

The dignity of Manoel

Scholarly source:

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy (1992). *Death without weeping: The violence of everyday life in Brazil*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Meet Manoel

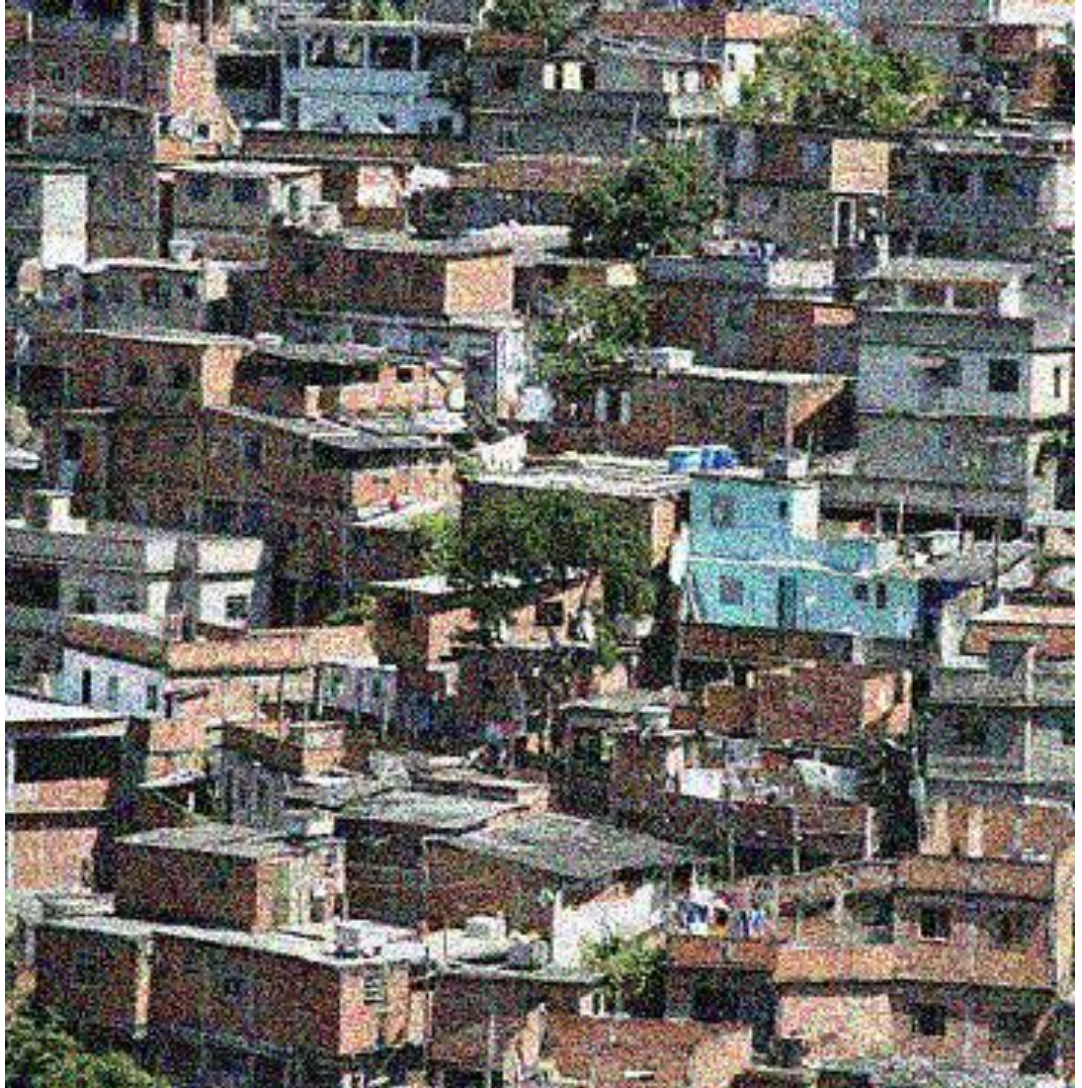
Manoel's full name was Manoel Eduardo Tavares Santos. He was fourteen-years-old in 1989 and living in Brazil.

Manoel was known by his family and neighbors as a young man of great dignity.

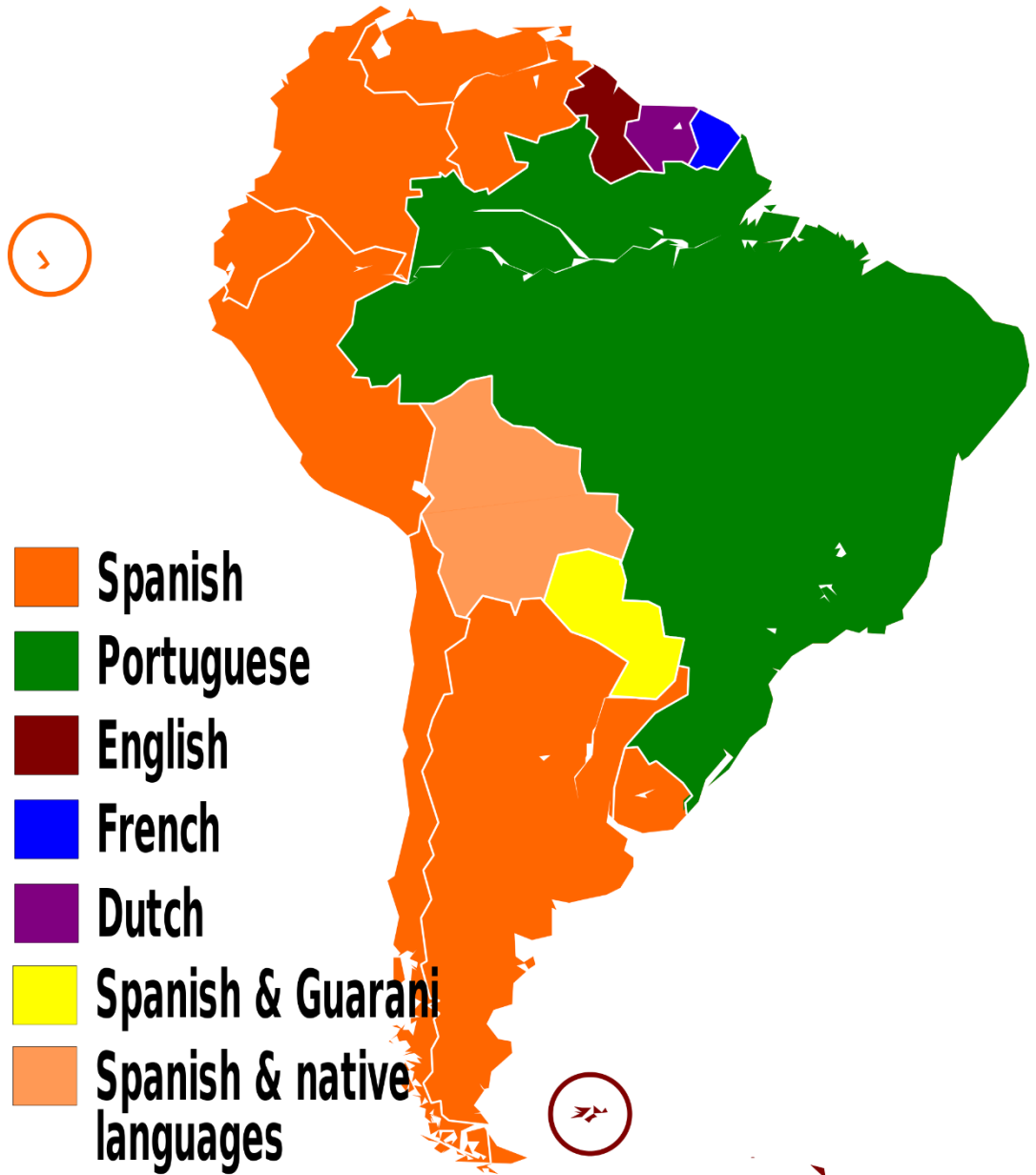


Manoel's world

Manoel lived with his seven younger siblings, mother, and grandparents in a *favela*, which was a poor section in Rio de Janeiro.



Manoel and his family spoke Portuguese because Brazil was ruled for a long time by Portugal. Most other South American countries were colonized by Spain, and those people spoke Spanish.



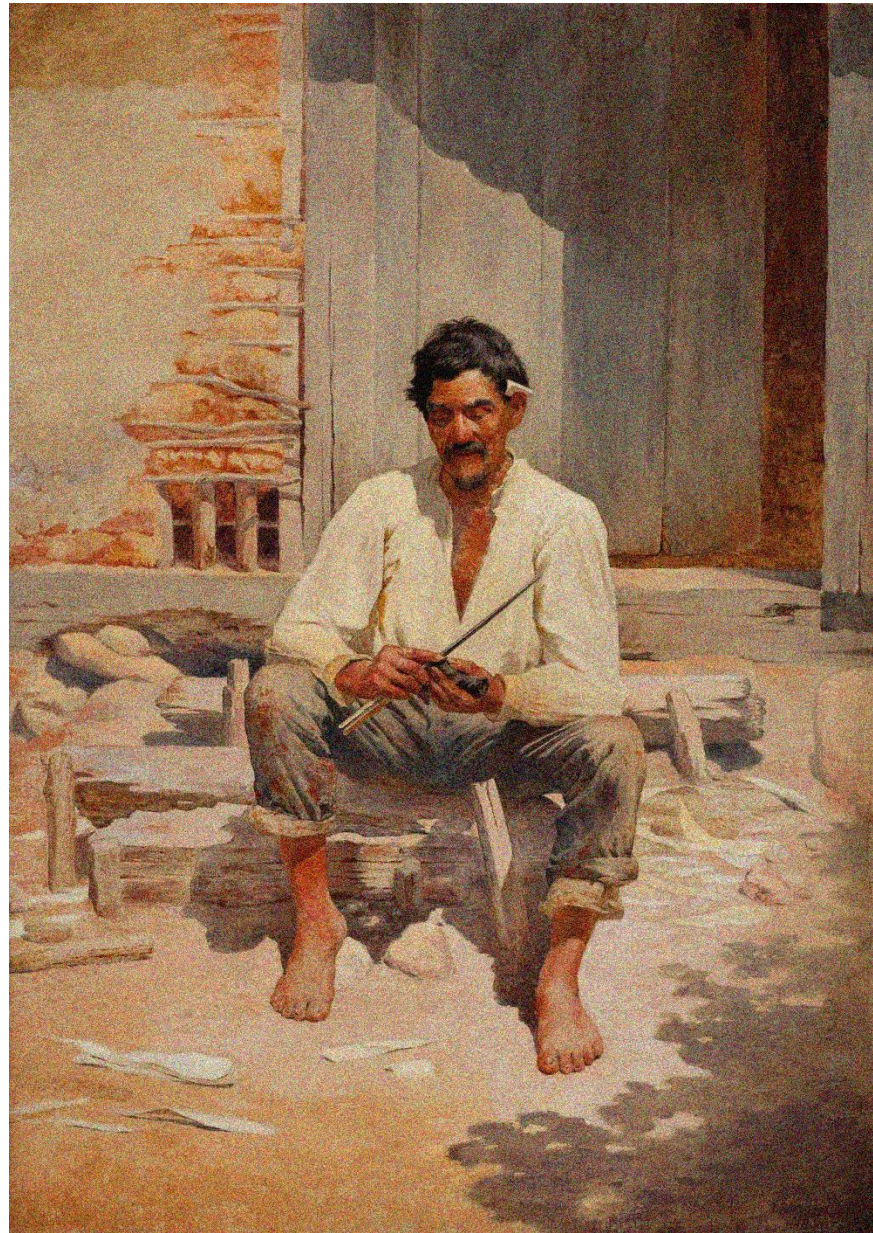
The Portuguese brought in African slaves in slave ships to Brazil, mainly to work the plantations. Manoel was the great grandchild of a slave couple who were freed in 1888.

Brazil was the last country in the western world to free its slaves.

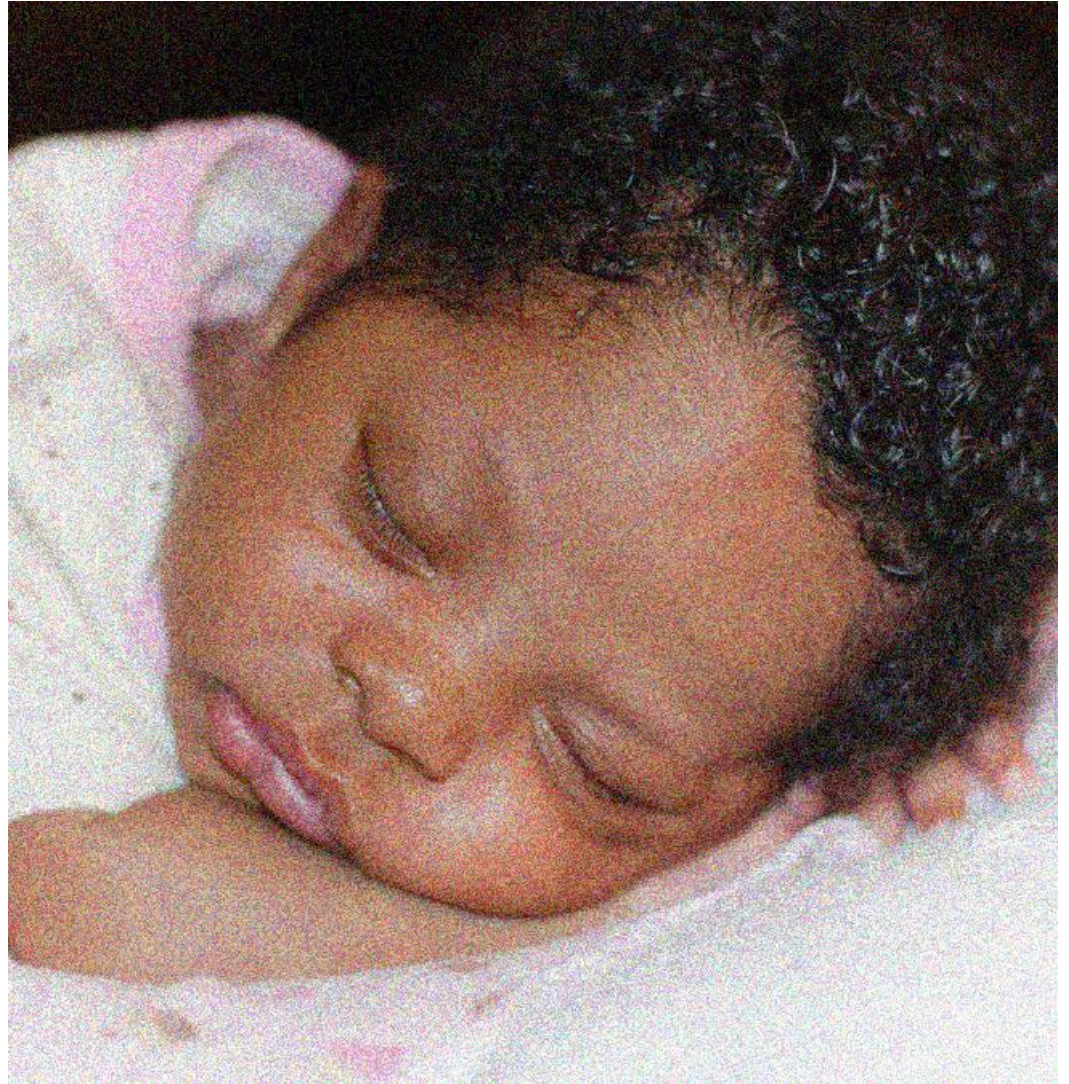


At first some of these slaves were able to sharecrop, which was farming a small piece of land owned by someone else in exchange for a portion of the crops.

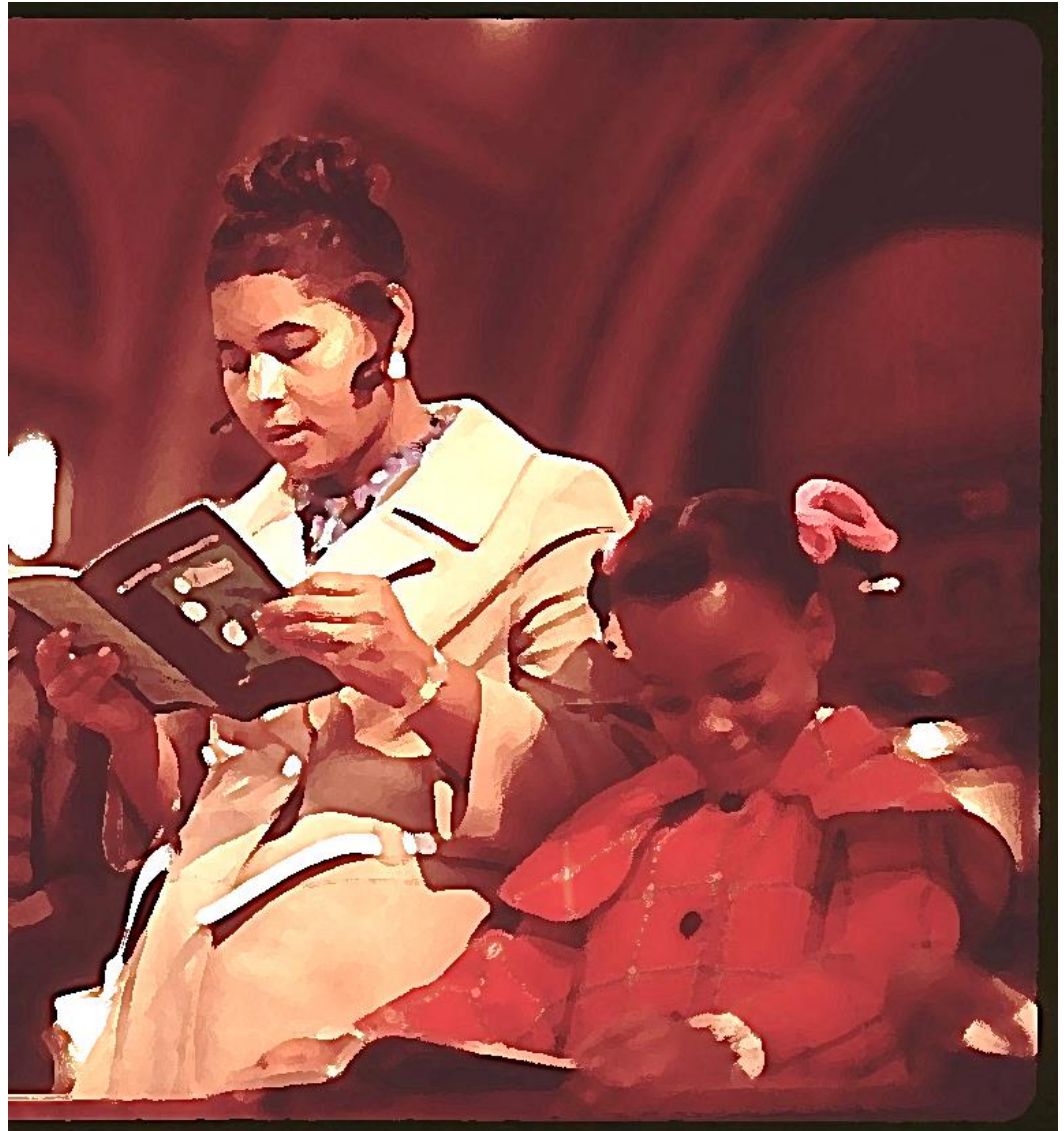
But in the middle of the twentieth century the landlords began to restrict what they could grow, and gradually most of these sharecroppers had to move to cities and work for wages. Here is where they built the shanty towns known as *favelas*.



Manoel's mother lost two babies before they were six months old. Like most people in the *favelas*, there was not much grief for the dead babies. That's because there was a belief in the *favela* that some infants were not meant to survive. For this reason, mothers and older siblings usually did not bond too closely with the infants at first. They waited to make sure that the child would survive.



Manoel was Catholic. The people of the *favelas* tended to be more strict in keeping many Catholic laws than the middle class people living in the center of the city. For this reason, and others, the residents of the *favelas* had many more children than the other Rio residents—even if many of them ended up dying as infants.



The shanties in Manoel's *favela* were made of materials the people could get easily. Manoel's house began with only a roof and walls. The family gradually added rooms, windows, a doorway, and at last—a porch.



Much of Manoel's free time as a young boy was spent constructing this home with his family members.

Manoel, as the oldest child, would inherit the home when his mother was gone.



Manoel's father died several years earlier from drinking bad water that had to be hauled in from places outside of the *favela*.



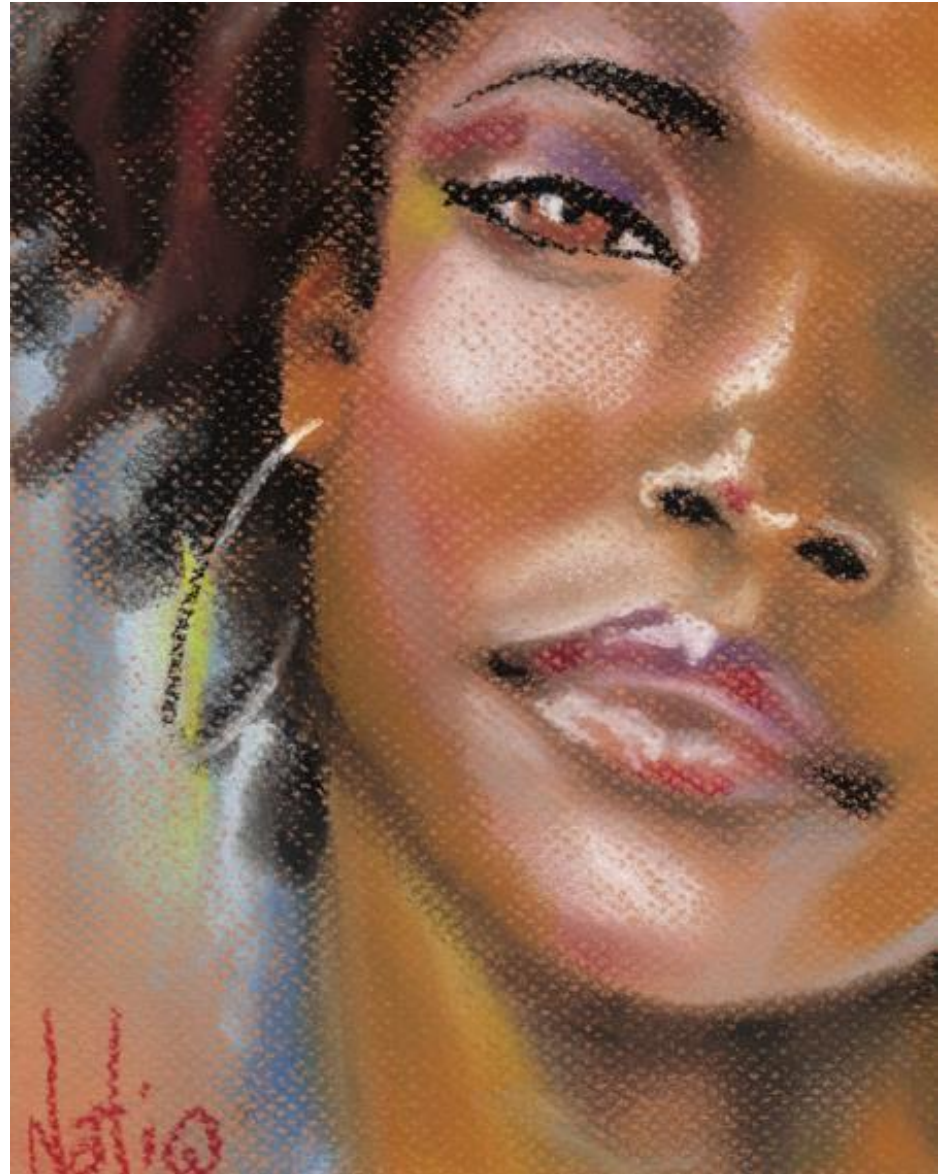
Besides his mother, Manoel had two grandparents that lived with them in the shanty. His grandfather was in poor health, but he sometimes worked the sugar plantations to help out. But this could only happen once in a while.



Fortunately, Manoel had an aunt with a working husband and she took in three of his brothers to ease the burden on his young and very beautiful mother.



His mother had a serious problem. In Brazil at that time, it was considered a shame for women to pick sugar cane on the plantations, but Manoel's mother had no choice. She had to do it or her family would go hungry.



The plantations were considered a man's domain. Manoel's mother had to put up with cat calls and insults as she worked.



Manoel was only fourteen but he wanted so badly to help his mother. His sisters, who were still at home, carried water buckets back and forth between wells and the sugar plantations. Manoel would pick weeds. But this only helped by making their mother more employable. The plantation owner refused to pay children under the age of sixteen for any work they did.



To further help out, Manoel found an empty patch of land and turned it into a garden to grow food for the family.

But Manoel remained unhappy. He hated to see his mother being ridiculed. But how could he keep his mother out of the fields and end her shame?



Manoel's solution

When he had free time, Manoel learned to play African drums from the older boys. He and his friends would also play soccer in the streets of the favela.



But another activity would prove fruitful. Manoel and the older boys would collect rubble and pretend to be building their own shanty. Over the years, they had collected a huge amount of cans and junk.



Then one day an American investor came to Rio. He opened a recycling factory near Manoel's favela.

Alas, there was a way to make money!



Manoel and his older friends began to take in their heaps of junk. The recycling plant told them which pieces of junk they would accept and gave them plastic bins to package the items.



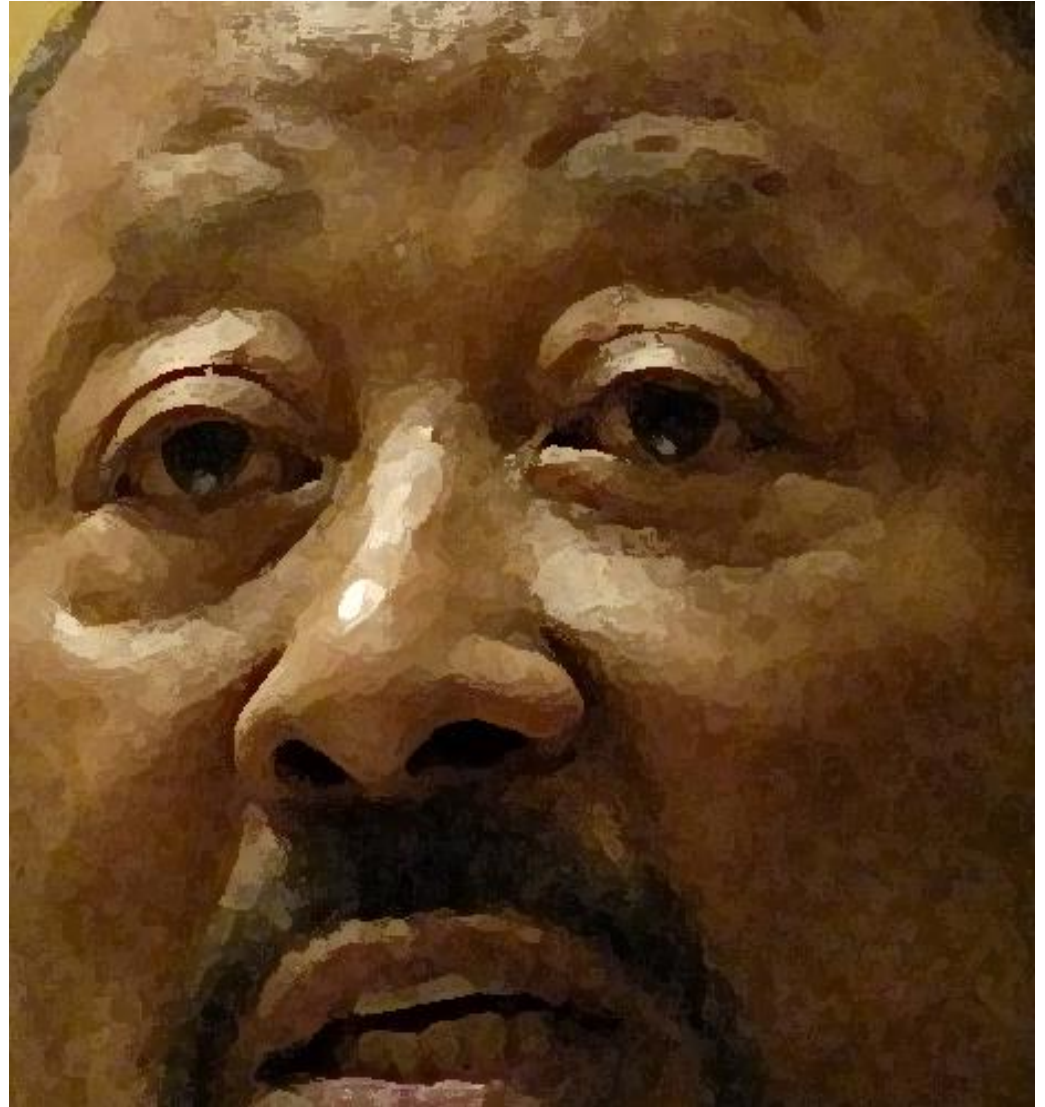
But the other boys were old enough to get wage labor and didn't need to support their mothers. So they kindly agreed to leave the junk collection go to Manoel.



Manoel was so thrilled. He could bring back dignity to the family. His mother would not have to suffer working at the sugar plantation.

He told his grandfather of his new job.

The grandfather was so pleased. "But Manoel," he suggested. "Why don't you wait to tell your mother of this news next week when Carnaval starts. That way she will have a double celebration."



Manoel took his grandfather's advice. He waited until the streets in Rio were packed with people ready to celebrate the pre-Lenten days of *Carnaval*.



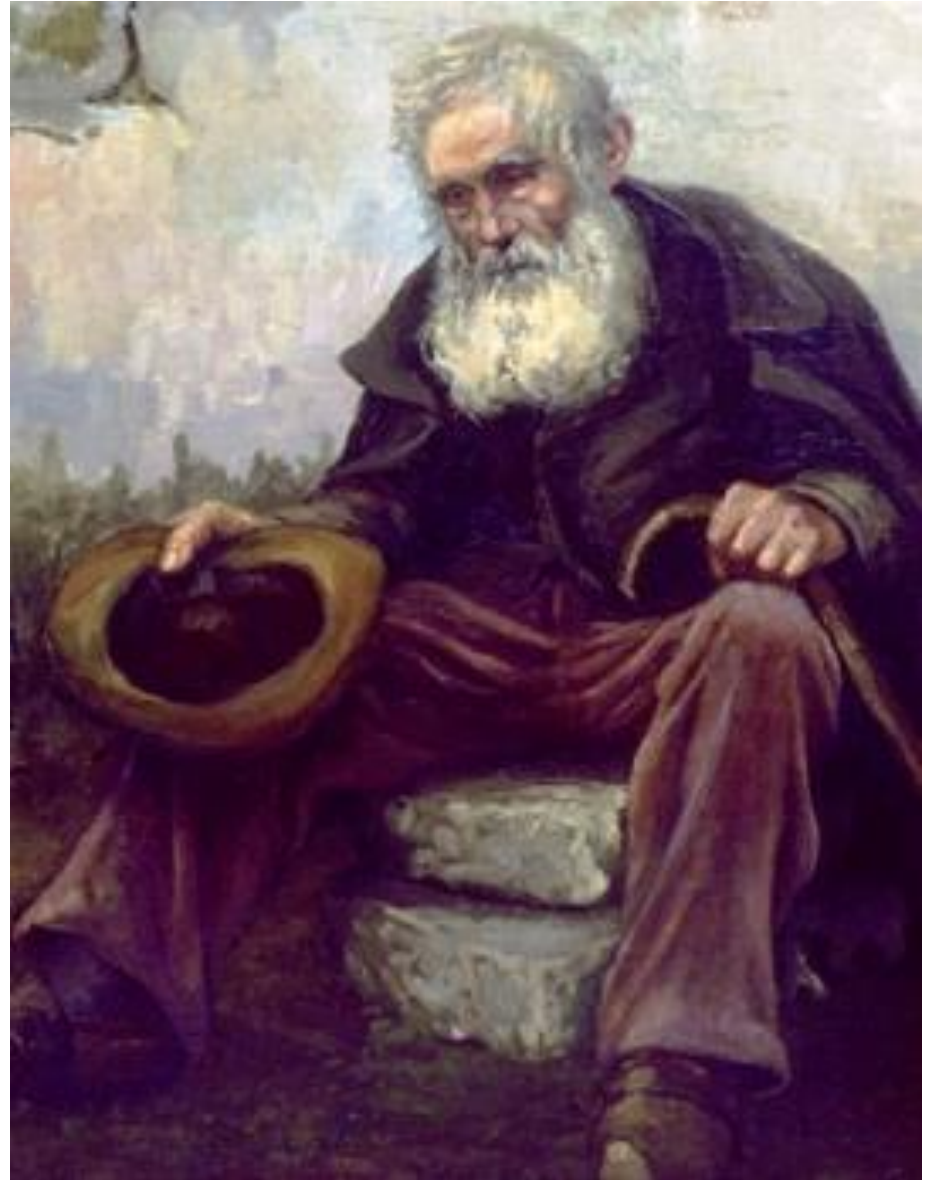
During the parades of *Carnaval*, people would practice many of the African traditions that had been passed on by former slaves, including African drumming. Manoel and his older friends joined the parade with their drums.



They followed the beautiful
Brazilian women dancing the
steps of the Samba.



It was appropriate that Manoel would tell his mother of the good news during *Carnaval*. *Carnaval* was a time when rich and poor often masqueraded as their opposites. Manoel saw the white owner of the sugar plantation watching the parade on a stoop, pretending to be a beggar.



Manoel spotted his beautiful mother dressed up in her finery on a great float. How proud he felt!



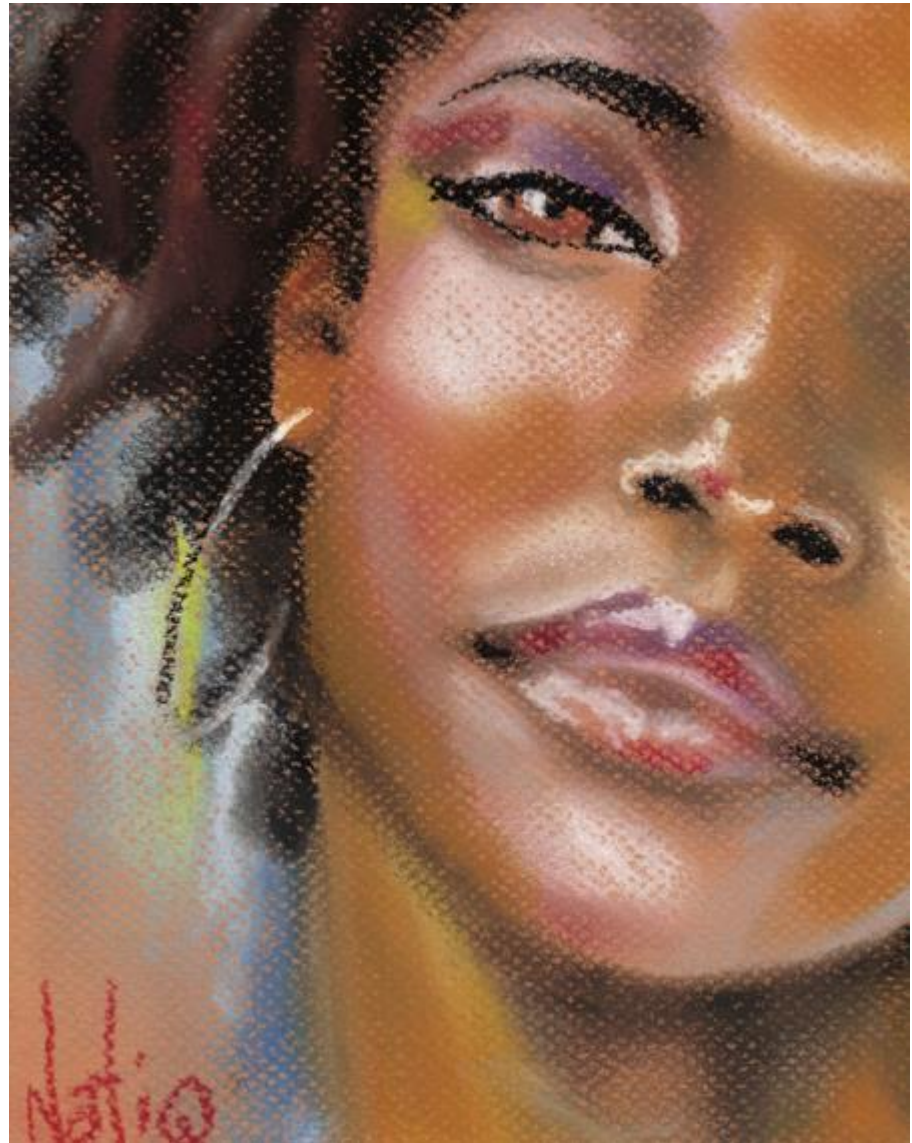
Manoel waited until the parade was over. He then followed his mother and siblings to a crowd that was watching a local band on a side street.



Manoel took his mother aside and told her of his new job collecting junk for the recycling factory. "You can leave the plantation next week," he declared humbly.



His mother gazed into her son's eyes. "Oh, my son, my wonderful Manoel," she sighed. "You are poor but you are the most dignified young man in all of Rio, I swear. Now today you have restored my own dignity."



And that night Manoel, his siblings, aunt, and grandparents celebrated. They had the most wonderful *Carnaval* night ever. They watched the festivities and the fireworks until the sun came up.



The end

Let's talk!!!