

NOTHING DOING (extracts)

Doing Nothing (mostly) with Kids in the  
Puerto Rican Highlands

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NOTHING DOING is the second in a series of papers describing the results of an aborted project, "A Geography of Caserio Children," undertaken by Denis and Ingrid Wood in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, in 1970. Although the work was not completed as projected, much information was collected, and is currently being published in this form in the belief. Requests for the full version of the paper should be made to Denis Wood, NOTHING DOING, School of Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina, 27695-7701.

Figure 1 consists of the sketch map we made of La Villa Universitaria--el caserio--in order to record certain classes of behavior. The eleven apartment buildings, arranged in courtyards, are numbered across the image.

To their left, marked "O" is the complex office. To the right, marked "D," is one of the buildings of the Barranquitas Regional College of Interamerican University. At the top, marked "P" is the swimming pool. Just below buildings 3 and 5 are two small structures marked "A" and "I." The former is Angel's Colmado. The latter is where we lived. The two amorphous shapes are baseball fields; the rectangle near the office is a basketball court. North is to the right.

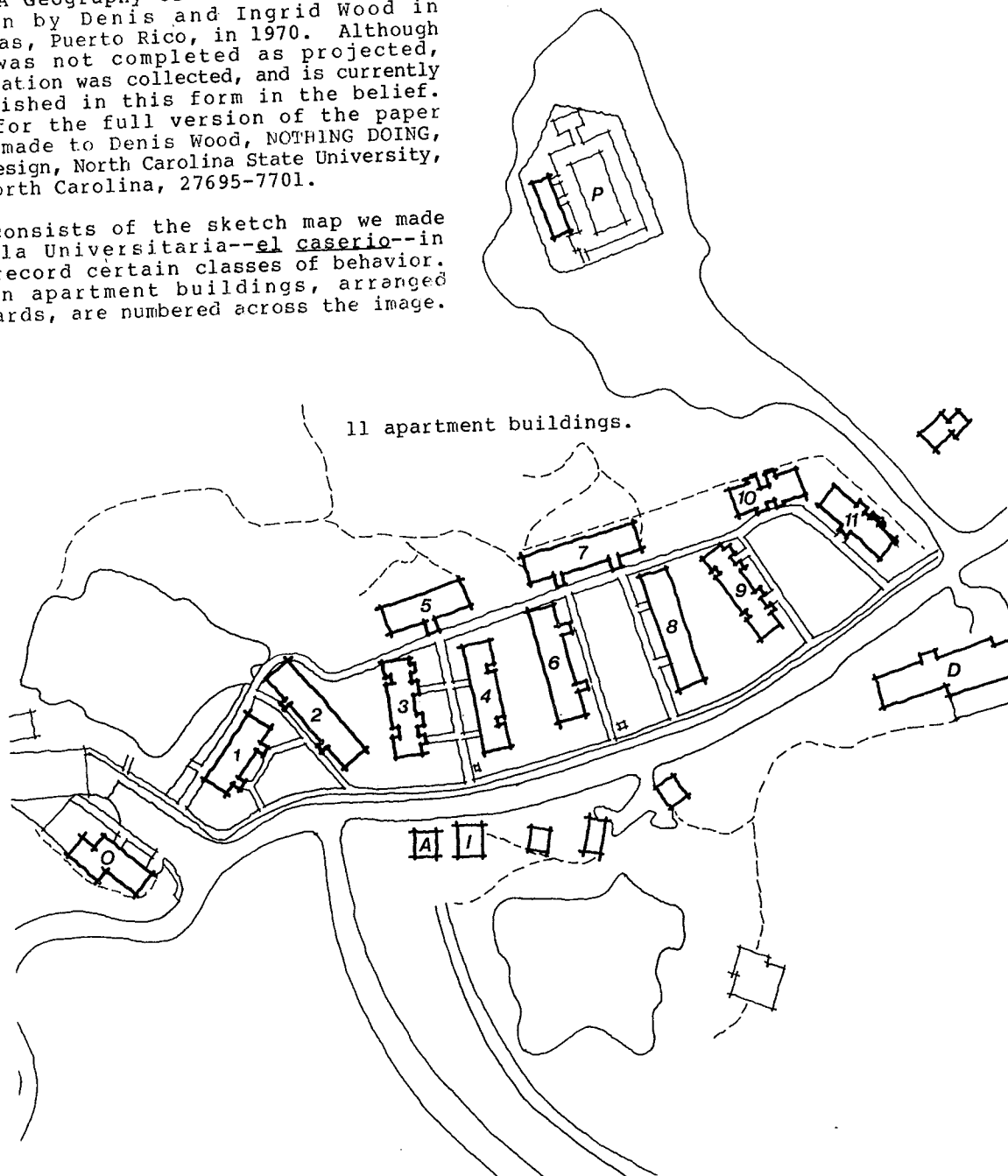


Figure 1: La Villa Universitaria: el caserio.

Special thanks to Bo Emerson who reminded me of the insanity of leaving all this stuff in a box in the back of a closet.

The project is the property of the kids of the caserio who inspired it and made its realization a joy. The paper is dedicated to the many Maldonados who made life a joy, especially the family of Francisco Maldonado Gonzales and Juana Burgos Ramos whose children --Carlos Enrique, Adelina, Carmen Leida, Angel Antonio, Angel Luis, Angel Tomas, Victor, Carmen Milagro, Moises, Ismael and Josefina-- were ever a wonder and never a care. This paper will never make as much sense to you as you made to me.

The first paper in this series, TO CATCH THE WIND: Kites, Kids, and the Environment in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, is also still available from the author upon request.

Because that was the main thing about kids then: we spend an awful lot of time doing nothing. There was an occupation game called "just running around." It was no game. It had no rules. It didn't start and it didn't stop. Maybe we were all idiots, but a good deal of the time we just plain ran around. Many many hours of my childhood were spent in learning how to whistle. In learning how to snap my fingers. In hanging from the branch of a tree. In looking at an ants' nest. In digging holes. Making piles. Tearing things down. Throwing rocks at things. Spitting. Breaking sticks in half. Unplugging storm drains, and dropping things down storm drains, and getting dropped things out of storm drains (which we called sewers). So help us, we went and picked wildflowers.

ROBERT PAUL SMITH: "Where did you go?" "Out" "What did you do?" Nothing.

Nothing is pretty much what the kids in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, did most of the time, at least in 1970 when I was there. Lots of nothing. But then, nothing is what most kinds have done most of the time everywhere. I did lots of nothing growing up in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 40s and 50s. In the highlands of Chiapas in souther Mexico in the 60s I watched kids doing nothing with panache. I listened in the 70s when many times I wished I couldn't to kids in Worcester, Massachusetts, doing nothing at the top of their voices. I have studied kids doing nothing with Elan in Raleigh, North Carolina. Everyday now my six year old comes home from school--exhausted!--from doing nothing. For the kids of Barranquitas doing nothing was no joke either. This is an attempt to say how serious it really was.

#### Who, What, Where, When and How

In 1970 my wife Ingrid and I lived in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico, a small, classically Latin town of some seven thousand inhabitants that spills its white buildings down the sides of green hills in the central highlands of the island. A good hour's drive from San Juan, it's a minor commercial center for a disintegrating agriculture hinterland still based on a variety of minor crops and tobacco.

For some time prior to 1970 it had been increasingly difficult for small farmers in the central highlands to make much of a living, and in the flight from the farm a number ended in Barranquitas. These made homes in the squatter settlements--Alemania, El Amparo, La Perla--on the edges of town; or in the slums along the river--Calle del Rio, Calle Abajo--a stone's throw from the central plaza. In these latter, Roberts Manners, in 1950, counted 190 shacks and houses in an area 150 by 20 to 25 yards. (1) Needless to say, it has been increasingly crowded in the years following. In 1963-64 some of the people living in these slums moved into a new public housing project or caserio. Because it was then the only public housing project in town it became know as El Caserio, although it was officially called La Villa Universitaria. For a number of reasons it had been constructed outside of town where the country still comes up to the backdoor and sometimes part of the way into the house. The caserio is physically isolated. Almost all trafic--and all vehicular traffic-- between the caserio and the rest of town moves along a single road. It cannot even be seen from any point in town. The residents of the caserio are likewise socially isolated, and this despite family and other ties to many in town and throughout the countryside. Never participants in the political life of Barranquitas qua commercial center, in moving, the caserio residents also severed the bonds that had connected them to the life of the slums and squatter settlements. There were, after all, distinctions: where in Calle del Rio there were only public pumps and public baths, in the caserio every apartment had hot and cold running water, two sinks, a shower and a toilet; and where in Calle Abajo there was no electricity, in the caserio there were ranges, televisions, radios, stereos and lights at night. There was a social pretension about living in the caserio that was almost palpable, though there was at the same time a felt despair for a life lost. Some people couldn't stand it and moved back to the slum. "People in the caserio are nasty," they would say. "They gossip and fight and try to live better than they are." Others moved up, to a prefab in Bayamon just outside of San Juan, or on to the States and the impossible promise. Some moved back and forth, in and out. Lots stayed. For them, for then, the caserio was an okay place to be. They formed the stable heart of this crazy place that the others, no matter where or why they went, had to come back to, if only to visit. (2)

After the caserio opened, people began moving in directly from the country, bypassing entirely the urban slums. By 1970, better than half the caserio residents had never previously lived elsewhere in town. Many of these retained a semblance of their previous lives, the men, for example, continuing to work part-time on nearby farms, or actually farming small plots of public or otherwise unused land close to the caserio. Others took part-time jobs in town or worked on the ephemeral construction crews that passed through the region like the trade winds. Few had full time jobs and most of these, like the peddling of lottery tickets, were tenuous ways to make a living. Most took what work they could wherever they could find it. Even the stable heart of this subculture was none too stable.

At once least and most stable were the kids, least stable because they grew up and moved on; most stable because having spent most of their lives there--and having lived through the most of the life of the caserio--they most thoroughly embodied its growing traditions of where to do what and when and how, unconfused by memories of the traditions of other places. If most of these traditions came with their parents from the countryside, still, for the children, they were of the caserio.

For most of them, this was the world. In February 1970 there were 329 people in the caserio less than nineteen years old. Most of these were kids. Their median age was eight, and a lot of them had spent all their lives here. One hundred and sixty-nine of these kids were boys, 160 girls. Most of the school-age kids went to school, at least between five and fifteen. When they hit fifteen, all sorts of things began to happen. Some of them dropped out of school and hung around; others went to live with grandparents or their married brothers or sisters in Catano or the States. When they were old enough, they joined the Army, or got married. Some of them even stayed in school and lived at home, but not many. Only seven percent of the caserio kids were over fifteen. This had nothing to do with their parents' life-cycle: older kids just tend not to stick around. Since 1970 some of the kids I knew have become college students. Others have died. Most of them are still growing up. (3)

If they are, they're probably much like the kids we knew. Vibrant. Alive. Loved. Loving. Active. Everywhere. Kids are important in Barranquitas. One young father, explaining why his wife would never have a hysterectomy, put it this way: "That wouldn't be any life--with no babies!" He wanted to have young kids in his home when he was an old man. He liked their noise and their questions. He like holding them and laughing with and at them. Robert Manners might have been describing life for the young child in the caserio when he wrote of the rural child outside Barranquitas that: "There are few toys for the baby, and his principal play contacts are the older children and adults who spend hours holding him, fondling

him, laughing at his first efforts at walking and talking." (4) At any age kids in the caserio have less work to do than their peers in the countryside, but "all children are expected to keep themselves available for work if needed." No one ever grumbled when sent on an errand; or demurred even when requested to help in so serious and prolonged a task as bagging coffee-berry hulls. Physical skills, appropriate social behavior, personal cleanliness and honesty are more important than school skills. Most of the child's early play is imitative of adult behavior, usually with adult tools. "A three-year-old can peel a mango with a carving knife. A six-year-old can handle a hoe adequately enough to have his labor valued, and usually knows how to use a machete. Breakable objects like eggs and spillable ones like open bottles of kerosene are entrusted to four- or five-year-olds to be carried." (5) While most parents voice belief in the good of a good education, they do not manifest this in their behavior. They like to see only good report cards, but make no effort to see that their children do their homework. In some cases they simply have no way of knowing what this means; in others, no way of imagining how to do anything about it. Nor do they have any way of encouraging or supporting their scholastically inclined children. (6)

Unencumbered by farm chores or pressures to do homework, caserio children have lots of time to do nothing at all. Nor does this time diminish significantly with age. Except for preschoolers, kids of all ages have equal portions of the day at their discretion. Girls, for whom there are many chores boys are not expected to perform, have less discretionary time and energy than boys, but even they have plenty. Of course there is the work a kid does to make money, shining shoes down at the plaza, crating live chickens for local farmers, doing minor chores for local shopkeepers, washing cars for neighbors and running errands of all kinds. And beyond this is the endlessness of sports and games. Baseball and basketball are extremely popular. So is running. But so is doing nothing, hanging around and hanging around adults figuring out what to do next and exploring and gathering fruit and playing house and fishing and building huts and collecting herbs and making soapbox racers and playing store and cooking out and reading comic books and swimming and playing in the dirt and singing and dancing and playing the guitar and spinning tops and messing around generally. Of all the things to do, doing nothing is, in fact, the most popular of all.

#### Nothing To Do, Doing Nothing, Doing Something and Got To

Doing nothing is readily separable from the rest of what a kid does with himself. You can't pick a kid up and shake him and expect the doing nothing to come to the top like cream. It may not be separable at all, but that doesn't mean you can't taste it. Robert Paul Smith distinguishes between being bored



Figure 2: Kids "doing nothing" with a couple of sticks and a pile of dirt left by a construction crew in one of the caserio courtyards. (Photo by Victor Maldonado Burgos.)

and doing nothing: "There is a difference between doing nothing and being bored. Being bored is a judgment you make on yourself. Doing nothing is a state of being." (7) He also distinguishes between doing nothing and doing something: "We were bored when we were kids, but we never thought a day was anything but a whole lot of nothing interrupted occasionally by something." (8) Something. Nothing. Being bored...And of course the backdrop of the have-to-do-its, the sleeping, the eating--no, the coming in to eat--, the getting up and the going off to school.

But, I'm not sure Smith had it quite right. I'm sure he was bored--we were all bored--but sometimes when he remembers being bored, I'll bet he had nothing to do. My brother Christopher was always moaning "There's nothing to do!" and whining "What's to do?" It wasn't that he was bored--you can be bored playing baseball and that's doing something--but that he had nothing to do. Or no one to do it with. Having nothing to do is a flailing,

a searching; but not like boredom, a repletion, a lassitude brought on by repetition, a sinking-down exhaustion of the spirits. Boredom may precede nothing to do, but it doesn't have to. Nothing to do can happen right after breakfast or right after school Friday afternoon or for long stretches at the beginning of summer vacation. I think nothing to do happens when things change, when obligations are suddenly lifted or a friend moves away or the rain falls on a string of sunny days--and then: what should I do? Or when a game has ended and there are too many things to choose from next--and then, what should I do now? Nothing to do is an emptiness, crying to be filled.

It has nothing to do with being alone. A lot of kids can be empty together. Idle hands are the devil's tool the saying goes, but in the caserio all activity sprang from nothing to do. Sitting on the steps before the stairs or standing around on the porch of Angel's colmado, the kids with nothing

to do were poets waiting on their muse or like a faculty ad hoc committee convened to figure out what the hell it was supposed to be doing. (9) Waiting. Anxious. Wanting to be doing something. Empty.

Doing nothing is a filling. Doing nothing is an unfolding of things to do, an unfolding of things that have no names like mooning around a lamppost or kicking stones into the drain across the street, an unfolding of things to do that have names but not taken altogether like a whole string of street games such as El Gato y El Raton and Verbena and Escondido and El Pote, an unfolding of things that have names that can as well be left unsaid like stealing and seeing who can pee the farthest, or an unfolding of all these mixed up together. (10) Doing nothing is almost everything. As a term, it conceals as it identifies. It is both comprehensive and evasive, simultaneously screen and mirror. Like a kaleidoscope, it is everything, and it is nothing. Most of all it is doing. And it is what Barranquitas kids did most of the time.

It emerges from nothing to do in a million different ways. Sometimes nothing to do and doing nothing are so close only the mood can tell them apart. The moping kid disconsolately rolling the ball up the sidewalk again and again, dumbly like Sisyphus, grimly rolling out the time, has nothing to do. The curious kid sending the ball up the sidewalk to watch the jigs and jags in its return, and doing it again and again, now sending it up fast, now slow, now on this edge of the sidewalk, now on that, is doing nothing. (11) These could be different kids at the same time on opposite sides of the caserio. Or it could be the same kid, minutes, or days, earlier or later, doing nothing and nothing to do interpenetrating like waking and dreaming in the early morning. At the other end doing nothing merges almost imperceptibly into doing something. Fifteen guys that just happen to be playing ball, even if they've been doing it every day for weeks, are doing nothing most of the time. But twenty guys in uniforms meeting regularly to play ball are doing something and doing it with a vengeance.

I was going to say that the things kids do when they are doing something always seems to involve store-bought equipment, but that's only partly true, even if it is more and more true every day. The difference between pick-up and league ball games lies as much in the schedule--and the structure, commitment and responsibility that schedule implies--as in the uniforms. In a pick-up game you can lay down the bat anytime you want to--or worse, take the bat with you--and that's that. If you get mad, you can just stomp off, or if you get bored, or if you see something more interesting going on down the street, or if some better players come along and want you to play with them instead of the dolts you're playing with. You don't do that in school games or league play. You make a commitment to responsibly do a job

in a group activity and you do it. The schedule and the uniforms are tangible signs of that commitment. Of course they are rewards and promises too, but their real function is to be the badge of a pledge. Play under these conditions is less play and more something else. The elements of play are there--the balls and bats--but the forms are disappearing. When the umpire says, "Play ball!" he means "Throw the ball!" Play is the furthest thing from his mind.

I think this is why something to do gets more adult sanctioning than doing nothing. It has names and structures and rules and outcomes that are easy to enumerate if less easy to demonstrate. If, out exploring, you come across a forest pool like La Santa and you strip and jump in--you're doing nothing. But if you go home and get your towel and your trunks and your fee and tromp off to La Piscina--you're doing something, you're going swimming. If you're washing a neighbor's car and you start spraying each other with the hose--you're getting into trouble. But if you're splashing each other at the beach where you've gone in a car with your parents--you're having fun. If you're out wandering around and you happen to climb a fence and grab a few naranja--you're stealing. But if your mother sends you out to collect a few china from a derelict grove--you're getting oranges for your mother. (12) It's not that doing nothing is better than doing something--because doing stuff for your mother and going to the beach or the local pool are all terrific--but that doing something is different from doing nothing. When you're doing something you're doing something sanctioned by adult authority, something involving others in an imposed structure unresponsive to individual whim or need. If it's all planned that you're all going to the beach, you can't decide at the last minute to stay home. If you've decided you're going to the public pool, you've acknowledge that you won't be cannon balling off the deep end.

Just as doing nothing slips into doing something, so doing something gradually ceases being voluntary and turns mandatory. Building bonfires on Candelaria, beflowering others on Carnaval, giving gifts on Mother's Day, going to the Missa del Gallo on Christmas Eve, participating in the parrandas that follow through the Christmas season, staying up late on New Year's Eve--none of these is in any sense mandatory, but neither is participation entirely voluntary either; and when the issue is kids' labor the distinction is even more difficult to make. (13). I am mostly thinking about the shoe shining that goes on down at the plaza and the little stands that are set up on the campus of the small regional college to sell fruit and alcapurrias to the students and the errands that are regularly run and the chicken crating that goes on in the poultry factories up the road. (14) At one end is something to do. It's fun and interesting and you make a little spending money for the movies or the pinball machines. But at the other end it's obligatory, work pure



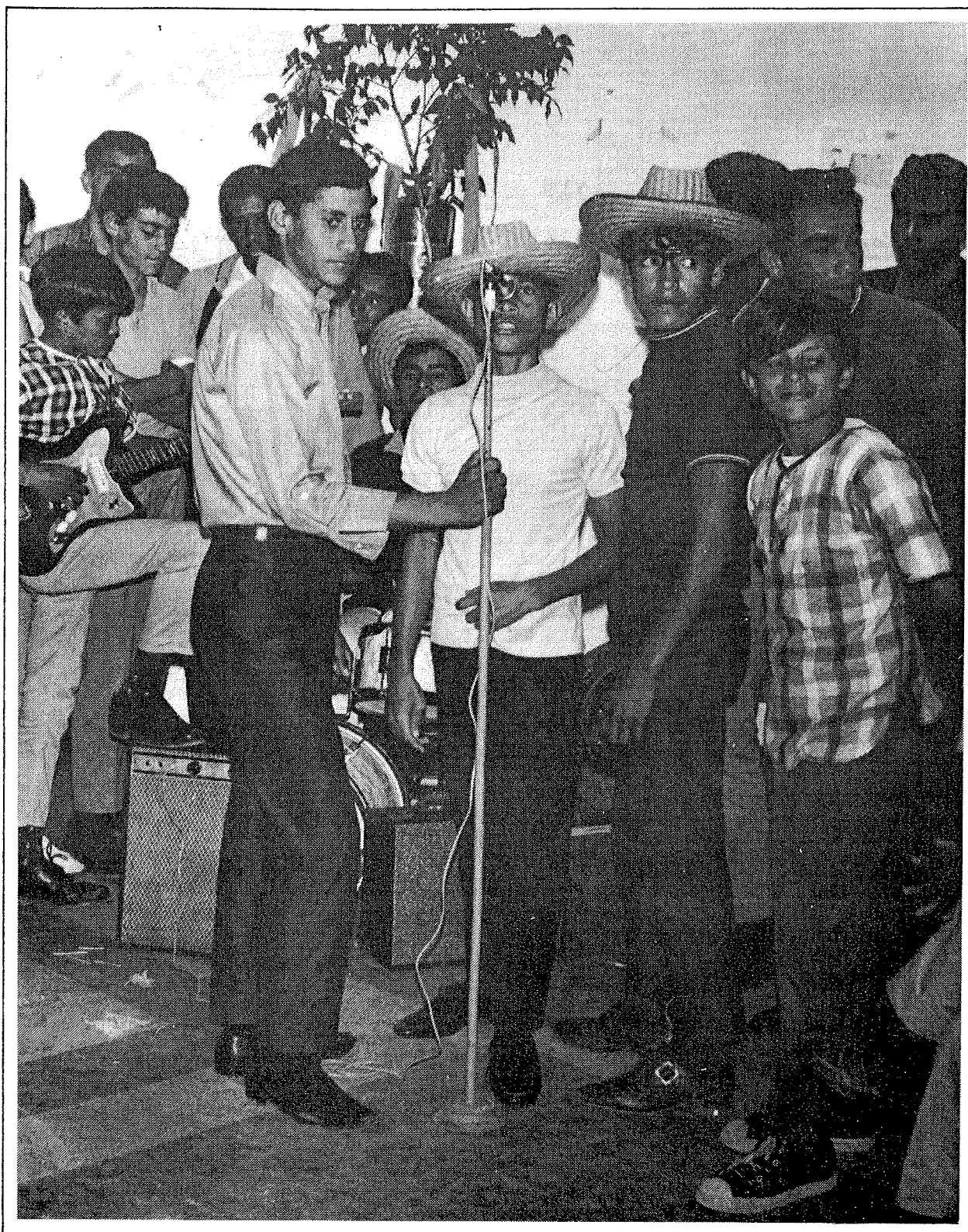


Figure 3: Singing becomes "something to do." Victor's band, Los Cazadores, performs at our wedding in January, 1969. From left, Johnny plays guitar, Edward slightly behind him to his right; Victor's singing, Jorge to his right; Anibal to his. (Photo by Danny Amaral.)

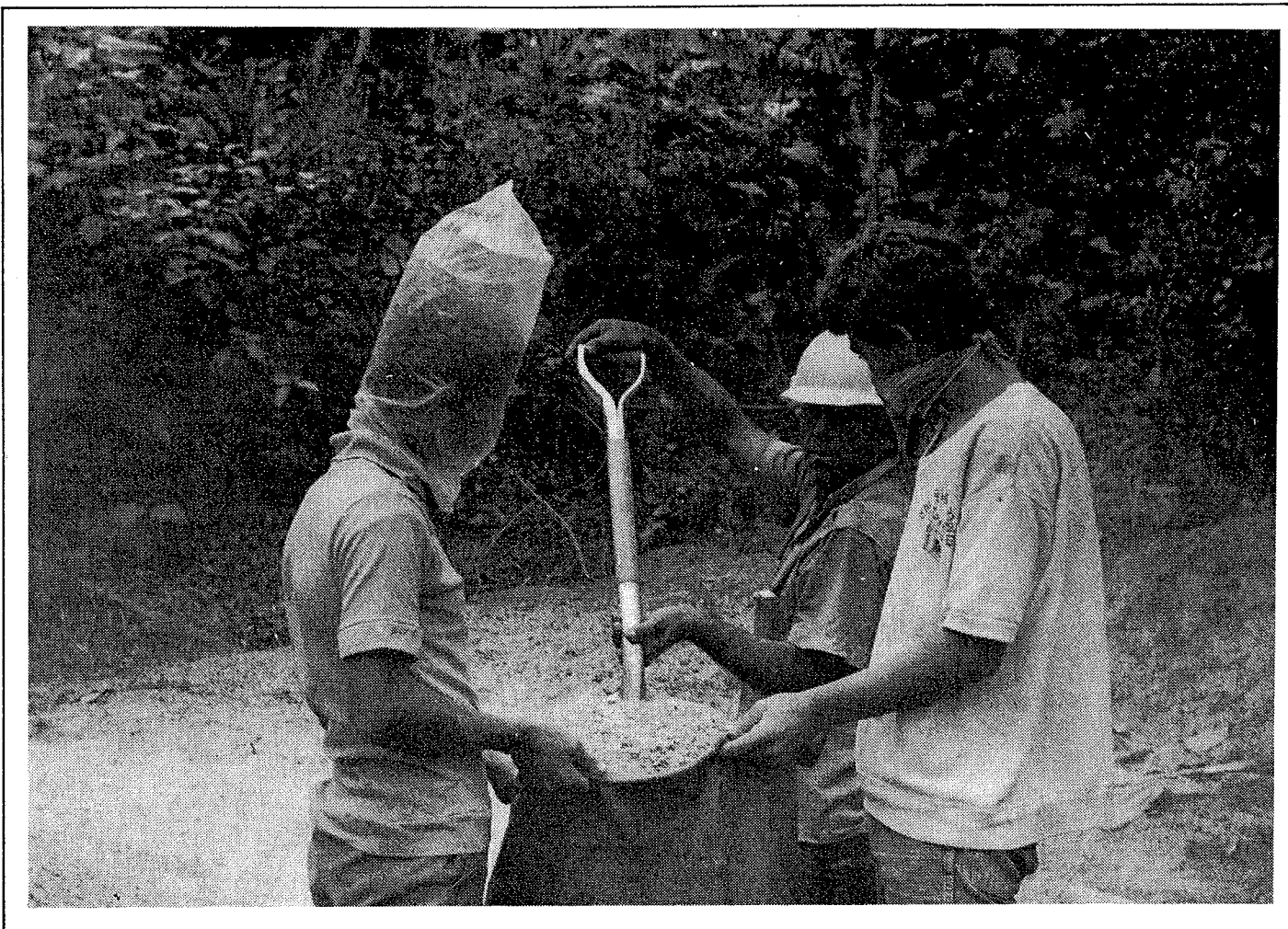


Figure 4: Victor and Edward bagging coffee berry hulls with Victor's father. This was a "got to" nobody enjoyed.

and simple, and no longer play in any sense except the one in which living itself is play. Fathers commandeer kids of all ages to help them work their plots of platanos, fetching for the, certainly, but also hacking and digging and burning and planting. (15) Mothers not only have their daughters help around the house, but frequently have them help with the sewing, laundering and other work they may take in; or have them make things for sale, especially food, but also crocheted things; bags and dolls' clothing, and bead work, especially with certain local seeds generically called matos. (16) At this point the world of got to has been entered, got to do this, got to do that, got to take care of the younger siblings, got to come in to eat, got to come in and go to bed, got to go to school, got to behave like a decent human being, got to have respect, got to, just got to. At the place where doing something turns out to be something you've got to do anyway, the concern is with definitions and models of appropriate behavior. Girls carry their books in front of them

with both arms, boys carry them under one arm at their sides--they just do, they've just got to, that's all. Barranquitanos sing aguinaldos at Christmas time. (17) Human beings have vergüenza. (18) They just do. If they don't, they're not really human, that's all. At the other end of the world of go to is inhabited by biologic necessity and autonomic behavior, not gotta dance, but gotta sleep, gotta eat, gotta breathe.

If nothing to do, doing nothing, doing something and got to are typologically continuous, behaviorally they are as discrete as quantum particles. Kids in the caserio, like kids everywhere, leaped from one state to any other state in the time between breaths. Now the kid is doing something PAUSE now the kid has nothing to do; now he's got nothing to do PAUSE now he's doing nothing. He is never in a given state without being aware of the states he is not in. This is self-evident in the case of nothing to do. It is the fact that he is not in another state that is killing him. It is almost

as evident in the case of the things he's got to do. Even in kids who like to stop playing, come in and go to bed, it is one of the things they like that they are no longer doing something else. It is a relief to have to do something. And it is a relief to stop playing. Lots of times kids don't know how to stop what they're doing without invoking another state. Kids will all of a sudden have to do something when the conversation or the action takes a threatening turn--"Excuse me, I have to go eat." That this is what was going on was especially obvious in Barranquitas where there was no tradition of the family eating together and everybody ate when he wanted to. (19) The awareness of other states is equally important when the kid is doing something--for it is only this awareness that permits the distinction of something from nothing;--and it is the awareness of the other states that makes doing nothing the flexible, adaptive, fluid structure that it is. After all, it is the essence of the behavior of children who are doing nothing that they are aware that at any moment one of them might have to something obligatory. In doing nothing, nothing is fixed, all is endless mutable. (20)

The problem is to see the child's behavior as the child knows it: whole. It may be compounded of many parts, but it is compounded. This not to say a child can confuse doing nothing with nothing to do. No child could make such a mistake. (21) But that he knows his day to be a lot of nothing with a share of nothing to do and something and some things he's simply got to do all mixed up together. He can't tell them apart--"I can't play anymore. I have to go in now."--but he knows that in any day they will all be there.

Although the child in one state is always aware of the states he is not in, he never makes the mistake of regarding them as equivalent. In Barranquitas as everywhere the realm of the obligatory gives shape to the entire behavioral domain. The demands of the child's metabolic organization take on form within the traditions of his culture. The fundamental patterns of socialized getting up and going to sleep, eating and defecating, constitute a structure whose superordinate importance the child recognizes and accepts. "I have to eat," may be used as an excuse now and then, but the child accepts and obeys the rhythm of the meals. In fact he relishes it and depends on it, as teachers and students depend on the bell to keep manageable the dynamics of a class. Within this structure doing nothing finds its place as the ocean amid the continents. The analogy is close. Doing nothing is something you have to get through to get to the terra firma of got to on the other side. There is a lot of nothing going on between rising and going to bed. Some people drown in it. But others leap and splash and swim. In this ocean of doing nothing are the occasional islands of doing something--islands as significant in the development of the child as the continents of got to they sometimes approach in importance. Lying over everything is the atmosphere of

nothing to do, the only alternative medium for getting from one continent to another. It is only an analogy, but it gets across the point--and the structure of children's behavior--as well as any more abstract description. Men, and their children, are land animals, grounded in the bedrock of got to. But they also swim in waters of doing nothing and fly the air of nothing to do and climb out or land on the islands of doing something.

[Editor's note: Due to the length of the full text of "Nothing Doing," it has only been possible to reproduce its opening and closing here. The full version of the paper is available from the author. The paper proceeds with eminently readable diagnoses of the states of got to, doing something, and doing nothing. It ends with the following reflections regarding the state of nothing to do. As childhood comes to a close, the great open world of doing nothing narrows down. Unless new somethings and go tos take up the slack, there is left, not doing nothing, but just:]

#### Nothing to Do

It's hard for me to put my finger on, but there is something about doing something that is grownup, like being an adult, positing a distant goal of your own desiring and doing what you have to to get there, even though that might not be today or tomorrow or even next week; and maybe I feel there is too much of this around me on the mainland but that there wasn't enough, somehow, for the kids in the caserio. They could deal with obligations, face them, accept them, get them done, uncomplainingly, steadily, sometimes willingly; but they were less good at working out what to do when that wasn't given. And maybe this isn't exactly right either, but as the kids grew older, and the universe of stick ball and Dona Ana and Green Berets and tops receded, their options seemed to narrow, and what had been the right thing to propose for an empty sunny day at twelve wasn't right at twenty. I am probably kidding myself when I think it had anything to do with not enough somethings-to-do. More likely it had to do with too few jobs, though these could be but different ways of saying the same thing. For the younger kids the culture could still appear coherent; but for the older ones it could sometimes barely appear at all, and instead of something to do all they could find was nothing to do at all. (22)

In the beginning I said I thought that nothing to do happens when things change, when obligations are suddenly lifted or a friend moves away or the rain falls on a string of sunny days--and then: what should I do? Or when a game has ended are there are too many things to choose from next--and then, what should I do now? Though it may feel like forever, for a twelve year old nothing



to do is a moment soon to pass, a rest from the heaving ocean of doing nothing, a lull before landing on the shores of got to; but for a twenty year old it is the pass through the moment called adolescence that leads to the eternity of adulthood on the other side. It's an existential crisis, what should I do? and what should I do now? twined together into a single agony of choosing. The obligations that lay on the child--to go to school, to come in to bed--are permanently lifted; childhood friends in identical throes have left or are thinking of leaving; choices, sempervirent choices, clamor to be made: it is childhood for keeps. It may be this sense of significance that forces me to focus on the older kids when I think of nothing to do, or the sound of futility they couldn't keep out of their voices when, pawing through my papers, flipping through my books, they wondered what I was doing. The little kids would ask, "Can I help?" But the older ones would say, "Ah, Denny. I couldn't do all that, not in a thousand years." The younger ones would soon enough find something else to do; but the older ones would stay, listlessly looking on.

Nothing to do...Don't get me wrong, everybody did it, even the old folks wanting to play dominoes and no one to play them with, even they had a way of prowling you couldn't mistake, what to do? what to do? open to the off-chance, open to anything. Everybody did it, but the older kids somehow managed to do it with a vengeance, with an implication of violence. Coming down the walk from his apartment, just showered, clean clothes, I could watch Victor tense with it--in those few seconds get wound up, tight, with nothing to do; and Victor was the least of it; but even Victor, what would he do next year. (23) And it's not that it led to violence itself, or at least not in the kids--though maybe the adult violence, casual in the air, grew out of this somehow. (24) I don't know. It's all wrapped up and I can't unwrap it without ripping it to pieces. They couldn't relax anymore, that's one thing. They were so alert they couldn't see, and this meant that the old mechanism that used to switch them from nothing to do to doing nothing in the twinkling of a bright eye couldn't operate, couldn't switch them; and so they got stuck in nothing to do as they never had when they were younger. It became their way of being. It's funny, but because it happened to all of them, I tend to dissociate it from any of them. Doing nothing was just the way older teenage males (in particular) were. (25) It was a culture trait. But if a young kid had a lot of nothing to do, I put it down to his personality. There is some truth in this. A young kid never has nothing to do for long: in the fluidity of his life, he will always find something, something will always turn up. For younger kids these are statements of fact. For older kids they are empty truisms, offered by parents as talismans against their very real desperation. There is no longer anything fluid about their lives: the richness of doing nothing, of

fishing and tops and kites and stickball, of twirling around the lamppost and dancing down the stairs, of Pop Music Star and Making Movies, it's all evaporated from their lives like water from a pan of salt, and all that's left is hard, solid, crystalline: the evaporites of childhood, got to ("but not just yet"), something ("if only I could figure out what"), nothing to do ("now and forever"). I epitomize to make my point, but the change in the balance of proportions is real. The unlimited potential we claim to see in life is seen only from a distance: from within it is more often this or that and likely neither.

"Want to go coger chinás down in Hoya Honda?"

"Nothing doing."

"Then you want to go fishing?"

"Nothing doing."

"You want to go bother Don Bena's donkey?"

"Nothing doing."

"Then, what do you want to do?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

And sometimes that's how it is, nothing doing, nothing at all...

#### Notes

1. Robert Manners, "Tabara: Subcultures of a Tobacco and Mixed Crops Municipality," in Julian Steward, editor, The People of Puerto Rico, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1956, page 102. Tabara is the name Manners has chosen to disguise--scarcely--Barranquitas. Manner's description of the Calle del Rio and Calle Abajo residents, as well as those of La Perla and El Amparo (Alemania seems not to have existed in the 50s) is appropriate, since it was from among these that caserio residents were originally drawn: "Residents in the town slums are predominantly people who have come in from rural areas of this same municipality. They are artisans, laborers, chauffeurs, truck drivers and helpers, agricultural workers, odd-jobs men, women glove workers, and the growing middle class of technicians, professionals, service personnel, and specialists which has been developing with the growth of outside contact and trade. Their increasing numbers within the past seventy-five years --but especially in the past twenty years --is a reflection of a trend away from self-sufficiency and towards a greater dependency on cash. They say they like being out of the country, the availability of electricity and running water, the relative absence of mud, the life and movement of many people," precisely the sort of things the caserio provides in greater abundance than the slums themselves. His description is also on page 102.

2. An intelligent and recent examination of the issue of Puerto Rican migration is provided by Daniel Amaral in his doctoral dissertation, Family, Community and Place: The Experience of Puerto Rican Emigrants in Worcester, Massachusetts, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, 1977. His attempts to describe the patterns of migration, especially his use of the metaphor of the extended family as a fluid organism (see pages 318-319, though all of Chapter 8 is valuable) begin to get at the truth of the matter.

3. These figures come from a census commissioned by me and Ingrid as part of a larger project, never completed, we were calling "A Geography of Caserio Children." The census was carried out twice, both times by residents. The first census was audited by twenty residents for accuracy and was found to contain numerous errors and inadequacies. Rather than correct it, we simply repeated it. It was again audited by the same twenty residents and then spot checked by me. There may be one or two questions of interpretation (does so-and-so's son, currently in the States, actually live in the caserio or not?), but the data are really very very good. The data collected included the number of children by household, to age, sex and school attended; the place of origin of their parents with respect to the caserio; the length of residence; and partial information about the interrelatedness of the residents.

4. Robert Manners, opere citato, page 145.

5. Ibidem.

6. This is not to say that they don't support the schools, but that because so few of them actually attended school themselves, at least beyond the 4th grade, they have only the vaguest notion of what going to school is like, and consequently only the vaguest idea of how to aid or support it in their children. When given direction, they are almost uniformly responsive, but the directions they were given were usually to attend parents' night or the Christmas assembly. These were extremely well attended by the caserio parents, with many of them playing active roles. But such do nothing to give them an experiential feel for homework. As their children become parents, this situation will begin to change markedly. (For an interesting discussion of this development of rural education on the island, see Dorothy and James Borune, Thirty Years of Change in Puerto Rico, Praeger, New York, 1966.)

7. Robert Paul Smith, "Where did you go?" "Out" "What did you do?" "Nothing," Norton, New York 1957, page 100. It shouldn't be necessary to say that this is one of the handful of great books about kids. But it is, and it is.

8. Ibidem, page 99.

9. A colmado is a general store. The Colmado Junior in the caserio sold, like most colmados,

aspirin by the pill, cigarettes by the cigarette and rum by the drink, as well as fresh bread, lard, and a pretty wide range of fresh and canned foods. Like most colmados it was the local social and entertainment center, and although it lacked the typical pool table and jukebox, it did have a couple of pinball machines. Junior's was not a bar, however, and usually closed around seven-thirty or eight (having opened around six-thirty or seven). Angel, the guy who ran it, lived in the caserio, though, and the store could be opened at need.

10. These games will be described in greater detail later on in the paper.

11. In her amazing book (Love Me, Puerto Rico, Barton House, Hato Rey, PR, 1964--this is the second edition, the first having been published two years earlier), Mary Louise Edwards described a competitive version of this "game:" "Huddled in a semicircle, a group of five or six year old boys were shuffling along the side of the road, bent down from the waist and watching something move on the irregular pavement. Their arms beat the air behind them as though urging a race forward. I thought they had turtles or frogs but when I slowed the car I saw that they were racing marbles and the slope and unevenness of the road made it an unpredictable and exciting game. I was tempted to stop and try my luck" (page 133).

12. Caserio residents distinguished between the sweet orange (la naranja dulce) and the bitter (la naranja agria). The former they called china (because oranges came from China?), the latter naranja plain and simple. The usage is apparently island wide. See Ruben del Rosario, Vocabulario Puertorriqueno, Troutman Press, Sharon, Connecticut, 1965, in the primary vocabulary.

13. Candelaria is Canlemas and falls on 2 February; Carnival is variable, preceding Lent; Mother's day is a big holiday in Puerto Rico, lots of visiting and gifting, a time to show respect ("What's the matter, Denny? You have no respect for Ingrid?" was what I put up with all day long for not showering my wife with presents. This didn't stop other people from giving her presents, even though she had yet to become a mother! Even more amazing was the deluge of presents she got on Teacher's Day, which included some rather intimate garments, apparently typically); the Missa del Gallo is the midnight mass, attended by an astounding number of caserio residents, few of whom regularly could be found in church; parrandas are mobile song-fests that move from home to home during the twelve days of Christmas, once extremely important in the island, now less so, though very much in evidence in the caserio in 1970; and New Year's Eve is New Year's Eve. Mother's Day is an obvious import from the mainland.

14. Alcapurrias are meat-filled fritters, usually fried in lard, made of platanos and bananas, platanos and yauta or platanos and grated yuca (or other starchy food). Alcapurrias

are but one of a family of frituras, basically fried snack, which includes the more substantial empanada, a sort of meat-filled yuca "pie," and pastelillo, a sort of meat "turnover." What happens is that the mother whips up a batch of these in the morning and sends the kids off to sell them from a little table to students at the little regional college across the street from the caserio; or outside the high school; or downtown where the publicos park (a publico is an interurban jitney); or across from the health center; or to the owners of the road-side stands who sell them in turn. Often the cook also vends, but its a lot to carry and the kids invariably help, sometimes being kept home from school to do so. The platan, by the way, the plantain, the banana-like Musa paradisiaca which is never eaten raw, but rather harvested green and baked, fried or boiled. The tostone is another fritura, platian slice pounded and fried. The yuta is the starchy root of the large green-leaved Xanthosoma atrovierens, Xanthosoma caracu and Xanthosoma sagittaeifolium. The latter is sometimes also known as malanga. It is, in any event, a New World aroid similar to the Polynesian taro which tastes and feels a lot like a potato. Yuca is, of course, yuca (not Yucca), the cassava, Manihot esculenta or Manihot utilisima, manioc in other words, another starchy root.

15. For platanos, see footnote #14.

16. As Ruben del Rosario notes (opere citato, page 63), matos are "ciertas semillas dura y de varios colores que utilizan ninos en sus juegos." They are not just plaything, however. They are widely used as beads in necklaces and strung on net to form the outer surface of (usually lines) purses or evening clutches and as such are sold all over the island. Mary Louise Edwards tells the following story: "While I was walking on the beach of Vieques Island I found a marble-sized smooth grey seed. I had seen a necklace of such seeds in a little shop in San Juan called The Tourist Trap. When the taxi man came to take us back to the boat I showed him the seed and he grinned and nodded his head. He knew what it was, 'Matos, I show.' He drove slowly, with his head out the car window looking at the bushes. In a few minutes he stopped and got out of the car, motioning me to follow him. We walked over to a low shrub growing in the sand and he gingerly picked off some dark-brown pods about the size of bantam eggs. The bods were soft-covered with sharp pricklers; I've never seen anything so well protected. I managed to pry a few open with my pencil and inside was one, and sometimes two, of the smooth gray seeds" (opere citato, pages 153-154). Whatever this plant was, it was not what the kids in the caserio meant by matos. They used the word to refer to camandulas --their name--, seeds about which del Rosario writes, "semilla pequena, dura y de color gris perla que se usa para hacer collares y rosarios" (opere citato, page 38). A camandula is, in fact, a rosary, of one or three decades, while the camandula seed is

a hard, pearly white-to-grey-blue capsule-like seed of a variety of the Asiatic grass Coixlacryma-jobi (Job's tears), which has been used in jewelry of various kinds for centuries.

17. Anguinaldos are extremely traditional songs sung and played during the Christmas season, the couple of weeks from Nochebuena (Christmas Eve) through Ano Nuevo to Reyes (Twelfth-night or Epiphany), sometimes know as "las trullas aguinalderas." It is a time of pretty non-stop singing and dancing and drinking and eating.

18. Verguenza is a profoundly powerful social-moral sense of shame. It underwrites the social order and motivates the heavy sense of guilt most Puerto Ricans of my acquaintance felt about simply being alive. If you have verguenza you also have respeto, a sense of what is due others in any social situation. For a discussion of respeto that could have been written of caserio residents in 1970, see Robert Manners, opere citato, pages 144-145.

19. Again, see Robert Manners, opere citato, page 145 where he says, quite simply, "Regular mealtimes in which all of the family sit down together are unknown." This can be unnerving to an observer from a culture in which the sense of family is largely defined through precisely such behavior.

20. Again, it must be pointed out that boredom can be associated with all these states. Certainly people are frequently bored doing things they've got to do. The boredom of assembly-line and house work has become legendary. Many a child has been bored stiff doing something special his parents have planned to keep him entertained. Nothing can be as boring as a trip to a state park! Doing nothing is much less likely to be boring than doing something or got to. By its nature, doing nothing is flexible activity that can be modified or changed to keep interest high when boredom threatens. The threat of boredom is one of the things that structures doing nothing, the threat--not the fact. Nothing to do may be the least likely boring, mostly because anxiety is usually so high. Nothing to do is uncomfortable, but not boring. There are exceptions. Waiting for a connection in a bus terminal is usually filled with nothing to do, is usually boring beyond belief and commonly ridden with anxiety. But these are structural implications of waiting, not mutual dependencies.

21. Neither can an adult. In fact, the terror of nothing to do probably increases with age and a sense of responsibility. Think of Daisy Buchanan wailing, "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?" to the great Gatsby, "and the day after that and the next thirty years?" The distinctions I've made for children are perfectly characteristic of adults as well. Think about thinking. Sometimes your mind is a complete blank. Unless you're a Zen monk and have worked for years to reach this state,

you feel at sea, as we say, lost, empty, flailing for a thought. That's nothing to do. Then there's doing nothing. You're "lost in thought," fantasizing, thinking about this, thinking about that. If somebody asks you what you're thinking about you say, "Oh, nothing." That's doing nothing. Sometimes you're thinking about something, about what to do about the back porch, or how to deal with the neighbor's dog. You're thinking about something and if somebody asks, you'll tell them. Sometimes you're getting ready to leave home for some reason and your kid or somebody comes up and asks you a question and you say, "Wait! Not now! I've got to think!" and after a while you say, "Okay, now what is it?" That's obligatory thinking. It's not always so harried but sometimes it is.

22. As the older kids have more and more nothing to do on their hands they begin to look in other places for the something to do, even the got to, they can't find in the caserio. For some kids this is a search for precisely something to do, action, that they will no longer permit themselves to find in the things they increasingly define as childish. For these kids it is often enough to go to town, to find a "faster" crowd to hang around with. Cano was a good example: running wasn't enough for him, and a few weeks after the race he was hanging around with a downtown crowd, trying heroin, coming home late, moving out of the caserio, in a phrase, though continuing to sleep there. For others, downtown wasn't enough; they moved in with relations in Catano, Bayamon, Rio Piedras, and the States (Chicago, Philadelphia and Brooklyn during the year we lived there. For eighteen year olds there was always the army. A few stayed: some worked the land with or like their fathers; others found the rare job (a sudden opening for a school janitor, a welder's gofer); and one or two merely aged, without maturing

into adults. There was really only one of these in the caserio--one male anyhow (females could do this less obtrusively than males, with less shame)--and he was treated as sort of village idiot, allowed to sweep up at Angel's, babysit, but also the butt of many cruel taunts and jokes (typically calling his "masculinity" into question). A culture without viable places to mature into is a cruel thing to grow up in.

23. What he did was join the army.

24. I have alluded elsewhere to the murder that took place at this time. One guy, a lineman, slashed his neighbor across the chest several times with one of his tools, in a fight ostensibly over the barking of the lineman's dog. There was, of course, family tragedy and a good deal of gossip, but what impressed me was the casualness of the whole affair. SLASH! SLASH! MURDER! And then business as usual, almost as if it had never happened (except that somehow the barking dog was living with us all of a sudden). This was the most dramatic of the many acts of violence, but raised voices, raised fists, and raised machetes, to say nothing of grappling bodies (including those of women, were everyday...It was in the atmosphere, rife, like a storm that was perpetually just about to break. But as adults I associated the violence with, not teenagers (though a caserio gang of some pretension does figure in its history), never younger children.

25. Teenage girls were, by and large, employed by their families in a way that left them less time (approaching none at all) to display their anxieties about the future; and then, theirs were of a different nature to begin with. A girl would continue to live at home in a way that boys couldn't, or wouldn't think of. An exception is discussed at the end of Note 22.