stabbed the other didn't like either of the two!" a young machinist said with a click of the tongue.)

When I thought about the incident months later, I still had a visceral reaction to the half-moon of sunbaked blood. Nevertheless, with each new trip to the *garimpos* I became more aware of the near pleasure that

the storytellers took in my dismay. Although they might express sadness about the death of a particular individual, or revulsion at the senselessness of a particular brutal action, it was important to them that their stories have a visible effect upon me. In those cases in which I did not react strongly enough to satisfy them, they would produce new, even more horrific details until I finally did.

My point is not that the heinous events to which storytellers refer are a mere figment of their imagination, or that miners are a peace-loving lot whom others have wrongly maligned. Although some gold camps are more dangerous than others, few are entirely free of a violence that periodically spills over into attacks on Indians and other local groups.[42] The miners may see these groups as obstacles to their extractive activities, particularly when the groups hold legal title to the land, as native peoples sometimes do. They also may find these groups to be convenient scapegoats for their own frustrations, since Indians in particular tend to be even lower than themselves on the social scale. That a significant number of miners have some portion of Indian blood makes their hostility toward native people a bitter irony.

If miners' stories confirm the harshness of life in the gold camps while seeking to deter outside intervention, they also seek to make their tellers feel better by presenting violence not just as a fact of life, but as a peculiar source of pride. The following storyteller—a tall man known ironically as "Zé Pequeno" (Joe Little)—does not dismiss the doctor as a coward. Rather, his point is that miners possess a fortitude, even a heroism, that outsiders lack. Like Angela Maria, from whom I first heard this story, he insists that "living in the *garimpo* is not something that just anyone can do."

> Then, this doctor who arrived in the *garimpo* didn't sleep a wink because of the spirits. At six in the morning he asked for an airplane to leave that place. "I saw a lot of unquiet souls, a lot of things," he said. "Look, Seu Joaquim [the owner of the *garimpo* and his host], there are three spirits who are wandering about the *garimpo*. All three died a terrible death. In addition, they died with gold in their mouths, they had gold teeth but no one removed them. [Gold left anywhere in or on the body is believed to tie the soul of the dead person to earth.] One was a young man whom they killed down there in the gully. They killed him out of spite, a very young man. Another was an older man, poor thing, he died an ugly death. The third was a woman—tall, with dark brown hair, and slender. Her jealous lover plunged a knife straight through her heart." So then, that doctor explained absolutely everything. And so, *mana* [a colloquial form of address that literally means "sister"], you can see why living here is not for everyone.[43]

Stories that initially appear to celebrate bloodshed often turn out to be affirmations of a mystery that many *garimpeiros* see as surrounding Gold. By setting apart the *garimpo* from the humdrum world beyond it, violence gives its occupants new status. Though a source of deep anxiety ("Who will take care of my wife and eight children back there in Imperatriz if I die here tomorrow?"), it transforms a grueling routine into a high-stakes adventure that defies the social odds. This aura of deep enigma is particularly obvious in two differing accounts of a bleeding black man whom Angela Maria's estranged husband, Paulo, encountered one day around dusk. In the first version, Angela Maria stresses the grisly nature of the event; in the second, Paulo emphasizes its mystery.

> A horrible thing, Cândida, the *garimpo* is a hell, it's full of death, of things that would make anyone afraid. Because, look here, Paulo had gone in search of a wrench to change a part in the motor. And when he entered the machine shop, he saw that black man sprawled out on the floor. Full of blood, that man was bleeding from the chest, the neck, the head. A stranger, someone he had never seen before—heavyset and very dark. The man was still alive but he was bleeding so much that he was on the point of death. There was blood everywhere. "Gosh, that's one more gone, they've knocked off yet another," he [Paulo] said. And he went to find the others. But when they returned, the black man wasn't there. And what's more, there wasn't even so much as a drop of blood!

When I later got to meet Paulo in Lucky River, he took me to see the now-abandoned shed in which the event had occurred.[44] However, although he too described the bleeding body, he was far less interested in stressing its gruesome appearance than he was in impressing on me the enigmatic quality of the event. "I still don't understand it," he declares at the conclusion, outlining with a finger that once-bloody spot on the chipped concrete.

> Because look, that man was full of blood, the blood was gushing from his head. He was a strong man, but there is no one who could survive a wound like that. So I went to get help. And when I returned with the others—it was Dr. Joaquim and Joe Little, I no longer remember who else—there was absolutely nothing. No black man, no blood. The whole thing seems like a lie, a joke. [Here, he laughs a bit sheepishly.] But that's the way it was. Look, you can see that this shop has just one door. If someone had gone in or out, everybody would have seen. I have no explanation, I only know that the *garimpo* has its mystery, that here things happen that don't happen in any other place.

A number of possible motives for the differences in these versions are readily apparent. Angela Maria's estrangement from Paulo, her distance from the *garimpo* in both time and space, and her identity as a woman and a nurse almost certainly influence her rendition of the story. Paulo's desire to impress a foreign female visitor with his courage and his consciousness that anything he says is likely to get back to Angela Maria are obvious factors in his account. Nonetheless, the intermingling of the mysterious with the macabre that marks his version of the story is part of a pattern visible in other miners' tales.

At the same time that miners routinely rework others' caricatures of themselves to their own purposes, stories about a Gold that defies even the rich men who normally lord it over them bring home miners' deep ambivalence about a nature that they themselves would like nothing better than to exploit. "Ah, if a man could make Nature do exactly as he wanted!" one man with four gold front teeth exclaims in a small gold camp near Maués called "Now-You-See-It, Now-You-Don't" *(Vê, não vê)*. The striking contrast between miners' vision of an all-powerful Enchanted Being that demands respect and the effects of their daily activities (direct or indirect deforestation, wholesale pollution of lakes and rivers, often devastating attacks on local populations) underscores the competing forces that play upon these men.[45]

Outsiders' accounts of *garimpeiros* as assailants of a virgin land are no less contradictory. For all their vocal concern about the rain forest and so-called forest peoples, nonminers in Brazil and elsewhere are more apt to see nature as an object to be manipulated through either protection or development than as a living being that demands respect. Moreover, they have their own motives for presenting the gold miners as bloodthirsty giants. A convenient embodiment of the more savage aspects of tropical nature, the wild-eyed outlaw provides a focus for larger fears about environmental destruction: "Gold miners extract tons of gold from Yanomami lands and transform Roraima into a caldron of conflicts," declares an article titled "The New Gold Fever."[46] Articles by foreign journalists with titles such as "Gold's Lure versus Indians' Rights: A Brazilian Conflict Sets the Amazon Aflame" (the *New York Times*), "Gold Lures Hordes of Miners into Yanomami Domains, Despoiling Rain Forest" (a subsection of one piece in a larger report in the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Amazon Tragedy"), and "Motley Miners Pursue Amazon Gold" (part of the series "The Last Frontier" in the *Washington Post*) are equally critical of *garimpeiros*.[47]

The caricatures of gold miners in these articles provide a ready scape-

goat for an assault on tropical nature whose causes go far beyond the miners themselves.[48] Multinational logging and mining ventures, government development policies dictated in large part by international monetary pressures (Brazil's need to pay off the interest on a staggering international loan while attempting to control inflation), and the burning of forestland for large-scale cattle ranches are only the most obvious of the other causes. Hydroelectric plants, roads that necessitate and foster ongoing deforestation, and waste-producing industries are ultimately far more destructive than limited-scale mining. Although miners have killed many native people through direct attacks and the indirect spread of disease, these larger enterprises have had a much more significant effect on a regional population that includes the sorts of ordinary men and women who turn to mining when deprived of their traditional livelihood. Nonetheless, the "scruffy," "ragtag," and "desperate" *garimpeiros* make particularly effective targets, because they divert attention from destruction in which newspaper readers might find themselves complicit.[49]

The miner as environmental villain permits readers in Washington and Tokyo, Lima and São Paulo to bemoan the destruction of the Amazon while continuing to consume hearts of palm salads at mahogany dining tables or to package handfuls of "Rainforest Trail Snax" in gleaming sheets of foil made from Amazonian bauxite. Moreover, while it would again be wrong to minimize the consequences of miners' destructive actions, the wholesale condemnation of them conceals the extent to which the Rain Forest they are routinely pictured as despoiling is itself a giant. Like the teenage women who find themselves working as prostitutes in some gold camps—an occurrence that also has received heavy media coverage—Amazonian nature in these articles is depicted as profoundly vulnerable.[50] Just as the young women are "imperiled," "imprisoned," and even "mined" in "hellholes" where "just about everybody packs a .38" and violence is "a simple fact of life," nature itself is routinely degraded.[51] Newspaper reporters regularly describe *garimpeiros'* use of toxic mercury and their attacks on Indians as a "violation" and a "rape of the land." ("Police Raid Amazon Saloons Said to Enslave 22 Girls," reads the subtitle of one article that goes on to decry the desecration of "untamed tropical forest.")[52]

Thoroughly virginal, this land full of great trees and Indians clad only in beads and feathers has no defenses against the gold-hungry "barbarians" who turn what ought to be paradise into hell. The ironic contrast between the noble-looking jaguars on "Save the Rain Forest" posters

and the "wildcat" miners in the press coverage attests to the idealization of a nature whose less appealing aspects are routinely projected onto a particular group of human beings.

Quick to accept the vision of themselves as tough men inured to violence, miners nonetheless deny that they are enemies of nature. Their reasons are practical in part. While the image of themselves as swashbuckling outlaws keeps out intruders, portrayals in which they appear as enemies of nature and of native peoples lead to demands from environmentalists and human rights groups for official intervention. Responding to international pressure, the Brazilian government has sought to keep out miners where it cannot control them, periodically bombing rudimentary airstrips that serve a host of *garimpos* in Roraima, where miners have engaged in egregious attacks upon the Yanomami.[53]

The notion of the *garimpeiro* as an environmental outlaw reinforces ideas of gold mining as a disease and of miners as dangerous carriers of a moral virus that, in the words of the *Washington Post,* threatens to "contaminate society as much as mercury pollutes the rivers."[54] "If Latin American governments do not work together to curb the rape of the tropical rain forests [by the miners and similarly destructive individuals], the entire planet may be endangered," reads the subtitle of an article in *USA Today.*[55]

If, however, *garimpeiros* have good practical motives for contesting the image of themselves as destroyers of nature, they also have more emotional reasons. "These people who call us enemies of the forest don't live side by side with us in the mud; they only see those pictures of birds and butterflies on television," scoffs an older man in a malaria ward in Itaituba, who tells me how his one lucky strike at Serra Pelada paid for the "big cloud of silk with shiny beads all over" that came all the way from Paris to serve as his granddaughter's wedding gown. "Half an hour here would be enough to stop them from talking nonsense. But which of these *doutores* [an umbrella term for anyone with money] is going to leave his soft bed to do penance in the sun?"

Miners' startling assertions that they are the ones who understand and truly respect nature underscore the gaps between word and action. Their apparent disregard for nature in their search for gold makes it easy to dismiss those claims and the accounts of a living Gold. Yet what looks to outsiders like a series of contradictions may not strike the miners as such. Most of the men, for instance, find it hard to believe that mercury does any sort of lasting damage.[56] "They don't understand all this talk about how *garimpeiros* are poisoning the waters," says Angela Maria.

"They see the wind carry off that little trail of smoke into the air and ask how it could end up in the river. 'These people who claim that we are making ourselves sick just want to scare us into leaving so that they can take our place!' they say." [57]

Many miners argue that the environmental destruction they wreak pales beside that of the powerful developers who are often quick to paint themselves as friends of nature and who may sponsor preservationist efforts that improve their own public image. "Do you think that these people have a shred of real interest in the monkeys or the jaguars?" demands one man in Lucky River, tapping the end of a hand-rolled cigarette against a table strewn with playing cards. "They say that they want to protect the forest for our grandchildren, but just look at what they do. If you want to see dead fish, ma'am, go there by the refinery. If you want to see dead trees, go look at the drowned forests there in Samuel and Balbina [both enormous dams that flooded vast areas of forest]."

The environmental organizations that decry the miners' genuinely destructive actions may come in for similar criticism based on their seeming lack of interest in people of mixed blood. "These know-it-all environmentalists cry when the turtles die or when some Indian gets measles, but they couldn't care less when our children go to bed with an empty stomach," adds one of the man's regular blackjack partners, prompting three or four other miners to nod energetically. "As far as I'm concerned, the pack of them can go to hell." [58]

Although few of the storytellers acknowledge the discrepancies between their words and actions, it is often these very contradictions that make their tales compelling. Thus, while Gold is clearly a woman in these stories (or, rather, a series of women), she remains a projection of the severely constrained miners' own fierce desire for a richer, freer life. "Why do you stay here?" I impulsively ask a thoughtful, funny eighteen-year-old in a fly-infested gold camp near Porto Velho; he is still recovering from his third bout with malaria. "You're smart and mining's going to get you nothing but more malaria—why don't you catch the next plane out of here and do something else?"

"What else is there for me?" he answers. "Are you offering me a job?" We both laugh too hard and I feel embarrassed by my question. "Besides," he continues, now entirely serious, "in the *garimpo,* almost anything can happen, almost anything, you see?"

It is this at once escapist and defiant sense of a shape-shifting Gold's enduring mystery and potential that first drew me to the stories told by Angela Maria. While the terms *victim* and *villain* are ultimately too

simple to describe a large and varied group of people united only by their desire for something better than what would normally be their lot in life, the miners are unquestionably both.

As for Angela Maria, when I returned from my sojourn in Lucky River, she was waiting for me on the dock. "It was terrible, wasn't it?" she said as we trudged up the hill with my suitcase full of scratchy shirts and unused woolly socks. Newly conscious of the stock role that outsiders play in miners' portrayals of the *garimpo,* I found myself wanting to tell her that Paulo's version of the story of the mysterious black man was very different from the one she'd told me, that no one in the camp had ever heard of Maria Gasolina, and that Lucky River in July is as hot as hell. But the words stuck in my throat. On the one hand, I didn't have the heart to disappoint a friend who had gone out of her way to help me. On the other, I found myself thinking, "The real problem is not the *garimpo,* the real problem is the world that makes Brazil, Brazil."