

**Letters from  
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to the  
ITEBA Network**



**Fall 2001 and Spring 2002**

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Wednesday, September 12, 2001

Dear Friends at First Presbyterian Church,

I write this with sadness in my heart, for it is hard to be many, many miles away at a time when our country is in the midst of such a tragedy. Though I've been feeling sad, angry, helpless, and frustrated, the new friends I've met here have been incredibly generous, caring and supportive. They helped me call home and get in touch with a few of my friends who live in Battery Park City, dangerously close to the Towers, and shared my joy when I finally received the news that my family and close friends are okay. They are shocked and concerned and have been asking me how close Oklahoma is to NYC, as well as soliciting my help in sending e-mails to friends of theirs who live in the United States. One of the e-mails I helped them write today was to Emilie Townse, who works at Union Seminary in New York City and whom they grew close to during her visit here just a few weeks ago.

They've also expressed concern about you, their friends in Washington, Pennsylvania, so I told them I would send their messages along. I hope that you and all of your loved ones are safe. Please know that my thoughts and prayers, as well as those of your colleagues and friends here at ITEBA, are with all of you.

I am surrounded by an incredible group of people here at ITEBA. Mama June left on Friday and though I was sad to see her go and am missing her terribly already, I am comforted by the fact that she has left me in the hands of some truly wonderful people. The warm send-off I received from your fellowship, combined with an enthusiastic welcome here, have made me feel incredibly supported and inspired to begin my caminhada with the people of ITEBA, what I see as an incredible opportunity to share a little bit of their lives and their dreams. While Mama June was here, she helped me get settled and oriented in this beautiful yet huge and somewhat overwhelming city that will be my home for the year. We spent the week learning the ins and outs of the complicated bus system, discussing my role at ITEBA with the directors, registering for classes, and, most importantly, meeting all of people I will be working, studying, and living with. Mama June introduced me

to her and Papa Bill's wonderful friends who all squealed "Junie!!" with delight, gave her a huge hug, and immediately asked how "Biw" was doing when they saw her. This is a big city, but after this week with Mama June I am convinced that my grandparents know everyone who lives here. And the friends they have here like them so much that the fact that I am the "neta de June e Bill" (June and Bill's granddaughter,) moves them to hug me and extend offers to give me classes in Afro-Brazilian dance, take me on trips and spend weekends at their house. Even the woman we ran into last week at the Mercado Modelo, a woman who has a little stand there where she sells Brazilian jewelry, handbags, postcards, etc., gave Mama June a big hug and then gave me a card with her name and cell phone number on it in case I ever need anything.

I am lucky to have two amazing grandparents who are loved, admired, and respected so dearly here, but the more I realize the extent and high quality of the work they've done here, the more I realize what a hard task I've taken on. Mama June says she has a hard time following my footsteps because my ballet training left me with a permanent toes-out walk, but I'm afraid the footsteps she and Papa Bill have left here at ITEBA are going to be far harder to follow.

As I begin to gain a better understanding of the language (which is very very different from Spanish,) as I live my day-to-day life in this new context, and as I learn more about the work that is going on here at ITEBA, I am also beginning to understand just how special, but also, how fragile, this place is.

In one of the first discussions I participated in with Mama June, Marlene and Aguelza, Aguelza (who's presence is absolutely vital to ITEBA,) revealed her minimum-wage (read: below subsistence-level) salary but also expressed her dedication and true commitment to ITEBA and it's goals. Mama June and I did all we could to hold back our tears during that conversation.

Though I heard Aguelza's frustrations during that conversation, I am understanding more each day, just by living in her context, what she was saying. A couple of days ago, for instance, I went to the papelaria across the street from ITEBA to buy a notebook, a simple spiral-bound notebook, for class, and couldn't believe it when the cashier asked me for \$6. \$6 for a

single-subject spiral notebook??!! That's nearly 10% of the minimum wage here. I walked away from the store with a fairly expensive notebook in my hands, but also with a better understanding of why education is so inaccessible here in Brazil. And this is only one example of why the services ITEBA offers are so important.

ITEBA is making education accessible to people who most likely wouldn't have the chance to attain any form of higher education were it not here. In a city where 80% of the population is black, it is astonishing to hear that the universities here are only 2% black. The students arrive to ITEBA tired, after a long day of work, but, from what I've seen so far, they are all eager to learn and proud to be here. In my classes I am witnessing first-hand the way in which ITEBA is carrying out its mission statement -- by training their students to read and think critically and by encouraging self-esteem and power of the povo (people.) It is exciting to be in a place where the esperança (hope) is so tangible.

October 10, 2001

Dear ITEBA Network,

Greetings from Brazil! I hope this letter finds you all well, despite the events that are going on around us. I've felt especially far away this last month, and experiencing the events of the past few weeks at such a distance has made me feel both more and less American than ever. Though many of my thoughts this month have been with my family and friends in the U.S., my eyes and ears peeled for the latest information, I've been easily distracted by the beauty of the country I'm in and by the exciting work going on here at ITEBA. More and more, I realize the importance of this network's mission and just how much we need our brothers and sisters around the world. With the help of my friends here at ITEBA, I am attempting to turn my own cynicism and sentimentality into compassionate listening and hope.

There is much to report this month! As I write the giant sunflower that was created, petal by petal, by ITEBA students and faculty (each person wrote their name and one word that described what they brought with them to ITEBA and its goals –words ranged from solidarity to peace to hope,) during a ceremony held on the 24th of September. The ceremony served as a celebration of Spring as well as an awakening to the needs of the country's marginalized population. The Liturgy class I'm taking planned the celebration, but I unfortunately didn't get to attend because I came down with Dengue Fever (transmitted by an evil little mosquito!) a couple days beforehand. After the service my classmates called me from ITEBA to make sure I was doing okay and to let me know that the ceremony had gone beautifully.

I had lots of people taking care of me so I recuperated fairly quickly, and by the time the weekend rolled around I was healthy enough to make a trip to Quilombo Zeferina to help out with the zilian tag sale held to sell ITEBA's large supply of used clothes, some of which were brought down by the participants of Mutirão 2000. I at first thought it strange that they were holding a tag sale instead of just giving the products away-the purpose of the donations was, after all, as I understood it, to

provide much-needed items to an impoverished community. When I asked Aguielza and some of the others who organized the “Bazar” why they had chosen to distribute the goods in such a way, however, their explanation made quite a bit of sense. The “Bazar” provides advantages both to the members of the community of Pirajá and Quilombo Zeferina as well as to ITEBA, they explained. The items are marked at extremely low prices – .10, .20, .50 cents (in Brazilian currency – practically free, Jací said! And if someone wants something but really can’t afford it, it is given away for free.) Thus, the community members feel pride in being able and ITEBA, in exchange, makes enough money to pay the rent, water, and electric bills of the Quilombo.

I was very excited about my trip to Zeferina – not only because a severe case of Cabin Fever was beginning to take over the Dengue Fever, but also because I was looking forward to meeting all the kids who I’ve heard so many great things about. Unfortunately, however, the group I made the trip up to Pirajá with only got there in time to help with the clean-up so I still haven’t met any of the kids. The “Bazar,” however, was quite successful (the Beanie Babies were apparently the biggest hit of all!) and they are talking about holding such tag sales once a month from now on. There is also talk about the possibility of investing in a sewing machine in order to “Brazilify” (shorten and skimpify!) some of the clothes so that everything can be used.

The Quilombo Zeferina music group is still going strong. I just bought a couple of raff ho is leading the group, last week – they are trying to raise enough money to record a CD!

I will finally get the chance to meet the Zeferina kids next week when I begin teaching English classes (2x/week) there. I’ll let you know how that goes in my next letter, but for now any ideas on successful techniques for teaching English to adolescents are welcome...I’m a little nervous, as I’ve never done such a thing before.

Back to ITEBA. This weekend, the monthly post-graduation course that ITEBA is offering in conjunction with the Escola Superior de Teologia (EST – Superior School of Theology,) which is based in São Leopoldo, will take place. The course meets once a month for three-day (Thursday through Saturday) intensive sessions, with a new topic (ranging from History of

Ethics to Violence and the Church,) each month. The course has been quite successful thus far, attracting students and professors from all over Brazil. I will be good enough (I didn't understand Portuguese from the moment I stepped off the plane, as my grandfather wrote, but I am finally catching on to the many nuances of the language,) to participate in next month's course on Bioethics.

Though I'm not always sure that the work I'm able to do here is always helpful, I have been able to facilitate communication between ITEBA's leaders and the English and Spanish speaking worlds. We've been in especially close touch with Emilie Townse and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, who are both at Harvard Divinity School right now (Emilie works at Union Seminary but is on Sabbatical and spending the semester at Harvard.) They are both very enthusiastic about the work ITEBA is doing and seem to be looking forward to their next visits. Emilie just mailed a box of 20+ books written by Womanist Theologists for ITEBA's library – the books were received very enthusiastically, and now people are talking seriously about being able to read those books!

Last week, Jacintha Puntman, from the CMC (Central Commissionary for Mission – I think that's the translation, but it doesn't sound quite right in English!) which is based in Holland came to visit ITEBA. The CMC funds various social/religious, community-based projects around the world and Jacintha came to check out the work going on here at ITEBA – she seemed very impressed, so funding from the CMC looks promising!

Communication will soon be facilitated even more – a new web site for ITEBA (coming soon to a computer near you!) as well as quarterly ITEBA News Bulletin are in the works.

Every day, I continue to be awed by the people here – the faculty and students alike. I honestly can't figure out how they manage to do all the things they do, with seemingly endless energy and spirit. I am surrounded by incredible people whose hidden talents and true generosity amaze me more and more each day.

In class the o was sitting next to me, pulled out a copy of an article from an American literary journal (I don't remember which one,) and handed it to me.

As I began to read it, Eduardo pointed to a name, told me it was his, and asked what the author was saying about him. I looked at him, quite impressed, and explained that the author was exalting his contributions to Afro-Latin American poetry!

The most touching moment of my birthday (besides the phone call I received from one of my best friends who lives in NYC, in Zone Zero, who called with the good news that she was feeling hope and happiness again for the first time since the attacks,) was when Jací and Georgina, two very poor women for whom the bus fare back and forth to ITEBA is a large expense and who I have grown pretty close to (they're absolutely wonderful!) proudly came up to me to give me their present – a very cute little tank top. I knew that the tank top had been a huge expense for d to give it back and offer to take them out to dinner instead, but instead I graciously accepted and marveled at the act of true generosity that I had just experienced.

I think that's all the news I have for now. Know that you are all in my thoughts.

In peace and solidarity,  
Sara

November 12, 2001

Dear ITEBA Network,

As your clocks fell back last month, the clocks in Brazil sprang forward. It is officially spring here in Salvador, but the summer sun has already begun to shine, and has brought with it blue skies, dozens of delicious tropical fruits, and one-hundred-and-one variations on the tank top (my clothes are beginning to feel very boring and conservative!) It's not quite the New England fall that I'm missing at home, but it is a beautiful time of year.

My day-to-day life has changed a great deal since I last wrote. Up until mid-October I had been living in an apartment in the center of the city, just a ten minute bus ride from ITEBA. I was living with Marli Wandermurem, a visiting professor who is currently finishing up her Doctorate in Theology at the University of São Paulo. About mid-October, Marli left for Washington D.C. where she was invited to do coursework with Mary Hunt and other well-respected Feminist Theologians at a seminary there, and I moved in with Lourdinha, a graduate of ITEBA and member of YAMI who is currently not only writing a thesis in Philosophy (for the Bachelor's degree she will receive in January from the Catholic University,) but also participating in the Post-Graduation course here at ITEBA, and working at a day care center. She's a pretty amazing woman!

Lourdinha (and I, now,) lives in Alto de Coutos, a neighborhood in Salvador's "suburbana." "Suburbana" literally means the suburbs, but perhaps "Periferia," the other name that this section of town has taken on, is a bit more accurate. The periphery. In every sense of the word. Unlike the suburbs of the United States, the suburbs of Salvador are home to the most marginalized sector of its population –the poor, who are, not surprisingly, predominantly black. The suburbs have a strong re f violence and drugs. Before I went to live there, many people at ITEBA (students and professors alike,) expressed a great deal of worry and concern – the suburbs, they claimed, were no place for a young foreigner like myself to live. After hearing these similar sentiments from many people, I began to feel a little nervous about living in Coutos, but decided to make the move anyway, and I am glad I did.

I am so happy in Coutos. Not only do I feel safer here than I did while I was living in the center of the city (ironic, huh?!), but I am now living amongst a wonderful family (I technically live with just Lourdinha in a little two bedroom house, but we live across the street from her brother, next door to her dad, above her sister, and down the street from another of her sisters. It is hardly ever just the two of us in her house!) who has gone out of their way to make me feel welcome and comfortable.

One of my favorite things about rd that Lourdinha's niece, Eide, just gave me a tour of last weekend. After shooing the chickens and roosters away, Eide pointed all the different trees out to me – mango, guava, cacão, caju, jaca, acerola, banana, coconut....some of my favorite fruits along with many other fruits that I didn't even know existed – a heaven for the fruit-lover that I am! Many of the fruits were too high up for us to reach, but we were able to reach a cacão, open it up, and eat it right then and there. It tastes nothing like the chocolate, the product that brings the fruit it's fame, but it was delicious. I am now keeping my eyes on the mangos – mango season is approaching, so I sneak out into the backyard every couple of days now to check on their progress.

The one drawback to living in Coutos is the long bus ride. The trip is an hour and a half each way, usually in overcrowded buses, meaning that I have to make the whole journey standing up sometime ses that go back and forth from the suburbs remind me of an exercise I once participated in at school. The point of the exercise was to illustrate the unequal distribution of wealth in the United States. The exercise began with ten people, sitting on ten chairs, each person representing 10% of the population and each chair representing 10% of the wealth. At the end of the exercise, one person (10% of the population) was lying comfortably across 9 chairs (90% of the wealth) while 9 people (90% of the population) were crowded onto 1 chair (10% of the wealth.) The exercise was very powerful, but the crowded buses that I ride everyday in this country where the gulf between the rich and the poor is much larger than the gap that exists in the United States, are a much more tangible and realistic illustration of the reality. The buses, which transport the poorest members of society from one end of the city to the other, carry many more people ty, and everyone ends up struggling against one another (instead of the system, in this case the bus companies or

government,) for their piece of the little bit of wealth that is available to them.

I'll admit that I don't look forward to the bus trip, but coming home to Lourdinha's family and the fruit trees is definitely worth the ride. I go into the center every day and come home late at night (because classes at ITEBA don't get out until 9:30pm or so,) so I'm not home as often as I'd like, but I'm slowly integrating myself into the community. I've met almost all of Lourdinha's family now (a huge family – I meet someone new everyday!) and I'm taking an Afro-Brazilian dance class with a group that meets every Saturday at a space that's in walking distance from Lourdinha's house. The dance class is difficult and I was very sore after the first class, but I'm keeping at. The intensity of the energy that is created by the musicians together in class is something I never experienced in my more formal classical ballet classes, and it is wonderfully invigorating.

As I understood, I was supposed to start going to Zeferina regularly over a month ago, but things there are going very slowly. Not only is the new space is very small and unsuitable for many of the activities that ITEBA wants to hold there, but they have also run into problems in trying to get the water and electricity set up. Marlene (Academic Director of ITEBA) says that at this point it looks like the regular programming may not get started up there until the beginning of next year. I'll keep you posted on Zeferina news.

Last weekend, Rev. João Dias (Director of ITEBA) invited me to see the work of CEDITER (Comissão Ecumênica dos Direitos da Terra – Ecumenical Committee for Land Rights), which he also directs. I got to participate in a dynamic workshop on Gênero e Gestão (Gender and Administration) given to rural w eautiful town in Bahia's interior. João and his wife put me up in their home in Feira de Santana and were wonderful hosts. It was my first time outside of Salvador and felt great to get away and see a completely different aspect of Brazilian life.

While visiting with João and Ithamar, they enthusiastically shared the good news that Bryn Mawr is sending \$US 12,000 for LEMMAS (La Evangêlica do Menor Marta Strunch,) a group that works with street children in Feira de Santana. The money will be used to purchase new land on which to build their community center.

This week is a short one – Thursday and Friday are both holidays. Thursday is “Day of the Republic” and Friday is a blackout, declared for the whole Northeast in order to meet the energy rationing requirements. These blackout holidays are being declared each month (often with little notice,) but they are not quite the candlelight-only blackouts that I had imagined. Businesses, etc., may not open, but we are still allowed to use as much energy as we want at home. According to the news, however, these semi-blackouts have been successful in lowering the Northeast’s energy usage to the maximum allowed.

The 20th of November is not an official holiday (yet!) but it is “Dia da Consciência Negra” (Black Awareness Day) so we have spent this week preparing a bunch of activities that will take place the week of the 20th. Among them are a fashion show / beauty contest to display African dress and costumes and affirm the beauty of the black race, as well as a “caminhada” (march/walk) that will take place in the Suburbana, where I’m living. I’ll tell you how these events go in my next letter!

Sincerely yours,

Sara

December 12, 2001

Dear ITEBA Network,

The city of Salvador is beautifully decorated with Christmas trees and lights and the end-of-year festivities have begun, but with the sun beating down harder and harder every day, it is hard to believe that the holiday season is really around the corner. And though the Christmas spirit of joy and giving is beginning to spread, so is the amount of violence that marks everyday life here in Salvador. When Marlene sat me down last week to have one of her motherly-like talks, she began with the usual, making sure I was happy and eating well, but then turned the focus of the conversation to my safety. "Summer and the holiday season have arrived," she said, "and that means that you have to be a lot more careful now. At this time of year there are always more assaults on the bus, so don't take the bus alone after 9 p.m.," she advised. "I'm not trying to scare you, and it's not just because you're a foreigner; it's dangerous for us Brazilians as well – this is just another part of the Brazilian reality." I knew that Salvador, like most big cities, is not crime-free, but the meaning of that didn't hit me personally until about two weeks ago. While walking along the sidewalk, on the way from my morning Portuguese class at the Federal University to ITEBA (I decided not to take the bus because it was an absolutely beautiful day,) I had my necklace ripped off my neck by two young men about my age. It all happened remarkably quickly and nothing was hurt except for my feelings, but the incident has been on my mind quite a bit since it happened. As the picture in my head of the two black men who aggressively yanked the necklace from me, a young, white (and therefore, privileged,) woman, keeps recurring, I try to focus on a bigger picture: the structure of racism and oppression that those men's violent act that they committed was clearly a reaction to the larger institutional violence that they experience every day, and though that does not make it forgivable or less hurtful, it makes it a little more understandable. But understanding where the violence comes from doesn't make experiencing it any easier. The day after my necklace was taken, Georgina, one of my close friends here, came to ITEBA in tears. She had just received the news that her 21 year old nephew had been murdered. I didn't know him, but I knew his sister – we had just gone to see her dance in a spectacular performance the week before. Because Georgina lives in

Salvador's suburbana, (just a block away from where I'm living,) the first question that many people asked when they found out what had happened was whether or not her nephew was involved in drugs. Hearing an affirmative answer would make the fact of his death a little easier for them, but, unfortunately he was involved in drugs. I can't believe how many times she was asked that same question over the course of the week. There is a strong stigma – another type of violence – associated with living in the suburbana. People automatically assume that, because most of the people who live there are poor and black, they are also involved in drugs and crime. In other words, they take the population of the suburbana to be marginal when, in fact, they are marginalized. As I write this, it is hard to hide my feelings of anger, sadness and frustration. Yet, I am thankful that I have become a member of the ITEBA community, a group that is walking alongside the marginalized members of society. A group that, by contributing to the construction of an all-inclusive society, is looking for peace and justice in the midst of all this violence. In a class presentation last week, Eduardo, one of my classmates whose son was assassinated because he refused to be articulated and moving explanation of the role that ITEBA plays in his ongoing struggle to end this kind of violence. Eduardo is here, he told us, not so much for religious insight, but for arguments to help in his fight for a just Brazil, a Brazil free of racism and other forms of discrimination. ITEBA is providing its students and community members with the critical academic tools to understand how Salvador's citizens are both victims and agents of violence. The very day of Eduardo's presentation in our anthropology class, for example, we talked about the extraordinary power of the civil and military police over the poorer populations. Here in Salvador, the police are called upon to enforce, often violently, the apartheid-like codes that seek to keep the poor and the black "in their proper place." Race and race hatred have emerged today as popular discourses that justify violent and illegal police actions in poorer communities like the persecution, which is what Eduardo's son was a victim of, is directed at a specific class and shade of resident. As the class discussion went on, I thought about the extreme importance of the march I participated in on the 20th of November, the National Day of Black Consciousness, and what ITEBA's participation in the march meant. One that day, I walked (or perhaps I should say danced –it's impossible not to dance along to Ilé Aiyé's contagious rhythms!) alongside my classmates, colleagues and professors, and joined in their chants, calling out for an end to racism,

oppression, police violence, and other forms of discrimination. I remember looking around the huge crowd at one point and noticing that I was the only white person within eyesight. I suddenly became very conscious of my own whiteness and, feeling

guilty about the privilege that comes along with it, wondered for a second whether or not I belonged there. But at that moment Jací o the group and taught me a new dance move.

It took me a couple counts to catch on, but in the time it took me to pick up the step, I was able to stop thinking about my differences and focus on the ways in which I have become accepted as a member of their/our collective struggle and how empowering that has been. The whole student body of ITEBA gathered on Tuesday night, together with the staff and faculty, for the end-of-year closing ceremony (and birthday party – ITEBA turned 15 on December 10th!) Creuza Oliveira, an active member of the United Black Movement, and Rev. Richard Shaull, a prominent theologian from Bryn Mawr, gave a dynamic talks on the subject of religious intolerance. Oliveira reported on her experience at the Conference against racism in South Africa, and Shaull spoke on the subject of how to respond, as a Christian, to the terrorist attacks (which, coincidentally, happened three months ago – to the day – of his talk.) Though ferent, both Oliveira and Shaull expressed a strong desire to overcome all the barriers that divide us on our path to justice and equality. We ended the evening with two songs: “Então bom natal,” (the Portuguese version of “Happy Christmas/War is Over,” by John Lennon and Yoko Ono,) wishing a Happy Christmas and peace in the New Year to all, and “Momento Novo,” a hymn inviting everyone to join in a circle and walk together because each of us is very important. Extremely relevant and uplifting messages with which to end a difficult month. I too affirm that you are all important, thank you for your solidarity with ITEBA, and wish you all a Happy Christmas and a year full of peace!

Sara

January 11, 2002

Dear ITEBA Network,

My mom, stepdad and brother spent the holidays with me, and though the time they spent here seemed short, I am still glowing from the wonderful moments we shared, basking in each other's company and the warm tropical sun. Among celebrations at friends' houses, Christmas and New Year's concerts, and trips to the beach, we also made it to Quilombo Zeferina and Valerio Silva, the Mutirão I work sites. There my family got to see first-hand the incredible progress from just a year and a half ago.

It took us a couple of tries to reach Pirajá by bus, but once we arrived, our trip to Zeferina went fabulously. Fabricio greeted us at the bus stop and led us to Quilombo Zeferina's new location. The new house is just down the hill from the previous one, and is unfortunately much smaller and hence, inadequate for many of the activities that used to be conducted, such as the capoeira classes. The house, however, was easy to pick out. There were tons of kids crowding the entrance, eager to participate in the Christmas celebration that was going on inside. The kids recognized my family and asked about other Mutirão I participants whom they still remember quite vividly. It was my first time meeting them, and it became immediately clear why everyone had talked so much about the Zeferina kids upon their return to the States last year. Mona Lisa's bright smile and twinkly eyes, Fabricio's calm and kind manner, and Jamila's bubbling energy all stole my heart right away. In contrast to our modern American gift-fest, the kids received little plastic toys and soccer balls that didn't look like they were going to last much past the holidays. They were nonetheless overjoyed, and held them like most cherished possessions. After the Christmas gift-giving, they led us to admire the retaining wall, started during Mutirão I, which is now complete and about 10' high. The construction of the actual community center should commence next Spring, so it looks like there will be plenty of work for the Mutirão II group to do in July.

The construction of the Valerio Silva church has come a long way since Mutirão I. The sanctuary is complete, and the upstairs has been turned into a sewing classroom. They have about 8 sewing machines and classes twice

weekly taught by the sister of Dagoberto, Valerio Silva's minister. Quite a different scene from the pictures I saw of that room while the construction was underway! Next to the sewing classroom is space for a new kitchen. The old kitchen next to the church will be demolished, and during Mutirão II, the Valerio Silva group will help construct a small medical center in the adjoining yard.

ITEBA is now open again, and although classes are not in session, I am back at work. Many students have been coming in to pre-register for next semester's classes, which are scheduled to begin after Carnival. We are preparing for the summer course/retreat that is run every year by YAMI, ITEBA's women's group. This year, Sandra and Silvia, members of YAMI and ITEBA professors, will be facilitating. They are back from São Paulo for the holidays, where they are studying for their Master's Degrees. As I write, Sandra and Silvia are in the other room preparing their presentations, so I was able to get a sneak preview of the course content. The theme looks very interesting – we will be learning about Body and Religion from the perspective of Race, Class and Gender. The course is less than a week away and we still have a lot of preparation work to do, but after receiving news of a potential police strike last night, Marlene sent everyone home early.

As we walked out of ITEBA to the bus stop, we passed police wearing ski masks, masks that reminded me of the Zapatistas in Mexico. Unlike the Zapatistas though, these police held handguns with their fingers on the triggers. The atmosphere felt stilted, and people were unusually quick to catch their buses home (if the police strike, the bus drivers stop working as well because they become targets of assaults, etc.) When we finally got on the bus, I was able to read the pamphlet that one of the masked officers had put in my hand. I asked Georgina for an explanation of what exactly was happening. The heading of the pamphlet read, "Governor César Borges leaves the city security-less. It's better not to leave your house." Apparently, there was a huge police strike last July, which lasted for a couple weeks and basically paralyzed the city. The strike occurred in big cities all over Brazil, but I've been told the chaos reached such an extent in Salvador that the city government brought in military soldiers to "calm" things down. In fact, for some people these soldiers caused more fear, not less.

According to the police, the government has not only refused to reinstate a dialogue, but it has reneged on the agreement ending last July's strike. The police forces have been threatening to strike during Carnival, when the city is full of tourists – people who the government does not want to disappoint, for it does not want to export a “bad” image of Brazil – but, for better or for worse, the strike may come upon us a bit sooner.

Strikes, among government workers in particular, are far from an uncommon occurrence. The Federal University (UFBA) strike that lasted over 3 months just ended at the end of December. The staff and faculty of the University, who haven't received a pay increase in over 7 years, are working against a large movement to privatize the University. The overwhelming number of strikes is emblematic of a larger Brazilian dilemma: a failed economic development model that has widened the gulf between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” For all the proliferation of high-rise apartments, new cars and factory development, a vast proportion of the population has been relegated to intractable poverty.

Perhaps because Brazil is one of the most economically and politically polarized countries in the world, the police strike is particularly complex. When we turned on the news this morning to hear strike updates, a news reporter was interviewing people with relatives who have “disappeared”, giving them a chance to show pictures and explain where they have last been seen. This led me to think about the many disappearances, tortures and deaths of “subversives” for which the military police were heavily implicated throughout Brazilian military rule (1964-1985). Though the process of democratization has been fairly rapid since the end of the dictatorship, it has yet to check the extraordinary power of the civil and military police over the poorer populations. An image that I have not been able to erase from my mind's eye is one my family and I saw on our way to a Christmas Day lunch with my “Brazilian family” in Coutos. Next to a highway off-ramp, three men were being held at gunpoint by twice as many police officers. “Robbers,” our taxi driver explained as he pointed out the scene to us. He also pointed out a couple that was walking along the street towards the police officers, and commented on the danger that the couple was in. My family and I exchanged worried looks and agreed that the “robbers” were probably in more danger than the couple.

At the end of this month I am traveling to Porto Alegre, a city in the south of Brazil, to participate in the 2nd World Social Forum. The first Forum took place last year, also in Porto Alegre. My godmother, who lives in Argentina, is steering a committee that will focus on international debt. She asked me if I would volunteer as a translator, and I jumped at the opportunity. My uncle John will also be attending from Northern California. I can only hope that I will keep straight the three languages I will be translating and not invent my own version of span-tug-lish!

With great expectations for Mutirão II, I wish you all the best for the New Year!

Sara

February 13, 2002

Dear ITEBA Network,

What a summer this has been! Less than four months after the summer I spent in New York City I am enjoying another summer, an advantage of venturing from one hemisphere to another. It has also been busy, full of excitement and reward. In the last month, I have: 1) participated in the summer theology course for women that YAMI (the vibrant ITEBA women's group) puts together every year, and 2) traveled to Porto Alegre for the World Social Forum, and 3) danced and sang (tone-deaf without inhibition!) my heart and lungs out during Salvador's world-famous Carnival. I could write pages about each event, but I'll try to keep it concise.

The summer course, "Women Doing Theology," took place on a lovely ranch in Cachoeira in the middle of January and was so beautiful – on a variety of levels – that I was often moved to the point of tears. The first tears came during Marlene's (academic director of ITEBA and one of the founders of YAMI) welcome and introductory remarks. She explained that the first course was held in 1993, with my grandma June's help, when they recognized a need for theological reflection on their socio-cultural roots (Northeastern Brazilian, black, indigenous, poor, female) and religious reality. Several dreams were articulated during that first course. Marlene presented Silvia, this year's course leader, as the realization of one of those dreams.

Sandra and Sílvia, both ITEBA professors and members of YAMI who have been in São Paulo working on their Master's Degrees (but eager to bring the skills they acquire there back to ITEBA when they finish,) came home to Salvador for the summer to lead the course. Sílvia is a Presbyterian Minister and Sandra practices Candomblé (the Afro-Brazilian religion that developed in Salvador and the Recôncavo under the specific conditions of slavery.) Together, they were a truly dynamic duo.

All of the presenters and participants had their own individual histories, and all were descendants of African slaves and indigenous peoples. As I watched the fire in Sandra's eyes and listened to the passion in Sílvia's voice, I was overwhelmed by the beauty and the power of both the women and the work

they are doing. We examined a variety of myths and ideologies, deconstructing those that suppressed them (and are still often taught/socialized to believe are of the devil), and celebrating those that empowered and continue to empower them.

A few days after the summer course, I flew down to Porto Alegre (in southern Brazil,) for the World Social Forum. My friends here in Salvador warned me that I was going to “another Brazil,” and were they ever right! My idea of Brazil is based primarily on my experience in Salvador, and in Porto Alegre I felt as though I had arrived in a different country. And that was before the other 50,000 participants from over 100 countries descended upon the city! The most obvious difference between Salvador and Porto Alegre is the people. The southerners are mainly of German and Italian ancestry, a stark contrast to Salvador, where 80% of the population is of African descent. The other big difference is the unemployment rates – Salvador has the highest unemployment rate in Brazil – 26%, whereas Porto Alegre has the nation’s lowest – 15.1% (still, however, nothing to brag about.) Street kids are not abundant like in Salvador, and even though I drove around the city quite a bit, I didn’t drive by any favelas (slums). Unlike most of Brazil’s cities, Porto Alegre has been governed by the Worker’s Party since the 1980’s. As far as I understand, this is a big reason why the forum is held in Porto Alegre – because this way, it receives government support. It’s strange, because I’m just not used to having government as an ally when working with NGO’s and activist organizations!

This year, the forum united more than 50,000 academics, students, political activists and organizers – a big increase from the number that gathered together for the first World Social Forum, held there last year. The forum was organized in protest of the economic policies being discussed and promoted at the World Economic Forum in NYC. Because of the great diversity of groups and members present, the agendas and ideas discussed were varied and ranged from human rights to agrarian land reform to external debt.

There was much anti-U.S. sentiment, but people at the forum were good at distinguishing North Americans from the U.S. government, and although the participants from the North were fairly sparse, there was a strong emphasis on bringing together the popular forces of the North and South in order to

develop constructive economic alternatives, as well as to defend the fundamental human rights of the world's population.

I worked with the group Jubilee South, an international campaign/union of countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa that confronts the causes of the debt problem and promotes lasting alternatives of economic, social and ecological justice. My godmother, Beverly Keene, is one of the powerhouses behind the campaign, and it was she who invited me down to help out with translations and preparations.

Beverly lives and works in Argentina, whose current economic crisis is strongly linked to debt issues, so it seemed natural for Jubilee South to organize the International People's Tribunal on External Debt. This event saw representatives from all over Latin America, Asia and Africa give personal testimonies and powerful illustrations of the damaging nature, dynamics and consequences of debt domination. Though it seemed at first hard to connect the AIDS crisis in Africa to ecological destruction in Ecuador, it became clear by the end how tightly linked the two are to debt domination. These are but two of the many thousands of groups, sectors and countries whose human rights suffer as a result of debt domination.

It was easy to get discouraged and feel cynical at times, difficult to accept that the very North American policies I had been taught to believe were created to promote justice and equality, were in reality doing the opposite. At the same time, there was so much enthusiasm in the air and in the articulate words of the participants that I am still feeling hopeful that another world, full of inclusion rather than exclusion, a world in which wealth and power are more fairly distributed, is indeed possible. After reading the coverage of the World Economic Forum in NYC, I am glad to see the similar conclusions reached there.

As I write this, the last trio eléctricos and afoxé bands are making their way down the street, and Salvador is marking the end of Carnival. Carnival is a six-day, high-energy celebration that draws ten of thousands of people to see the extreme talent and beauty of the city and to get lost in the wildness of the streets before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Although I had planned on going out every day and not missing one minute of the fun, I ended up finishing with the festival before the festival actually finished. I'm

so exhausted I'm taking this last day to catch up on some sleep before things go back to normal tomorrow.

This year, for the first time ever, the theme of Salvador's Carnival is "Mother Africa". African culture has a huge influence in this city, but this is the first time those roots are being officially recognized. Lourdinha, my housemate, is a member of the United Black Movement, and so I got to march in the opening procession of Carnival, joined by our friends, my uncle John and his girlfriend Kathryn, and 1,000 drums from the four main Afro-percussion blocos (Carnival percussion bands). These included Ilê Aiyê, the only all-black group, created at a time when blacks had no space within the Carnival processions. Before this group, blacks could only participate as security guards and street vendors. Ilê Aiyê is so beautiful that I got goose bumps when I saw them for the first time.

It was easy to get caught up in the festival of happiness and forgetting Brazil's "reality", but at one point I stepped out of our group to check out those behind us. There was the famous (and expensive!) bloco Nana Banana, with a large group of white people who had paid handily to dance safely inside the cords, while the people hired to hold the ropes of their safety were all black. I realized that even though the city had come a long way in declaring Africa the theme of Carnival, there was still a lot of work to be done.

Hoping the spirit of Carnival reaches you,  
Sara