“The Madness of Hunger”
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Stage-read by SFSU students, directed by Debby Kajiyama (Kajiyama X Navarrete Dance Theater), at the 105th AAA Annual Meeting in San Jose, CA, in November 2006, on the panel “On the Margins of the Everyday. Papers in Honor of Nancy Scheper-Hughes.”

Main characters:
Antonio da Silva, 7
Madalena, Mother
Maria, Aunt

Bullet: Antonio da Silva, seven years old, offers his body in sacrifice to relieve his mother from the madness of hunger in Northern Brazil.

Synopsis:
Antonio da Silva, a seven-year-old smart little nordestino, offers his body in sacrifice to forestall once and for all the madness of hunger in Alto do Cruzeiro, northeastern Brazil. Antonio considers himself “a lucky boy” and says he is “glad to be alive,” despite his bare-bone and ill health. He fears, however, for the fate of his younger twin sisters, on the brink of starvation, and for the sanity of mother Madalena, who suffers from chronic nervos. There is never enough food in the house for the children, who are constantly crying, driving Madalena crazy. One day Maria shares her last two Valium pills with her sister Madalena so that the woman can make the decision no mother can dream of: Which one of her three kids should she let go of this time? Should it be Maria Antonia or cross-eyed Carolina? Antonio, she ponders, is already too old to be an angel. When Antonio overhears the conversation between his mother and aunt Maria, the boy decides to carry out his plan: to offer his own body, like Jesus did, to end the sacrifice of others. What ensues is a battle between life and death, between love and desire, and between justice and fate.
Madness of Hunger, ACT ONE

Inside a small thatched-roof mud hut in Alto do Cruzeiro, Northeastern Brazil. In one corner, a plaid hammock is slung across wooden beams; in the other, a few pieces of clothing hang from a stretch of barbed-wire. A blackened aluminum pan sits right in the middle of the dirt floor, next to some burnt sticks and cracked coco nut shells. Antonio is swaying the hammock where his two twin sisters (who can’t be seen) lay, crying.

Antonio (scratching his head full of lice)
Hush, hush, Mama will soon be back with some milk. Hush, hush, stop crying and go to sleep!

Maria walks in carrying a bucket full of water on her head.

Maria

Madalena! Madalena!

Antonio (scratching his head)
Mama went to the drugstore to get some medicine for her nerves. There’s nothing to eat … (to the girls) Sshhhhhhhhhhh… close your eyes and go to sleep!

The boy turns back towards Maria, reaches into his pocket and hands her some folded bills. Maria lowers the bucket onto the ground.

Antonio
This is the money we collected to send your daughter to São Paulo.

Maria (counting)
…3,4,5,6,7! Oh my beloved Jesus, bless the people of the Alto for their generosity! Once Fatima starts as a nanny, we’ll all do better around here. Her first paycheck, we’re going to have a feast, a real barbecue! (retrieving a small package from her bra) Here, take this for your sisters, and have some yourself. You’re just a bag of bones! You need to be strong to help your mama split firewood. Now, what’s that thing on your neck?

Antonio (touching the side of his neck)
I don’t know.
Maria (examining the lump)

Does it hurt?

Antonio (scratching his head)

Only when I swallow.

Maria

You’re skinnier and skinnier because you don’t like food! Next time you won’t fool us, pretending you’re dead. You’ll go straight to the cemetery in a cardboard coffin all right!

_Madalena walks in the door, looking pretty dismayed. Antonio hands her the small brown package and takes off running._

Madalena (opening the bundle)

What is this, _comadre_?

Maria

A piece of bread for the girls….Shhhh, they’re asleep. Did you get the medicine?

Madalena (taking a bite)

Huuum, I am starving…Seu Tito gave me a pill for 50 cents… nothing left over for the milk, what to do? But then, coming up the hill I heard Nailza screaming. I looked in the window and saw her shaking all over, losing her head! She was ready to hit her boy with this huge log! She’s worse off than us here; her little angel left last month and now the boy refuses to eat. She says he’s already hallucinating, getting ready to go! Poor woman, so I gave her the Valium.

Maria

Now what have you got? No medicine, no food! Finish up that bread, _comadre_, before the girls wake up, otherwise it’s _you_ going mad again! Here, take some of this money and buy yourself some meat. Fatima will have to wait another month.

Madalena

No! She’s our only hope!

Maria

Let’s go down to Seu Tito again and ask for more medicine.

Madalena

And pay him how?

Maria

I have my way with him.
You mean…

Madalena

Listen, Madalena, like you, I am hungry, too. Almost everyday my house is without food. My compensation is screwing. Do I take pleasure in it? Of course I do. How else am I going to know I’m alive if I don’t screw?

Madalena

I may be a _pobre_ and hungry but I do have my pride.

Maria

Pride? You’re wasting away, giving up sex. Sex is your right, and it’s free! I may be a bag of bones, but I’m still crazy about screwing.

Madalena

No wonder you’re always pregnant.

Maria

I get up at four in the morning, I hardly sleep at all. There is no time to take care of myself. I carry water on my head, I prepare the meals, I feed the kids, but I always find time for sex. I’m all bones, all right, but I still know how to screw real good.

Madalena

It was sex that first brought trouble into your life. So many mouths to feed!

Maria

Yeah, but it is sex that now brings medicine and food to my family. What other solution is there for a poor black like me?

Madalena

Long ago I had my fill. Now I am completely nauseated by screwing. I’d only do it to save Antonio’s life, only for my sweet little boy! See, I’m rotting with this terrible disease, God is angry at me. It’s punishment for my life as a street woman. What a game without any fun!

_ Antonio enters abruptly, screaming._

Antonio

Mãe! Mãe! They’re taking Nailza to jail!

Madalena

What? Nailza?
Antonio
She killed her children, Mãe, João and Antonio are dead! It’s true, I saw blood all over them!

Madalena
Oh my God, what are you saying? That can’t be, I just gave her some Valium!

Maria
Sometimes one pill just won’t do. Takes me at least two to settle down…Nailza looks pretty hardy.

Madalena
The poor woman is going to rot in jail. The sheriff just doesn’t understand nervous. The man’s rich, doesn’t even have to eat! Antonio, go find Manoel and tell him to go straight to the jailhouse to see what’s going on.

ACT TWO

Antonio walks into the hut with a bundle of firewood on his shoulder.

Antonio
Mãe, you abuse me!

Madalena
It’s only because you annoy me so much!

Antonio
But Mãe, I’m so hungry!

Madalena
There is nothing, nothing left to eat.

Antonio
I want milk.

Madalena
Can’t help you kill your hunger, my son. (mixing a spoonful of sugar in a glass of water) Here, take some sugar water and go to sleep.

Antonio
(drinking) Ah, my stomach feels so dry! I had a dream I was eating a steak.

Madalena
Go to sleep, just go to sleep! We’ll have a party soon, beans, cornmeal, and some pop. (Antonio exits)
Maria (entering)

*Comadre*, bad news: I got only 50 cents begging at the market… Here are some black beans for the kids.

Madalena

What are we going to do? We can’t be like this forever. The kids want more than just beans, they want milk and meat. Here’s the real struggle.

*Children crying in the background.*

*Madalena covers her ears with her hands.*

Madalena

Who can stand by and listen to a child crying that its stomach is aching from hunger? I am going crazy!

Maria

Come on, *comadre*, these little critters don’t suffer!

Madalena

Antonio is so sickly, always hungry.

Maria

He doesn’t even pay attention to food! And now that lump won’t even let him swallow, do what?

Madalena

He just told me he’s hungry, dreaming of a steak.

Maria

Must be the worms, I’ve got lots myself -- tum tum tum, they drum inside my body. *That* can make you crazy, too.

Madalena (covering her face, shaking her head) No, no, it’s not worms, I don’t think… He doesn’t have the strength from meat. He’d whine and cry for whole milk when he was littler, always rejected papa d’água.

Maria

Papa d’água? Babies fed on water soon have blood that turns to water. It’s a miracle he’s still alive. But weren’t all of your kids fed on papa d’água?

Madalena

All seven raised on that, now there are only three left.
Maria
You’ve let four go, and Antonio’s managed to escape you. Wasn’t he meant to be an angel?

Madalena
They all loved papa d’água, except Antonio. That’s why we got so close.

Maria
Whatever you fed him, you should have never picked him up, carried him around, kissed. Never! Getting attached from the start... Now you’re in trouble!

Madalena
Not Antonio, Não! He never had any desire to eat and I felt pity for him. Poor critter! So we cuddled. I tried and tried to feed him polenta but he just wouldn’t eat.

Maria
Shame on you, now look where you’re at: in love with the boy. I don’t think there’s any hope, he’s so sickly! Let him go!

Madalena
Stop it, I’ll pick one of the girls. Your small children are all long gone, what do you know?

Maria
They’re all good angels, God bless, left this world without suffering. I was smarter than you: never picked them up, never cuddled, no carinho, but you!

Madalena
Só Deus sabe! [Only God knows!] I gave him sugar water every night to go to sleep without crying, the little angel! (hands in prayer) Please God, don’t take Antonio, he’s just learned the alphabet. I’ll send you one of the girls!

Maria
Maria José? Carolina? You gotta decide fast. Next thing you know you’re getting attached to them, too. It’ll never get better.

Madalena
Antonio is my arms and legs, but there’s just not enough food! (crying) I can’t go on like this!

Sound of babies crying gets louder and louder

Maria
I’ll get up real early tomorrow morning, light a candle to the Sacred Heart, and pray we get some meat at the Matadouro.
Madalena
(screaming) I can’t stand this! I can’t stand this!

Maria takes a small paper package from inside her bra, unfolds it and hands Madalena two small pills.

Maria
Here, take’em for your nerves, it’s your turn.

Madalena
Valium? Where did you get it?

Maria
Seu Tito gave me a couple on Christmas. We should use them now. It’ll make the decision easier.

Madalena
Obrigada, this stuff makes me feel so strong!

Maria
Now you go lay down, pray to God you get some sense in your head, and decide by early morning who’s gonna leave this world next. (Maria exits)

ACT THREE

I
Madalena is stirring some sugar into a glass of water. She looks up at the sound of her girls crying, places her hand over her ears, and calls out the window:

Madalena
Maria! Maria! Come up here fast! Ireeeeeeeexeeeeeeenee!

Comadre!

Maria (entering in haste)

Madalena
I’ve made my decision. I’m gonna let both the girls go. They’ll be happy together in heaven, the little baby angels.

Maria
Both the girls? You can’t give up the girls, they’re your future!
Madalena
Better the girls should go than Antonio or me.

Maria
What are you saying? The girls don’t want to die, Antonio does. Why fight…

Madalena
I fought for him to stay alive and he *is* alive! Now I’m not giving him up, forget it.

Maria
Your two beautiful girls…

Madalena
They’ll be much better off in heaven, the two of them together. I can’t split the two apart. They were born together and now they’ll leave this world together…

Maria (in anger)
Is this what the medicine did for you? Listen, it is very wrong to fight with death. Antonio is doomed, when a child wants to die it will. You let the girls go, you’ll be alone! God wants Antonio, not the girls!

Madalena (closing her eyes)
I can still feel his mouth on my nipples, his little hands in my tangled hair. Now when I look into his eyes I feel for him! I just can’t let him go!

Maria
He has no more taste for life, he’s always lived in the shadows looking for death. But the girls, they want to live!

Madalena
They will be the prettiest little angels… Oh my Lady of Sorrows… Comadre, will you help me? *Por favor!*

Maria
It is your choice.

Madalena
They have to die so he can live. I have made the decision.

*The girls start crying. Antonio runs in the door and hands his mother a small package.*

Antonio
Mãe! This bread is for the girls! Dona Maria gave it to me down at the market.
Here, I’ll take care of it. Have a piece yourself (breaking the bun in half and biting into it)

No, mãe, I’m not hungry.

Please eat the bread, you need it. *Por favor!*

Mãe, listen, I had a dream!

Son, there is *no* meat. None!

Mãe! Listen! I was an angel and I was flying for real! Way, way up there, way above the clouds, everything so blue and beautiful. Mãe! It is beautiful up there!

Eat the bread, here, and stop the nonsense.

Mãe! I saw the gate to heaven, just like you said, gold and bright. And guess what, Papa was there, waiting for me with José, Marcelo, Eliza, and Paulinho!

*The girls are crying louder and louder. Antonio moves toward them with the bread in hands.*

Get away from them! Here, if you don’t want the bread, give it to me. (grabbing the bread from him and biting into it)

Mãe! I wanna go there, please!

In your dreams!

Mãe! I am ready to go there!
Madalena
Now you shut up and go fetch some water. You were never supposed to be an angel, and
now you’re too old to turn into one. You’re staying here with Mama and we’re going to
have a good life together, just the two of us.

_Madalena grabs Antonio and hugs him. The
boy tries to free himself from the mother’s
arms, at no avail._

Antonio
Let me go!

_Madalena (releasing the boy)_
Listen, Maria gave me some money and we’ll go buy a steak right now. I’ll cook it just
for you!

Antonio
I don’t want a steak, it hurts too much to swallow. I want to go to Papa! It’s so beautiful
up there! I saw hotdogs, candy, ice cream…

_Madalena (softly)_
Listen my son, I can’t let you go. You’re my arms and legs … and …you’re my … heart,
too! Since you were little…

Antonio
There will be more food for Carolina and Maria Antonia. Please, mãe, let me go!

_Madalena starts to shake uncontrollably.
She tries to grab Antonio again, who moves
away from her._

Madalena
Come here, my beloved son!

Antonio
Hush, mãe, hush, I’m ready to go there.

Madalena
You are not going there, there is no such thing as heaven! Come here to mamãe!

_The two embrace. Madalena is still shaking
uncontrollably. Antonio tries to calm her
down. The girls crying in the background
goes louder and louder. Madalena places her
hands over her ears and starts walking
around, but her legs start failing her._
Antonio

Mãe! Mãe!

Madalena (kneeling down, hands to the sky)

_Meu Senhor Jesus Cristo_, help me! Spare Antonio, take the girls instead, the little angels! You are a hungry God! I’ve given you four little angels already and now you want my beloved Antonio, too! You can’t take him, you just cannot. (shouting) Leave him alone! I give you two little angels instead, Maria Antonia and Carolina, two beautiful babies. That ought to appease your hunger. Let Antonio live!

_Madalena falls to the ground, unconscious._

_Antonio kneels down beside her and starts his own prayer._.

Antonio

*Querido Jesus*, please help me! I want to be an angel, I really do! I really am ready to go there and I promise you, I’ll be good, very good! *Querido Jesus*, I am sorry I’ve been so bad, fighting against death, but I couldn’t leave Mama alone! *Querido Jesus*, please, please make Mama understand that I can be a good angel, that I can take up wings and fly! Please, I beg you, let Mama have the girls, they are so pretty! She will forget me, I am good for nothing no more! I can’t chop wood very well and to carry water I need to ask for help! What good am I down here, good for nothing! *Querido Jesus*, please take me with you. Take me with you and I will not disappoint you ever, ever again. Amen.

_Curtains._