
When Poor is Rich: Transformative Power of I-Thou Relationships in a Brazilian *Favela*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores an economically poor group of people who create relational wealth for themselves as they learn to live at the boundary of rich human contact. The community's story, and the stories of individuals within the community, demonstrate the ways that our conventional notions of wealth (i.e., money and societal power) can be shifted fundamentally to include concepts of wealth encompassing holistic well being. The ethnographic data for this study is analyzed using a Gestalt theory lens, drawing heavily upon Martin Buber's philosophy of I-It and I-Thou relationships. The author concludes by suggesting that this essential notion of fostering humanness holds potential for transformation and social change.

This ethnographic case study¹ considers the role of relationship and humanness in creating wealth through well-being in a socio-economically marginal-

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ized community. Though I am classically trained in business to conceptualize “wealth” in financial terms, I understand wealth linguistically as “that which brings value.” What is explored here, then, is the “value” created in individual lives through the transformative power of individuals who not only honor themselves and their life experience but also honor others as equals. Doing this work requires that individuals come to know themselves beyond the boundaries created by social projections and economic labels (e.g., “dangerous drug addict”, or “filthy poor people”). These relationships, grounded in profound and authentic humanness, can best be characterized by Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” interactions (Buber, 1923/1970). Traditional interactions for *favelados*, the people of Brazilian *favelas* (shanty towns), are hierarchical relationships (Buber’s “I-It” relationships), both with other classes of society and among themselves. The shift to I-Thou interactions brings value to the experience taking place *between* individuals, rather than locating wealth either in the individuals or in their possessions.

The emphasis on value found through relationship by honoring self, co-creating experience among people and dialogic creation of meaning, also undergirds Gestalt therapy theory (Yontef, 2002). Gestalt theorist Wulf (1998) explains: “[T]he fundamental fact of human existence is the human being with the human being, i.e., a person is always in relation to some-thing, or some-body. In Buber’s anthropology, communication is what makes human beings human beings. Genuine dialogue begins when the I enters into the presence of the Thou” (p. 89).

This study explores how one group of socio-economically marginalized people (e.g., “the poor”) creates holistic riches by cultivating that fundamental fact of fully being human, that I-Thou interaction. Its hypothesis is that transformation from a schema designed on projections, to a schema based on an experiential capacity and courage for human encounter, emerges from the experience of people being authentically in relationship with one another. This transformation includes valuing the humanness of others and learning from one another as everyone builds self respect, self esteem and, in the case of poverty, economic sustenance. The hypothesis will be explored through the stories the people in and of a community in northern Brazil related to me during field work carried out in 2001. By way of conclusion, an emergent theory of transformative cooperation will be posited.

Background

When I first visited the village Quatro Varas in 1994, the spirit and grace of the people starkly contrasted with the physical squalor of the neighboring *favelas*. I arrived in an air-conditioned tour bus as part of an American

delegation of business students wanting to learn about international trade, though from the sanitized perspective of banks and four-star hotels. Perhaps in attempt to thwart a particularly parochial chaperone, I immediately volunteered for “treatment” offered through the broken translation of a local healer. Three healers set to work on my various pressure points and charkas, as my chaperone worried on the other side of the drape about her personal liability if I contracted disease from the locals’ touch. With no shared language but that of a transcended tongue of the heart, the healers and I encountered each other in what Buber calls an “I-Thou” relationship, a reverent state of presence co-created with the other. I experienced an unconditional acceptance never imagined in my otherwise privileged life. These women, with every reason to resent me—from the vehicle in which I arrived, to the indignant chaperone, to the icon of privilege possibly projected onto a foreign business student—transformed our socio-economic inequities through their human touch. The healers conducted a particular current of love transcending not only socio-economic boundaries but also personal life injustices, backgrounds of drug abuse, violence, and other burdens. This was my first—my pivotal and my transformational—experience with the village Quatro Varas. From there, I became curious. My deep regard for their web of relationships and humanness only grew as I repeated contact with the community in 2001.

I studied Quatro Varas, a community, a project, and finally a metaphor, in order to understand the phenomenon of wealth as well-being. This phenomenon compels people to discard their individualistic and hierarchical power perspectives and change into interconnected human beings who honor themselves and others. Their rich existence is particularly intriguing when contrasted with the socio-economic poverty context of the relationships. Here, two middle-class brothers transcend social boundaries in ways that catalyze indigenous healing and strength among a local population excluded from even the hope of having economic or social parity with any proximal social group. I now understand the community² of Quatro Varas to manifest itself in three ways: the project grounds as a physical location, the programs held on and sponsored through the project grounds to reach people, and the rhythm of how work gets done by the community.

² The Portuguese word *comunidade* can be translated as either “the community” or “the commonwealth.” The distinction between these two words in English illustrates a distinction made in this paper. In interviews, we find that “the community” is used to refer to the project Quatro Varas, the people associated with Quatro Varas living in surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the commonwealth or entire class of poor people nationwide. This blended intention of both structured community and communal spirit of living mirrors Paul Goodman’s intention in his 1947 book, *Communitas*. By this time, Goodman’s thinking was already shaping that of Fritz and Laura Perls and of early Gestalt therapy theory. Victor Turner (1969), cultural anthropologist, later explores the experience of “*comunitas*” from individual existential, group cooperative, and social model perspectives in *The Ritual, Process Structure and Anti-Structure*.

The Project Quatro Varas

The project Quatro Varas is a therapeutic center in an urban *favela*, slum or shabby town, in one of the poorest regions of Brazil with the highest rate of illiteracy, the lowest level of income, and the greatest incidence of malnutrition and infant mortality nationwide (Roett, 1999, p. 228).³ The project is located on private land in Pirambu, the 250,000 person urban “periphery” on the north side of the city of Fortaleza in the northeastern Brazilian state of Ceará. Within Pirambu, different neighborhoods and *favelas* have evolved. One of the *favelas* was coincidentally near an abandoned manufacturing site. Years after the site was “baptized” a community by squatters, foreign grant support was secured to buy the property.⁴ This geographic area has come to be known as Quatro Varas. The site of Quatro Varas remains the abandoned manufacturing site, but the community now privately owns both the land and the buildings that have been converted into appropriate program spaces.

Quatro Varas emerged during the 1980s as a place of hope, with a community-based program of primary care therapies and skill learning. Blends of spiritual traditions actively guide the therapies and healings. The project is run as a collective where the proceeds any one individual generates are shared, half with the particular community project, and half to reward the person’s efforts. The project is open to a wide range of involvement, and its participants explain it structurally as a spider’s web of relationships touching approximately 12,000 people annually. As a primary figure in the community reveals in a story, “the spider is nothing without his web and we are nothing without community.” People hear about Quatro Varas through word of mouth and come because someone they know has been there. “People come here because of pain; they get here because of faith,” stated one visitor. The joining of people and stories creates a web of relationships central to the community’s identity and transformative potential.

The community’s web metaphor forms what I refer to as *relationality*. Relationality extends beyond simply relating to another; it also includes a state of humanness that co-exists with the experience of being *in* relationship. The interactions described here, and the stories related that others have shared, highlight two common conditions people tell me relationality heals: loneliness and social ostracism. A common experience for the people interviewed was discovering, “I am not alone.” To be “in relationship” in this context implies a

³ For an in-depth academic discussion of Brazilian *favelas* and the *favelados’* migration patterns in São Paulo, see Perlman (1976), *The Myth of Marginality*. For a journalistic story about the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, see Rambali (1993), *In the Cities and Jungles of Brazil*.

⁴ The purchase of property in Brazil increases the social standing of poor people among their peers according to Sarti (1995, p. 117). Many symbolic statements made by individuals and neighborhoods with regard to their relative self-worth appear in the stories told throughout this paper.

reciprocal way of being, whereby one seeks to learn from the other as well as to share respectfully parts of oneself with the other. By giving voice to their experiences, the people of this community come to find that they are not alone, that they do in fact belong.

The second term that emerges frequently is *humanism*, the condition of being fully human. In this context, humanism represents the potential for good and the realization of uncertainty, fallibility, or evil in every person. Relationality and humanism are at the center of the stories that people tell.

Method

During the field work for this study, I lived in the guest house called "the house of refuge," which was located on a hill at the ocean side of the project's common grounds. Anastasia White, another student of organizational behavior, and I engaged in participant observation and conducted interviews for eight days in the spring of 2001. We shared our observations and opinions nightly during our week-long visit, and we reflected upon our impressions, experiences, interpretations, and the meaning that could be made from the interpretations. In addition to conducting interviews, I gathered photographs and children's artwork and experienced healing practices. We maintained separate field notes, and we audio-taped our dialogues each evening. We acknowledged on arrival that our ability to hear people's stories about their experiences would be, in part, dependent upon our ability to gain acceptance into the community. No doubt, our fields of experience differed enormously each from the other and from those of the community members. Therefore, our primary liaison "presented" us to the community through stories of introduction and arranged for us to stay in the community itself.

Living in the community created opportunities to watch daily comings and goings of people, socialize informally by "hanging out" with community members, participate in massage therapy and healings, and consume local tonics for circumstantial ailments. We experienced an increasing level of trust from others as we participated in community activities and simply respected the rhythm of interactions.

Given that our life experiences shape our perceptions and interpretations in qualitative research (Schwartzman, 1993; Reinharz, 1992), it is necessary to outline our backgrounds here. I am a white, upper middle class American woman, raised in a liberal and socially active academic family in the Southern United States. This was my third trip to Brazil and my second visit to Quatro Varas. I am classically trained in business; I am also religiously and socially conditioned in the power of human experience. This convergence of fields not only exposes me to traditional economic and scientific thinking, but it also gives me a sense of identification with the twentieth-century German

philosophers who challenged the scientific establishment and influenced the Gestalt movement.

Anastasia White is a white South African raised in a black South African community during the end of apartheid and the birth of the new South Africa. She grew up as a freedom fighter for the anti-apartheid movement and subsequently trained as a peace-keeper and negotiator in identity-based conflicts. Coming from a religious family who continually gave everything they had to people who needed it more, she is comfortable with ambiguity, familiar with poverty, accustomed to multi-racial situations, and flexible where she does not understand the spoken language.⁵ This was her first trip to Brazil, which she found culturally similar to her home country.

Our open-ended interviews, anchored in appreciation for positive aspects of the individual and the collective whole (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 2000), were conducted in English and Portuguese in the presence of an interpreter.⁶ The interviews themselves were designed to make stories surface about the ties that bind individuals to the project of Quatro Varas. Because storytelling is common in the therapeutic methods of many programs within the project, it is a familiar way of interacting for the people. After returning to the USA, I followed Strauss & Corbin's (1998) grounded theory analytical approach to the identification of themes and concepts. A prevalence of relationality and humanness through personal transformation emerged inductively as the dominant contributor to the creation of wealth through well-being.

Quatro Varas and Its People

Quatro Varas translates into English as "four canes" or "four sticks." *From the Sertão to the Favela*, a book researched, written, and illustrated by the children of the village as a therapeutic project to strengthen their identity by honoring their field of heritage, tells the story of these migrant people's arrival in Fortaleza. The book begins with a description of the proud people's agricultural heritage prior to seasons of drought that had forced outward migration:

⁵ South Africa has 11 official languages and 22 commonly spoken languages; however it is rare for any one South African to speak all the languages. It is common, on the other hand, for two or more people to have a conversational interaction or a non-verbal interaction in which the parties do not speak the same language. Therefore, a cultural familiarity exists in situations where communication beyond language is required.

⁶ All interviews were audio taped. Interviews conducted in Portuguese were translated into English, including interviews conducted with an interpreter present. Two translators were tested, and their work was validated for accuracy by an independent Brazilian familiar with the approach and methodology used for the study. One translator was selected to render all interviews.

After an exhausting journey, the migrants finally reach the city in pursuit of their dreams. Straight away they find out that far from solving the problem, they are about to face a whole range of much more dramatic difficulties. These include finding shelter, putting up with the stench of the sewers and the uncovered rubbish heaps, having to endure constant noise and live in confined spaces, and coping with disease as well as all the violence and aggression that are a feature of life in the *favelas*. The city's indifference to so much suffering induces feelings of violence against life since their right to belong to society goes unrecognized [*From the Sertão*, p. 65].

As they migrate to the city and become its urban poor, these people undergo an identity shift: their initial identity forged by land and agriculture becomes conditioned by isolation and domination. Secondly, some of these migrants organize themselves into what evolves into Quatro Varas. The children's book tells of repeated police attacks and the migrants' collective resistance. It then recounts an ancient legend that goes as follows. Having a presentiment of his death, a very poor man summoned his four children and said: "I am going to die and I don't have any material goods to bequeath as a legacy. However, I am going to leave you a very important message." He then told each of them to bring a stick. When they did so, he broke each stick individually and sent his sons for more sticks. When they each returned, the old man put the sticks together and ordered each of his children to break them. Nobody could do so when all the four sticks were together. "All right, this is my message: while they are joined together, no one can destroy them" (*From the Sertão*, p. 149). At a people's meeting, the occupied *favela* began to be called "Community of Quatro Varas" (*From the Sertão*, p. 149), a metaphor that expresses the power of choosing to exist in interdependent relationship with others.

Today, the name "Projecto 4 Varas" is proudly painted on a double width car gate around the corner of a washed out, yet active, dirt street. The boundary to this community land is symbolic; a doorway next to the car-gate is always open, and fencing marks only three of four sides of the property. The project grounds are located along the ocean in the heart of the Pirambu *favela*. The project comprises buildings for various activities, gardens, and a large covered space for community meetings. The grounds feel energetically peaceful and restorative in the midst of urban density; yet, the Brazilian heat and humidity are oppressive and exhausting. Self-esteem, identity, and economic possibilities are co-created around the individuals, the eight programs run from the project grounds, and the collective of relationships now spanning middle class and people of the *favela*. The stories of some of these people and their programs provide examples of these relationships.

Airton Barrato—A Lawyer in the Favelas

Airton Barrato is a central individual who creates relationships in Quatro Varas. He grew up in the Sertão in a family of ten children, with a deep regard for human beings. Airton's transformation occurred early in the life of the community. Once he found a wallet in a trash pile. He was elated, until his mother scolded him for his delight by saying, "for you to have found it, someone else must have lost it." He describes his own childhood resentment toward workers who begged for food, because when his parents consistently invited waywards into their home, Airton's portion of dinner became smaller. Interestingly though, Airton's own adolescent entitlement shifted into a horizontal, relational way of being-in-the-world as he saw injustices being done, and as he came to know the people of the *favela* as individuals. Today, he lives in the *favela* as a lawyer and runs a near-free human rights legal aid project in Quatro Varas. He shares a small office with two others in a second-hand furniture and electronics warehouse, which supplies thrift shops throughout Pirambu.

His family migrated to Pirambu when his father's job changed during the drought. Airton tells stories of being embarrassed by his family's economic limits when they moved to the city; he thought "the favela was the place of poor and dead people." His projection shifted from that of "those poor people" into a "thou" paradigm, which he now articulates by asking, "What makes me different from those children? These adults? Why should I be different?" Two stories exemplify how he integrates his experiences with honoring self and other as equals, i.e., relationality through humanness.

In the first, Airton was exploring career possibilities through school. One day, while waiting for a bus, he watched as a boy sniffed glue from a paper bag. A policeman rubbed the boy's face in the bag. The boy screamed. A street bum, as Airton describes him, asked the policemen why they did that, and the police, in turn arrested the bum for interfering with police work. Airton went to the police station as an eye-witness for both the boy and the bum but was told: "You go away or you're going to jail also." Airton said he learned that "it's good to see, hear, and shut up"; the world was the way it was because people did not want to interfere. He said that he felt like a coward for having left. He asked, "How am I going to change the world if I'm uncomfortable to come forward? Had I been a lawyer and had I known the law, I would have had more power to help the two of them, the kid and the man." From a relational perspective, Airton was identifying with part of an alienated population oppressed by societal contempt for I-It relationships. His career goal was not so much to become a lawyer as to find a career that allowed him to engage in human relationships, and so move toward a Gestalt wholeness leading to social change.

In the second story, Airton had befriended Louisa, a young woman living in a shanty in the *favela* with two younger brothers and no parents. When he could, Airton gave Louisa or the boys spare change and bits of food. Louisa sadly describes the day when Airton passed by saying, "I have nothing to give you." She called out to assure him that it was his friendship they wanted, not his money. Not long thereafter, Louisa developed tuberculosis. Airton took her to the hospital. While they waited, two wealthy women arrived and jumped the line. They expressed a devaluing pity for Louisa, alleging that she had gotten tuberculosis in the streets and through working with straw. They voiced how hard it was for them to find servants and, at the same time, emphasized what good lives servants have—a roof over their head and food to eat. Airton exploded in anger: "I think she ought to die thin instead of fat and a slave to you people! You just want slaves. They work very hard for you...they're not treated like people...so I prefer that she die in the street." The wealthy woman promptly hit Airton with her handbag in response to his perceived insolence.

Airton was discovering through exchanges like these that how he related to poor people mattered more than what he or anyone else could give them. The rigid identity boundary that Airton had originally felt was now becoming invisible to him. He was not "helping" people across a hierarchical boundary out of piousness or pity, but rather he was being transformed as much as he was transforming others relationally.

Airton's presence in Quatro Varas symbolically, and through services provided, creates I-Thou wealth. The mainstream opinion that wealthy people are entitled to privileges because of the control that money brings kept anyone other than Airton from confronting the wealthy woman who ignored the people in the hospital line because they were of lower socio-economic status. Similarly, the social normalness of police abusing poor people who have no access to legal protection keeps others from standing up for those being abused. The collective reinforcement of social norms in culture is precisely what makes cultural change so difficult; it explains why social change through transformative cooperation requires authenticity, courage, and time. Airton has the option to leave the project by virtue of his education, but he chooses to stay for the wealth of relationality and humanness.

Adalberto Barrato—A Psychiatrist

Adalberto Barreto, Airton's brother, is a psychiatrist trained also in religion and medical anthropology. He treated some *favelados* free for his lawyer-brother early on and soon found he needed to go to Quatro Varas, where as many as 30 to 70 people would show up for help at the same time. "I'm not here to resolve your problems," he explained. "I come here to resolve *my*

problems." Adalberto was positioning himself with the community, not as a medical expert with I-It encounters over patients but rather in a horizontal relationship, where he too genuinely was seeking help. He tells the following story:

I need you...I am here ill also. People say, "Why? What kind of illness? You are here to cure [my] Universitarian alienation." Do you are content with the physicians, the doctors you have? "No, because they don't talk with us, they don't touch the hand, they are just prescribing drugs, they don't talk with us." Okay, and so [I] come here to learn to be a good physician.

This horizontal relationality aligns with Marianne Gronemeyer's (1992) notion of "helping." Gronemeyer explores the oppressive power relationship between haves and have-nots through the haves' attempt to "help" others "less fortunate," thus objectifying the have-nots. The subtle shift Gronemeyer advocates for is attitudinal; it calls for treating others with dignity and regard for their humanity. It requires revisiting our beliefs about what support entails. Adalberto did not come to the "poor" people and try to "help" or fix them. Instead, he cultivated his own ability to be in co-created relationships.

Community Therapy—A Foundational Program of Quatro Varas

"People who have had their lives transformed by belonging to the community in their turn invite others to join their group," explained Adalberto. The premise of community therapy, he went on to say, is that 80% of the psychosocial problems of the community can be resolved within the community by evoking the competence of the people. Therapy ground-rules exist, fostering the dialogic and relational process. The group collectively chooses the issue to be worked during a given session, everyone must speak only in "I" statements, and each person's experience is respected as valid. In fact, experience is seen as equal to medical opinion here, a perspective embedded with social status. By focusing their awareness on themselves both as experts and as people in need, community members foster authentic relationships (see Brown, 1980, regarding integration of conflicting personality aspects). Moreover, instead of functioning as a lawyer or a doctor and seeing their work as "helping" the other through the arrogance of a specialist's knowledge, Airton and Adalberto join the interdependent posture of relationality and humanness.

In parallel fashion to the Gestalt therapy movement's rebellion against traditional psychoanalysis, this practice is "firmly rooted in a basic belief in the power of human capabilities" (Yonteff, 1993, p. 6). As in Gestalt therapy, Adalberto "emphasized what people knew and what people could learn by

focusing their awareness" (Yontef, 1993, p. 7) in his systematically relational approach. This stance does not negate the power of education and expertise, something from which isolated populations like *favelados* are historically excluded (Blau, 2000). In fact, Adalberto seeks to build horizontal relationships systematically by identifying community members who have the potential to be trained as "community therapists" in an extension course at the local University, where Adalberto holds a faculty position. This effort transcends educational as well as socio-economic boundaries, resulting in the creation of community therapists capable of providing services in the larger Brazilian economy. In fact, the model has been so successful that it has been replicated in more than seventeen communities in Brazil. The leader of the Brazilian health department has recently invited community representatives to help the government learn how to provide better health care for Brazilians nationwide.

Casa de Cura—The Healing House

The Casa de Cura is a traditionally thatched hut on the ocean edge of the common grounds where people from many neighborhoods come. The women healers explain that the people of the community wove the bamboo canes with jute string to build the circular walls and then thatched the reed roof. The only non-permeable wall in the house is embedded with clay figurines of heads and body parts. The clay pieces are called "ex-votos" and represent an ancient healing practice of giving thanks to St. Francis, the patron saint of the people from the hinterlands. The ocean and the rain can be heard inside the house, and when there is a breeze, it too comes through. These structural elements keep the human experience grounded in nature and community, thereby honoring integration and wholeness.

Dona Francisca, now a healer, is a testament to the possibility created by I-Thou relationships. She arrived at the community desperate for help. Through the community therapy, and eventually through the massage certification program, Dona Francisca has now lived and worked in Quatro Varas for eight years. She recalls:

When I arrived, we had meetings under this tree and Adalberto practiced here. When I first arrived, I did not talk to him...just slept.... When I awoke, I looked at him and asked, "Are you a psychiatrist?" He answered, "Yes." I said, "What is your name?" He said, "Adalberto." I said, "I want to talk to you." He said, "Yes, you can talk to me." I was embarrassed to tell him all my story at first so only told him what was absolutely necessary... that there was no reason to live. I wanted to commit suicide.

There was a lot of unpleasant experiences in life, but [I] wanted him to treat me so I would get better. I was a housewife with kids. But, didn't want to live this life of anguish, sadness, and craziness. And he took me off all medication and gave me an adequate treatment.

All that is gone. I live the present. I'm cured and serve the people with lots of love and affection. I have lots of dedication to people and owe my health to...Adalberto. He treats many people, including my family. He is a very special person. He doesn't treat only with medicine. He treats your self-esteem. He did an amazing job with me. To me the most beautiful word that no one in my family ever said to me, was when Dr. Adalberto said, "Francisca, you are not alone."

Pharmacia—A Local Innovation for Health and Economy

An extension service of the local university, Federal University of Ceará, teaches about herbal plants and experiments with remedies. Adalberto brought the university pharmacist together with "root specialists" from the village, as well as with traditional indigenous healers now living in the *favela*. The knowledge shared and exchanged generated a cadre of women trained formally in making herbal remedies (tonics from plants grown on premises). The remedies have been carefully selected and analyzed to ensure safety and effectiveness. Locally grown in the common gardens, the ingredients in these remedies also have the advantage of creating jobs in the garden and in the lab, as well as of producing a product affordable to local residents.

Although Dona Ierina had a pre-existing interest in medicinal plants, she lacked self-esteem and opportunity. She now works in the pharmacy and shares her story of transformation. She tells it this way:

I really wanted to know what it was, Quatro Varas. So, I came with that.... I had been without earning any money and I was suffering a lot because of [my] divorce and surgery, so ... they invited me to come and teach crochet to the children through a program. And through this work, Dr. Adalberto, he got to know me even more. It had been some time since a person had left that had been doing that living pharmacy. And so he invited me. I said, "No, I don't have good health...." So on the third time when he invited me to come and work here in this project, I accepted, I came. And I said to him, "I'm going to give this experience one month...." And now I've been here almost nine years.

Art—A Program for Youth

The art therapy program started with the existing talent of young people

already in the *favela*. Adalberto tells of holding a special therapy session for young people who were victims of abuse, children of alcoholics, or on the street. Seventy children showed up at the first meeting. As Adalberto arrived, he noticed some young boys scribbling cartoons on trash; they crumpled up the drawings when they saw Adalberto—it was simply child’s play. Adalberto asked to see the cartoons; reluctantly the boys showed him what they had been doing. He thought the drawings were beautiful. Adalberto convinced the boys that there was value in their drawings, particularly if they were to draw on clean paper folded over such that someone might use the drawing as a note card. The boys began to produce hand-drawn cartoon cards, which Adalberto would take to medical conferences off-site and sell. Now, cards are also sold to visitors, researchers, and tourists who come to the community, as well as to the middle class clients of Thursday morning community therapy programs. Both the children’s internalized projections about their lack of ability, and the social circumstances isolating them further, had to be transcended in order for them to shift their own self-conception. By honoring their human potential and using his own socio-economic status, Adalberto created wealth, and then well-being, within the boys themselves.

Neves was one of the early adolescents drawing on the cards. Now he lives with his wife and children below the art house, still on the project grounds. His story illustrates both the power of being genuinely seen rather than merely objectified through projection; as well as transformation made possible through human encounter. He tells his story this way:

I stayed in the beginning because I didn’t have anything else to do. But what made me stay was that it was the first place that somebody said to me, “You are capable.” First time that somebody had said that I had the possibility to accomplish something to actually do something.... Here, nobody saw me as the son of an alcoholic, but as an artist, a drawer, a painter, and that’s what made me stay. And my function is to relay, demonstrate my experience to the others who arrive, the children.... There are people who stay six months and they go away.... What’s important is that while he is here, he becomes educated, understanding things, so that when he leaves, he doesn’t have to stay in the street doing drugs.

Neves played an active role in the children’s multi-year art and cultural history project resulting in the above-mentioned book, *From the Favela to the Sertão*. He explained that some French people had contracted for the book to be made, and that the result was profound for both the children and the community. He stated:

Here in Brazil, as in any other part of the world, the only thing that's valued is what comes from outside. People give privilege to what comes from the outside.... The stuff from here people don't really like a lot. And the French really enjoy Brazil...so they came up with this idea of making a book from here but they were going to sell it there...for us, it was a jump, a great achievement.

Faviana, a healer and pharmacist, also celebrated the transformative role of the book project when we interviewed her. She explained:

The day that they began the book, all of the kids, they studied hard and they worked hard and it was a big thing for them.... They launched it by taking it to the Cultural Center of Banco de Brasil.... It was a victory for the people that live here in the *favela*, to have your name in a book, this book, and it's published in two or three languages, and it's a chance for people to learn about another country or another culture. Without that, we were nothing. It gave us a chance to be something. I was so happy. I was very happy.

The children's artistic exploration of their heritage and identity began with deep regard for the child's identity and fosters a *thou* status within society.

Interpretation—Transformative Cooperation

A web of transformative cooperation is created through the journeys, the relationships, and the programs that are connected through what is denominated the Projecto Quatro Varas. The web extends through the links of interpersonal relationships emerging from unconditional and deep regard for other human beings. The web includes all the programs, anyone who researches there, touches lives or is touched by the lives of people or programs. In academic literature, the web is akin to a social network (Wellman & Frank, 2001) and relational wealth (Johnson, Smith, & Gambil, 2000).

Paradoxically, through awareness of their own humanity, these people transcend their poverty. It is precisely the base-ness of poverty that generates their holistic wealth. The web allows the members of this marginalized social class, who do not have access to a local economy, to live in and support themselves through relationship. Living "in relationship" implies a reciprocal way of being, living into the energy *between* individuals, seeking to learn from the other as well as to respectfully share parts of oneself with the other. By

giving voice to their experiences, the people of this community come to find that they are not alone, and that they do in fact belong in humanity.

The power of Quatro Varas is its ability to “provoke a break in a model which concentrates...power” in the hands of very few. In the existing dominant model, money and access to it equal power, which is culturally synonymous with success. In his community therapy model, Adalberto argues, “We change the passive individual object into an active, pattern of subjects.” In Gestalt thinking, this active pattern of subjects matters: “I make the difference that makes the difference” (Wulf, 1998, p. 85). Interdependences and respect for self and other equal success. With success, otherwise marginalized individuals become active community members who both honor others and honor themselves. From this shifted stance, enormous holistic wealth emerges because of the “psychical whole formed by [this] structuring of the perceptual field” (Wulf, 1998, p. 86).

Transformative cooperation, as experienced here, arises for these people as sequences of I-Thou experiences over time, particularly across identity boundaries. The experience has the potential to create a bond or a social link of a different significance than when it is formed within one’s proximal reference group. Each extension of self—both giving and receiving connection—seems to establish a link in a growing web, or social fabric, of relationship. Both individuals stress feeling the transformative experience of the trans-boundary connection as a shift from I-It relationships to I-Thou relationships. The shift generates an awareness that “you are not alone,” which in Quatro Varas makes the difference between identifying one’s worth or potential and one’s hopelessness. From a Gestalt perspective, Buber advocates shifting human consciousness in order to initiate social change (Doubrawa, 2000, p. 25). When this pattern of relationality that transcends boundaries in order to find mutual benefit for all parties is considered as an emergent theory, it suggests that the cumulative experience of increased links in a web or social fabric may enable transformative cooperation to occur at an entire societal level.

Implications and Conclusions

The anarchist roots of German existential philosophers who influenced Gestalt early on show up here. By authentic interaction, these subservient classes of society can indeed rise in their own humble and honorable esteem, co-creating the ability for response. The people and programs of Quatro Varas are transforming lives by seeding and cultivating respect and innovation. This is Gestalt practice functioning at a community and societal level. The work of Quatro Varas expands the interdependencies of the web. As the interdependencies and respect grow, the community’s success also grows. This

transformative rippling effect demonstrates Laura Perls' notion of Gestalt as a "therapy in society," of the shift in human consciousness as a means for creating social change (Doubrawa, p. 20).

The generative core of Quatro Varas is the reciprocity of and human engagement in the relationships that knit together the web of community. Through authentic human interaction the community builds, and self-esteem, self-worth, and pride in special gifts are generated. Through community, everyone knows, "I am not alone." The web's knit transcends socio-economic boundaries such that social ostracism, abuse and injustice made from fear, and individual loneliness are redesigned. Souls are caught as they fall, making healing encounters into a local economy, and a newly constructed local economy into a healing process.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian author and scholar of education who grew up poor during difficult times, portrays the historical context of land owners and workers in terms of oppressive power relationships of "haves" towards "have nots." Freire also argues that to transform the world is to humanize it (1973). The children authors, who could now be considered urban victims of their history, are indeed choosing to paint the landowner in compassionate terms to draw out positive capabilities and self respecting lessons from their own heritage.

This philosophical perspective emulates what Buber (1923/1970) explores as a movement from objectifying others in "I-It" relationships (landowner as oppressor, vertical dominance) to honoring the sacredness in all people and things, or what he calls "I-Thou" relationships (landowner as co-creator and one who empowers, horizontal collaboration). An "I-Thou" stance forms the foundation of the Gestalt paradigm. The Gestalt experience of meeting and being met at the boundary of contact, drawing on inherent wisdom of each individual's lived experience, and honoring "what is" as a basis for change are emblematic of the structured and organic self-esteem therapies of Quatro Varas. The resulting web symbolizes the organismic response of a community healing itself and others. From a social change perspective, this shift shapes current and future generations. Here, today's children learn about dignity, justice, and responsibility for reaching across potentially divisive boundaries in order to create honorable circumstances, rather than waiting for the larger national system to change and honor them.

The rhythm of the project is helping a community to step outside of the relentlessness of the culture of poverty, what Freire refers to as the "culture of silence" (Collins, 2001). Adalberto asks people through community meetings to step outside of the poor-mentality to join him in transcending the boundary created by projections and introjection. He asks people to take pride in their life-knowledge as a valued commodity. He asks people to identify with

their heritage, a time when they were valued as individuals and had a culture of pride. By so doing, he gets people to step outside of their objectification, boundaries that they have placed on themselves and that society has placed on them. The collaborative work moves them outside of being marginal in Brazilian society and into being pivotal in their own lives and in the lives of those around them. The “web” becomes the new referential society. As part of the web, people then come from a social place of importance and belonging and can identify with being *Brazilian*—with part of their identity—without being Brazilian *favelados*. In these ways, the rhythm of how work gets done has a fiery core.

Authentic relationship—reciprocally listening, learning and attending to—show up at the contact boundary, and acceptance of humanness—vulnerabilities, gifts, and emotion—builds value immeasurable in traditional ways. Our traditional notion of wealth as that which can be measured and economically leveraged must change. The depth and richness of the economically poor people of Quatro Varas illustrates the potential power of transformation available to all humanity, if only we would choose it. In this case, poor is very rich indeed.⁷

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