

Carolina Maria de Jesus

From Ragpicker to Best-Selling Author and Back Again

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Carolina Maria de Jesus's life story demonstrates the hardships confronted by even some of the most talented descendants of slaves in Brazil, but, more than just racial prejudice, her humble origins subjected her to compounded bigotry. Born a poor illegitimate black girl in a small town in mountainous Minas Gerais, Carolina also suffered the discrimination commonly experienced by women, the poor, bastards, and rustics both before and after she migrated to the burgeoning industrial urban center of São Paulo as a young woman. While she felt close to and admired her grandfather, whose father had been a slave, she found intolerance even within her own family, where lighter-skinned relatives shunned her and her mother because of their dark skin. Despite these strikes against her, Carolina parlayed her meager education, personal dignity, and harsh past into temporary celebrity when her diary about her life in a São Paulo slum became an international best-seller in the early 1960s. Her grit, independence, and lack of deference, however, ultimately alienated many of the middle- and upper-class white Brazilians who had initially supported her. Like all of us, Carolina had contradictory views that made some advocates for the poor who lavished praise on her work uncomfortable. While she railed against the prejudice of whites and browns, she also at times disparaged blacks and poor migrants from the Northeast as lazy and irresponsible. After briefly climbing into the ranks of Brazil's middle class through her book sales, Carolina slipped back into a precarious lower-class lifestyle before she died in relative obscurity in the late 1970s.

Carolina's voice gave rare insight into the lives of those millions of rural Brazilians who migrated to the cities in the twentieth century. São Paulo, Brazil's largest urban center and its industrial and financial heart, remains dotted with makeshift slums. After Carolina's day, crime rings that made their money from narcotrafficking maintained order and paid for local improvements with drug profits. The police only entered these neighborhoods in large numbers to make arrests. Even though the favelas were less threatening in Carolina's day, crime, deadly disputes between neighbors, and squalid conditions were common. Still, some of São Paulo's most powerful politicians came to know the outspoken Carolina during their campaign swings through the shantytowns. Although many ordinary

workers lived in the slums, favela dwellers were stereotyped as vagrants, criminals, and prostitutes.

*As a nineteen-year-old exchange student in Mendoza, Argentina, Robert M. Levine read in the newspaper that a black Brazilian writer, Carolina Maria de Jesus, would be appearing at a bookstore to autograph the Spanish edition of her newly published diary about slum life in São Paulo. When Levine mentioned it to some Argentine friends, they replied that no macaco ("monkey," insulting Argentine slang for blacks as well as their Brazilian neighbors) could have written a book, an argument that many educated Brazilians believed as well. Levine never managed to visit the bookstore, but he used the English translation of Carolina's diary when he started teaching in 1966 and continued to do so until his death on April 1, 2003. In addition, an oral history project initiated by Levine in collaboration with José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy and Juliano Spyer led to the publication of nine books on Carolina, including *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (1995). Royalties from their books and documentaries made about Carolina go to her grandchildren. In 1981 the University of Miami recruited Bob to develop one of the most successful Ph.D. programs in Latin American history in the United States.*

From 1989 until the beginning of 2003, Levine directed the Center for Latin American Studies in Miami. He published more than two dozen books on subjects ranging from Brazilian social and political history to Cuban history and the use of historical photographs as documents. He was one of the most productive and generous historians of Brazil, and his legacy lives on in his colleges, students, and publications.

Carolina Maria de Jesus, the great-grandchild of Brazilian slaves, was born in 1915 in poverty to an unmarried mother in Sacramento, a lethargic rural town in the dairy state of Minas Gerais.¹ A harsh childhood burdened by poverty and discrimination marked her for life, but it also gave her the motivation to struggle to improve herself. She had become literate largely on her own after attending for a scant two years a private school paid for by a benefactress, the wife of a local landowner. As a young girl, she developed a passion for reading. She shocked her mother by reading aloud the labels in shop windows and the names on storefronts. Her peers mocked her and claimed that a black girl enamored of reading must be a creature of the devil. By then she had developed a feisty personality; and rather than groveling in shame, as she claimed her mother did, she soldiered on, unperturbed.

When her mother died, Carolina, by then a young woman, migrated to the industrializing city of São Paulo in search of work. She became determined to write down her feelings and to tell her story. Starting in 1955, she began to keep a diary in notebooks fashioned from scraps of

paper she found while foraging for her living in garbage. Her diary entries, written with a powerfully personal narrative force, reflected a mixture of hope and ruefulness. She captured moments of poignancy in a touching manner: once, when she ran out of things to eat, her daughter Vera asked Carolina to sell her to her godmother, Dona Julita, "because she has delicious food." Whether or not all diaries are subconsciously written for others, Carolina's handwritten fragments conveyed a richly felt sense of her personal life. She was, as feminist scholars say, "constructing a self."

Carolina's initial success resulted in large part from fortuitous timing. Brazil had reached a crest of national optimism over economic development and populist reform in the late 1950s. Economic development, however, had left many Brazilians behind as rural migrants, such as Carolina, crowded into unhealthy urban slums. Many people saw hope in Carolina's rags-to-riches story. To them, she embodied the possibility that with help, *favela* residents could rise out of poverty and transform themselves. Carolina's personal honesty and her unwillingness to fall into despair contributed to the popular view of most slum dwellers as "poor but honest."

During the 1950s, Carolina, who had always dreamed of being a writer despite her two meager years of schooling, tried to find publishers while working as a maid for wealthy *paulista* families. She sent a short poem to a newspaper, which was printed, but publishers rejected other submissions of stories, plays, poems, and novels. Interviewed on Brazilian television after the success of her diary made her a celebrity, she said on camera, "If I weren't so happy I would cry. When I first gave my manuscript to Brazilian editors they laughed at this poor Negro woman with calloused hands who wore rags and only had two years of schooling. They told me I should write on toilet paper." She concluded the interview by saying: "Today I had lunch in a wonderful restaurant and a photographer took my picture. I told him: 'Write under the photo that Carolina who used to eat from trashcans now eats in restaurants. That she has come back into the human race and out of the garbage dump.'"

In April 1958, São Paulo newspaper reporter Audálio Dantas discovered that Carolina had written a diary about her hard life; he managed to edit it and published some of the entries in his paper. In August 1960, Dantas had the edited diary printed under the title *Quarto de despejo* (literally, Garbage room, but translated into English as *Child of the Dark*). It became the best-selling book in Brazilian history and brought its author worldwide fame.

Child of the Dark would not likely have been published at all if Carolina's diaries had been discovered before 1958 or after 1961. President Juscelino Kubitschek's successor in office in 1960 was the mercurial

Jânio Quadros. He resigned abruptly in 1961 and fled the country when his government became paralyzed in the midst of economic stagnation and political polarization. His successor, João Goulart, advocated leftist reforms that further polarized Brazilian politics and heightened ideological rhetoric in the tense Cold War climate that pervaded Latin America after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. In this climate, Carolina's diary would have been dismissed as being too naive. The right-wing military dictatorship that seized power in 1964 by overthrowing Goulart was little interested in social reforms. It initiated an era of Chicago School economic development that greatly increased the disparity between rich and poor and left many Brazilians feeling helpless and angry.

Brazilian society had become more divided than ever between an affluent world of mostly whites and a marginalized world of poor blacks and persons of mixed racial ancestry. Women fared much less well than men in this world. Until 1988, Brazil's civil laws discriminated against women. For instance, before a battered wife could press charges against her husband, he had to give his written permission. Carolina, a poor black woman, possessed an iron will and a strong sense of what she wanted. She was aware of the legacies of racism, gender prejudice, and political neglect of the poor, but she dealt with these burdens only as they directly affected her.

Carolina thought herself rich when Dantas opened a bank account for her in the amount of 858 U.S. dollars. The fact that she had to cash bills for 1,000 cruzeiros (\$4.88) to make change amazed her and her children. She earned the equivalent of 20,000 or 30,000 dollars (in 1996 value) and a few thousand more from American and French royalties, for her an undreamed-of fortune. On her earnings she was able to afford a maid. When she wanted to withdraw money from her bank account, she had to take the bus downtown and wait for Dantas, who then walked with her to the bank to sign for her. Her wealth disappeared quickly, however; she was besieged by requests for money, and she doled it out generously. She paid for an unsuccessful samba record featuring her voice, and she likely subsidized the poorly received editions of her later books.

Carolina Maria de Jesus died in 1977 not in utter poverty but in austere circumstances, a strange fate for the author who had sold more books than any other Brazilian. As a poor black woman, she faced unceasing prejudice. Given Carolina's unprecedented recognition worldwide for her insights about the lives of the social underclass, it is difficult to understand why so few women rose to her defense when attacks began after the first, flush days of her fame. Female Brazilian journalists generally treated her as harshly, or more harshly, than did their male counterparts. If Carolina had been a man, she likely would not have ended up in the *favela*. Most upper-class families preferred live-in maids, and

they routinely fired their female servants if they became pregnant. They did not want the child living in their home and their employee distracted with child care. The disdain directed at Carolina after her publishing success was perhaps a predictable response to an unconstrained, outspoken black female.

When Carolina died in 1977 she was a recluse. Her diary remained out of print for nearly two decades until it was reissued in a limited edition. *Casa de alvenaria* (Brick house) remained out of print and ignored. The generation who became adults in the early 1990s—born during the military dictatorship with its antipathy to social questions—had no way of knowing who she was when older scholars and intellectuals revived the debate over her significance following the “discovery” of her surviving children and the controversy over whether or not she merited recognition.

In all, she produced three autobiographical volumes. One of them, *Bitita's Diary*, about her early years (Bitita was her nickname), was published in France after her death and in Brazil only years later. Her autobiographical writing reflected her bitterness, although she fought against despair, often ending the description of a harrowing day with something that had made her happy—the sunset, or the lights of the city at night. She wrote of death and of watching restaurant employees spill acid on garbage so that the poor could not rummage for food. She wrote about excrement, drunkenness, sons who beat their parents, prostitution, undernourishment, and hopelessness. “Black is our life,” she said, “everything is black around us.” She wrote about race, about how she had always been discriminated against, about how she disliked idle people, about how she disliked most of her fellow blacks, whom she considered lazy. No revolutionary, she believed that if people worked hard, within the system, they could aspire to a better life.

On November 27, 1960, she returned to Brazil from Argentina for the publication of *Casa de alvenaria* in Rio de Janeiro. When her Argentine editor visited her a week later in São Paulo, she asked him for 20,000 cruzeiros to buy a suit for her son João. On December 12 she flew to Montevideo. As in Buenos Aires she was received warmly and asked hard but respectful questions about society and about her opinions and philosophy. She confessed that she had never expected her writings to be published, that she wrote to forget the bitterness of her life. She was struck by how clean the streets were; there were no beggars, and the Uruguayans dressed well and showed that they were cultured. She was taken to visit a neighborhood of *cantegriles*, a kind of slum, where she noted that the government was constructing permanent housing, with running water and bathrooms, to replace the shanties. There was a government school in the slum, although many men and youths were

without work. She advised the poor Uruguayans who came to see her to plant gardens and raise chickens.

In Montevideo, when she left the slum, Carolina was taken to visit the president of Uruguay, Victor Haedo, in his palace, where he embraced her and presided over a luncheon of Brazilian *feijoada* (bean stew). The next day, he and Carolina rode in a motorcade down the streets of the capital to the airport, where they flew to Salto to dedicate a monument. The archbishop was present as well as the governor and the chief of the president's military staff. She spent much of the day with Haedo. The reception given to Carolina less than a year removed from a São Paulo slum was stunning, although it was only sparsely reported back home in Brazil. Her reception in Argentina and Chile was similar. On January 16, 1961, she addressed a filled lecture hall at an international conference attended by Nobel Prize winners, Columbia University professor Frank Tannenbaum, and the Mexican and Cuban writers Carlos Fuentes and Alejo Carpentier.

In the United States and Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Cuba, and the Soviet-bloc nations, critics hailed Carolina as a heroine, a lone voice expressing the cry for help from the underprivileged classes. But fortune's pendulum swung back as soon as she returned from her second publicity trip to Chile, the last of her tours. The flood of requests for interviews and radio and television appearances stopped, although journalists continued to consider her fair game and dropped in, if now sporadically, at any time. Her royalties diminished abruptly. Although *Child of the Dark* became an international sensation, translated into more than a dozen languages, her publisher never anticipated the degree of its success and therefore sold the rights to foreign literary agents, who then assumed the bulk of the royalties. She would receive some meager payments from publishers in the United States, Holland, and France, but not a single royalty check from any other country. There were a few payments for movie rights, but except for a documentary made in Germany and another by TV Globo, little came of the projects to film her life story. Her last two books, issued while she was alive, *Pedaços de fome* (Pieces of hunger) and *Provérbios* (Proverbs), were commercial failures.

Brazilian intellectuals on the left rejected Carolina because she was not, in the words of one, a "typical proletariat." Her beliefs and attitudes did not fit the image of the heroic poor whom leftists imagined inhabited Brazil's fetid slums. She was not a revolutionary; her quest was personal, to fend for and protect her family. Nor did conservatives recognize her, even though she advocated a deeply felt work ethic, did not drink, and in later years gave statements to the press that seemed to support the military dictatorship. Her political views, in fact, were very much like

those of O. J. Simpson in the United States, who declined to support the Olympics boycott by African Americans in 1968 for the same reason that Carolina gave for her lack of political activism: "you can't change the world until you change yourself." Some Brazilians considered her, according to one university professor, a *palhaço* (clown).

The social reformism that had been prominent in 1960 when her diary was published had been replaced by a polarization of attitudes by the time of her death. At one end of the political spectrum stood right-wing backers of the military, who favored economic development over social change, and at the other end, a small group of leftists, mostly driven underground, who ignored Carolina because she was not revolutionary enough for them. The 1977 obituary published in Rio de Janeiro's *Jornal do Brasil* illustrates this ambivalence:

Carolina Maria de Jesus, the author of *Quarto de despejo*, died yesterday . . . as poor as she had been when she began to write the diary which would turn into the major best-seller in Brazil of all time. . . . In 1961 her book royalties allowed Carolina to purchase a brick house, a symbol—as she often pointed out—of her personal victory over hunger and misery. But her second book failed to attain the popularity of the first, and she began to quarrel with her friends and supporters, including the journalist Audálio Dantas, who had discovered her scavenging for paper on which to write her diary, and who had acted as her agent. Little by little, Carolina dissipated the resources that her book had brought her. She purchased everything in sight: she visited the famous, frequented the salons of the rich—but in time she began to irritate her hosts. . . . Her inability to adjust to success cost her dearly. . . . Forced to sell her brick house for nonpayment of debts, she relocated her family to a rural shack along the Parelheiros road. There she raised chickens and pigs and lived in poverty, refusing, however, to become a burden on her now grown children. It was in this place that she was found yesterday, dead of an attack of acute asthma. When her body was discovered, the mayor of nearby Embú-Guaçú offered a valedictory. She was buried in the cemetery at Vila Cipó, a polluted industrial suburb near Parelheiros, the place to which she had escaped in search of fresh air and seclusion.

Some educated Brazilians disliked Carolina because they considered her a traitor to their idealized image of the working class. Instead of wearing modest clothes, Carolina wobbled in stylish high-heeled shoes, and she talked back to wealthier and better-educated Brazilians who expected deference from a poor black woman. She also clashed with their stereotypes about race. Although she expressed pride in being black, she preferred romantic relationships with white men; each of her children had been fathered by a white man from a different country. In the 1960s, a decade in which black pride became an international movement, Carolina's preference for white lovers came to be seen as out of step to

many leftist and black Brazilian activists. Although she wrote that she thanked God for making her a Brazilian, she also castigated her fellow countrymen for their shortcomings.

In many ways, Carolina explored the nuances of Brazilian life as if she were a foreign traveler because her status as an outcast made her almost an alien among her own people. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, the French visitor to the United States in the 1830s, Carolina brilliantly described social contradictions and singular secrets.² She casually described little things about daily life that most people did not see or write about because they were considered taboo, trivial, or in bad taste. In *Birita's Diary*, she meets a woman named Nair who is so depressed at being black that she does not go to "dances for blacks," a cogent reference to the segregated lives of blacks and whites in her country and especially in São Paulo. Carolina quietly hoped for racial harmony, but her observations of Nair and other everyday realities unmasked the national myth of racial democracy—that Brazil was uniquely blessed among nations because of its heritage of racial harmony and cooperation. When she saw whites and blacks together, she commented on how good this made her feel, just as she was glad when she visited her black friend Ivete and found that she lived in a house that was comfortable and well furnished. Her comments about her disappointment in the lack of traditional May Day commemorations (an international holiday celebrating workers) in 1961 reveals sympathy with working-class concerns. Her observations about a black youth who lost the use of his hand in an industrial accident, but for whom President Getúlio Vargas's new labor legislation did nothing, divulged much about the legacy of this popular political figure. (Vargas committed suicide before he was to be ousted as president in 1954, but he left nostalgic memories among the poor for his populist rhetoric on behalf of ordinary Brazilians.)

No one in Brazil spoke out against the cruel insinuations that journalists made about Carolina's person. Nor did most Brazilian scholars believe that the conditions that Carolina had exposed merited greater national debate. No one acknowledged that it was perfectly understandable for a former slum dweller to have difficulty in adjusting to a world that reviled people like her. By emphasizing her brusqueness, eccentricities, and faux pas the media deflected attention from her social critique of society's many injustices.

Throughout her life, Carolina was weighed down by the scorn heaped upon her by society. Even though she shielded herself and her children from the squalid aspects of slum life, these conditions took their toll. By the time she was liberated from the *favela* by a stroke of fate, it was too late. She was exhausted, too beaten down to learn middle-class manners,

to censor her thoughts, to remove the layers of suffering from her psyche, or to prescribe solutions for society's ills.

Hostility to her blackness also plagued Carolina. Most educated Brazilians accepted the myth of Brazilian racial democracy despite the obvious evidence of racism surrounding them, especially discrimination against people of very dark skin. Carolina's writings describe racist incidents constantly, almost matter-of-factly, long before other Brazilians acknowledged racial prejudice. Foreigners less influenced by this racial mythology often recognized race prejudice when they visited Brazil. For example, Hollywood film director Orson Welles, invited in 1941 to participate in a birthday celebration broadcast for dictator Getúlio Vargas, was told that he could not bring a black friend with him into the studio. Welles's attempts to film *It's All True*, an anthology with segments about Carnival and the plight of northeastern raft fishermen, was criticized in a secret letter from his Brazilian production manager to the police complaining about Welles's "insistence on emphasizing the unsavory Negro element and mixture of the races."



In 1996, Vera Eunice de Jesus Lima, Carolina's daughter, revealed that she possessed thirty-seven of her mother's handwritten notebooks. Some had been copied by Carolina from the originals, in some cases with changes. Most of the more than 4,500 pages had been written after Carolina moved to Parelheiros, then on the outskirts of São Paulo. There she fell back into poverty but recouped enough economic stability to send her children to school.

Her unedited diary entries offer two kinds of insight into Carolina Maria de Jesus. First, they show her to be more complex than the two-dimensional woman depicted by Dantas. He knew that Carolina's lack of tact would irritate readers who expected lower-class celebrities to know their place; as a good journalist, moreover, he also knew the importance of simple, straightforward writing and aimed, through deletions in her text, to simplify her message. The problem is that Dantas's editing muted her personality, which was more feisty and angry than readers of her published diaries encountered. Readers of her diaries wondered why Carolina seemed so docile. In truth, she was angry and frustrated much of the time. She had a much deeper insight into how Brazilian society functioned, and she was willing to name names. She may not have always been accurate—she was entirely dependent on her own resources—but her perceptions were tenaciously held. Her experience shows us that indigents were capable of engaging the system that trapped them, and

that if that system produced individuals whom society considered loose cannons, there were many reasons for it.

The second contribution of her unedited writing is the welter of new information it offers about Carolina's life and, by extension, the lives of the poor, especially in the entries that continued after her two diaries were published. We also have additional detail about the periods covered by the entries. This information is especially valuable for the insight it offers into Carolina's new role as a consequence of her celebrity. Brazilian society was not accustomed to indigent black single mothers talking to reporters, or being interviewed on television, or writing about their lives. We should not be surprised at how she reacted. The woeful circumstances of her early life had steeled her to rejection and had given her a tough coat of psychological armor. Carolina was always an outsider, yet unlike many outsiders, she craved acceptance and fame; she wanted to be recognized as a writer, to achieve upward mobility.

Not surprisingly, her observations sometimes confused her readers; some found her contradictory; others, elusive and inconsistent. Not only was she a self-taught writer, but she was also tormented by hunger and by the frequent crises that afflicted slum dwellers. When the rainy season came to São Paulo, her shack, along with the others in her riverfront slum, was flooded, and her family had to find other housing. They might have to live in doorways or under bridges until the waters subsided. Once she was hospitalized after a woman in the slum stabbed her. Her routine frequently was disrupted by the need to protect her children from threatened violence, or by her inability to find enough junk in garbage to sell and then buy food. She had to spend hours each day in line at the *favela's* single spigot to draw water. With these hardships, she underwent mercurial mood shifts from despair to joy to hope to dejection. At the height of her fame, her writing style became reflective. She never shed her depression, however, although she had an astonishing ability to rise to the occasion when she had to fend for her children and keep her family afloat.

Her diary entries reveal a homespun philosophy that demands honesty in relationships between men and women. Carolina, whether she knew it or not, was a practicing feminist in a society that was overwhelmingly dominated by males. She refused offers of marriage because she knew that the men would not respect her and would treat her as their servant. "I have loved," she wrote, but "I have never been in love." She defied the Catholic Church's insistence on marriage as the basis for having children and raising them, and she insisted on choosing her own sexual partners. Even living amid garbage and sometimes covered with sores, she found herself sexually attractive to white men from higher social classes, yet she never betrayed her independence to exploit this advantage, even for the benefit of her children.

She decried the suffering of undernourished and illiterate children and preached basic family values that she held as guiding principles both before and after she became famous. Mothers, she believed, were duty bound to observe their children, care for them and protect them from danger, and discipline them when they were in error. Other *favela* parents shrugged when their children stole or cursed or acted irresponsibly; Carolina thrashed hers when they misbehaved. In a society in which the poor for centuries had drowned their pain in *cachaça*, she refused alcohol and tried (ultimately in vain) to keep her sons from liquor as well.

She lashed out at sycophants, playboys, perverts, unfaithful husbands, drunks, layabouts, and people who refused to work and who lived on the dole. She excoriated politicians who cynically promised poor voters what they never intended to deliver. She demanded that society show responsibility in providing education, health care, and housing for the poor, but she showed no sympathy to those who called for radical reform. She criticized Brazil out of her love for her country. She never alienated herself from the law or from political authorities, some of whom she cultivated to obtain favors. She once convinced São Paulo's popular mayor, Adhemar de Barros, to pay for a hospital stay. Her verses took landowners and arrogant politicians to task. Her statements to the press gave her entry into the offices (but not the hearts) of local officials, publishers, the media, and some members of the elite. Despite her generally favorable disposition toward the have-nots in society, she knew that people perceived her as a dirty black woman to be scorned.

As soon as her diaries were serialized by Dantas's newspaper before the first edition was published, she guided not only Dantas through her *favela* but also other newspapermen and photographers. Even after her celebrity had faded, she served as a conduit into the slums for filmmakers, journalists, and politicians. When the Finnish writer Eva Vastari came to her house, Carolina turned over her children's bedroom to the visitor. Eva paid her nothing but did buy some food for her host; Carolina acted as her personal escort. These visits must have been difficult for Carolina because reporters often criticized her clothing and the way she kept house. Once, Eva accused Carolina's children of stealing money from her purse. Although Carolina defended her children tooth and nail, she pulled her son José Carlos aside and told him that if he was guilty she would feed him poison.

The unedited diary entries provide invaluable details about the changing composition of the *favelas* in São Paulo as migrants from Brazil's North and Northeast poured into the slums of the industrialized cities of the South. Blunt and opinionated, Carolina looked down on these migrants, in part because she herself was from the interior of Minas Gerais—a place of higher status than the Northeast—but mostly because

the hapless migrants seemed to her to have given up. They lacked her burning work ethic and her sense of civic duty. Carolina's frequent calls from a pay phone to the radio patrol—the Brazilian equivalent of dialing 911—and to the police document her determination to rid the *favelas* of troublemakers and law breakers. Foreigners—namely, Portuguese but also some Japanese—were also changing the character of the slum population. Carolina was astonished by a Japanese woman who claimed that children were “worse than the devil,” and in her diaries she berated the woman for “engaging her mouth before engaging her brain.” On the other hand, she admired Japanese men, whom she considered hardworking, eager to better themselves, and not disdainful like the northeasterners.

She wrote about calling the police to stop fights in the *favela*, about her conversations in the street, about her appeals for medical assistance. All were aimed at dispelling what she considered the elite's contempt for those forced to live in slums and shantytowns. This goal is significant given that Carolina wrote during a period of peak interest in Brazil in social reform, when public sentiment (and real estate speculation) focused on *favela* removal as a leading solution for the expanding urban center. After she became a celebrity, she was always aware of the tenuousness of her fame, and she flailed away at social ills as if she knew that she had little time left before she would fade from public attention.

Carolina reveled in the prominence that came to her in 1960 and was susceptible to notice and flattery, especially from men of higher social status. She was receptive to journalists and other promoters of her talents, and she often confided in them, a trust which they often betrayed. She was quick to report instances of hypocritical behavior or attitudes that she saw as demeaning or derogatory toward the poor, especially blacks. She recorded her horror at hearing a socially prominent Argentine claim that the rich were the descendants of Abel and the poor the descendants of Cain. Once, she tried to learn to drive a car. Perhaps this goal was part of her yearning for middle-class status; perhaps she thought that being seen behind the wheel of an automobile would bring her respect. Instead, it had the opposite effect: when she steered the driving school's automobile down her street, her neighbors, who had been hostile to her from the first day she moved in, stared at her as if, in her words, she came from another planet.

Her assumed role as spokeswoman for the downtrodden empowered her to maintain her stoicism and not let insults get her down. She sat quietly outside the offices of would-be publishers to speak with people whom she knew were inside, although their secretaries had assured her that they had not returned from lunch. It irked her that her desire to purchase a new house in the countryside and pay the installments from

the rent of her present house was repudiated by her sponsors and publishers. Still, she persisted, resisting affronts to her social status, her skin color, and her gender. She refused to be defeated by people who inwardly snubbed her while they outwardly accorded her her due. She shocked and charmed, cajoled and flirted. At the height of her popularity as a public figure she threatened to cancel her publicity trip to Argentina and Chile if her sponsors did not guarantee that in her absence they would buy food for her children, who stayed behind in São Paulo. She knew that despite the clamor about her diary, no one really cared about her. She was and always would be a loner, the sole responsible person in her life and the lives of her children while they were still young.



Carolina wrote almost every night after she put her children to bed. She began most of her diary entries in the same way, telling when she woke up in the morning and what chores she set out to do, and then following the day's activities hour by hour. Some of her entries, however, were brief; others went on for pages. For the published versions of *Quarto de despejo* and *Casa de alvenaria*, Audálio Dantas shortened most of the entries and cut out enormous sections that he considered repetitious or otherwise unnecessary. He deleted details of her morning wakeup, her daily routine, her repetitive comments about neighbors, repaying loans, or paying off bills to local merchants. For some reason, Dantas switched around dates, adding sections to entries from other days and taking small liberties with the diaries to enhance their readability. He did not, however, write a single word that was not hers. He edited by selective cutting, not by adding or by making changes.

As a result, the first diary, *Quarto de despejo*, ran only 181 pages with fairly large type and wide margins. More than two-thirds of the entries written by Carolina for the period of the published diary were deleted. Yet this is not to say that *Quarto* suffered because of its length; its simple brevity, in fact, contributed to its power as a social document and testimony. But the edited *Quarto* as well as the edited *Casa de alvenaria* projected an image of their author that shortchanged her personality, simplifying it and robbing it of the contradictory elements that made Carolina more human than the packaged diaries suggested.

The Carolina Maria de Jesus of the edited diaries, then, comes through as a desperately poor, black single mother and shantytown dweller who is observant, aware of her surroundings, dutiful toward her children, and judgmental toward *favela* neighbors of whom she disapproved. The unedited diaries, however, show her in a far less restrictive way. The questions that fly off the pages of her published diaries—why she was

always so docile, so single-minded, so patient—emerge more clear-cut. Instead of being resigned, her personality flares up unpredictably and then subsides. Sometimes she seems manically agitated; at other times she lapses into depression. She not only records her observations but also offers them in great detail, believing the common stereotype that marginalized victims of society did not have complex explanations for their plight. She is astute and politically savvy in her criticisms, so much so that Dantas thought that he had to sanitize them lest her militant tone compromise her promoters and those who sympathized with her.

Carolina's two published diaries appeared in 1960 and 1961, at the height of national and local political reformism in Brazil. But this was reformism held in check—not the leftism of militants, but a measured set of demands that stopped well short of calling for structural social change. By packaging Carolina as a simple woman whose complaints seemed poetic in their innocence, Dantas managed to create diaries that neither threatened readers nor motivated them to demand political reform. What she really said in her diaries would not have ingratiated her with the authorities in São Paulo. Had Dantas's cuts not been made, it is likely that the editors at Francisco Alves would not have risked publishing them.

Few people understood the thickness of the protective shell that Carolina had been forced to construct around herself in response to decades of fierce adversity. Audálio Dantas did not remain her patron for long. Carolina, he insisted, would not accept the relationship he needed to impose on her as her agent. She never asked to be defended or cared for—she was too independent for that. Dantas explained that he could not deal with what he considered Carolina's petulance and irascibility. His opinion is consistent with that of other journalists and intellectuals who gave up on her. Perhaps it is understandable that her diary continued to sell well outside of Brazil, where readers wanted to find in her words an expression of rage against poverty and suffering that Brazilians grew tired of because they considered her attitudes simplistic and self-serving. She was the product of a society that tolerated the most glaring maldistribution of income in the world, yet she did not lend her voice to calls for massive social change. She simply wanted to escape from poverty with her children and to become a famous writer.

Carolina's diary entries, on the other hand, record a wealth of new detail that opens our eyes to the realities of poverty in underdeveloped societies. The exactness of her charges shatters our preconceptions about how marginalized people relate to the system that overwhelms them. Dantas's editing retains some of the shocking revelations, but on the whole it obscures the extent to which *favelados* such as Carolina struggled to engage the system. Carolina recorded people's reactions to what they

perceived as unjust prices and fare increases; she reacted to measures taken by São Paulo's corrupt populist mayor, Adhemar de Barros, to police the streets as well as trains and buses. She demanded accountability for public figures, particularly in those actions that affected the poor. In so doing, she was advocating active political citizenship for people denied voices by a system that gave them the vote but then paternalistically doled out to them empty rewards—for example, the playground equipment donated to Carolina's *favela* on the eve of the 1958 mayoral election, an act that, ironically, made it possible for Dantas to meet Carolina and bring to light her diaries. These diaries show us that even *favelados* wanted to be informed, wanted to be consulted, wanted explanations for urban renewal, fare increases, the unavailability of hospital beds in emergency wards. An outspoken nobody, she risked arrest for her militancy. How sad it was that after she was discovered, she was showcased as a sideshow freak—an illegitimate black scavenger who dreamed about Heaven—while her courage was ignored and her prescriptions for needed social change were brushed aside.

While *Quarto de despejo* offered details, Dantas balanced Carolina's criticisms carefully with passages of idealism and hope. Taken as a whole, Carolina's written output swings the balance to the darker side. Her unedited words provide invaluable new evidence about the way poor people related to their world and how they coped with it.

As a nontraditional author whose untutored works lacked polish and who spoke about matters considered banal by most intellectuals, Carolina's writings have been excluded from the Brazilian literary canon. Irving Stern's 400-page *Dictionary of Brazilian Literature* devotes only two lines to her. Carolina has never been included in a standard anthology. Only a single Brazilian critic, Marisa Lajolo, publicly acknowledged in 1995 when the Brazilian version of *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus* was published, that her story contained a valuable lesson. Carolina had died, Lajolo noted, in 1977, the same year that José Louzeiro's novel on the evils of street life was published.³ Louzeiro's book inspired Hector Babenco to make his stunning film, *Pixote, the Law of the Weakest* (1981), whose principal real-life child actor, Fernando Ramos da Silva, was assassinated by the São Paulo police in 1987 as the blight of urban poverty and violence depicted by Carolina Maria de Jesus in 1960 continued.

Brazilian critics have continued to berate Carolina and to denigrate her significance. In November 1993, following the publication of the new Ática edition of her diary, literary scholar Wilson Martins wrote in his syndicated column, which appeared in more than forty newspapers across Brazil, a savage and ignorant dismissal of *Quarto de despejo* as a "literary mystification" and a fake. He attacked the book's "precious" language. He commented on Carolina's "casual lovers," as if her personal

behavior canceled her right to be respected for her achievement. Dantas's outraged reply was published only six weeks later in the same newspaper, buried on an inside page. This author wrote to Martins in Curitiba, respectfully explaining that there was hard written evidence to prove that Dantas had not put words in her mouth, and mailed him a prepublication copy of the manuscript of *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. Although Martins perfunctorily acknowledged receipt of the letter and manuscript, he did not change his mind. In a subsequent review of the Brazilian version of the study about Carolina published in Rio de Janeiro in April 1995, he repeated the charge that Carolina's diary was a "literary mystification" and called foreign academics who assign it for classroom reading "naïve" and "ingenuous."

For some Brazilian intellectuals it remains easier to dismiss the legitimacy of Carolina's message than to confront the harsh realities of desperate urban poverty and the sexism, racism, and class prejudice that her life story and writings reveal. After Carolina's death, *favelas* have become dominated by well-armed gangs who thrive on the drug trade in cocaine, which swept urban centers in the economically sluggish decade of the 1980s when the military loosened its grip on repressive government power. Recently, jailed drug kingpins have demonstrated their ability to conduct their affairs via cell phone: ordering terrorist attacks and assassinations, and forcing merchants to close their businesses to demonstrate their power to state authorities and a frightened public. It would seem that the luxury of ignoring the many problems of urban slums that Carolina laid bare is one that politicians, scholars, and an informed public can no longer afford.

NOTES

1. Some of the text for this essay first appeared in Robert M. Levine and José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, *Cinderela Negra: A Saga de Carolina Maria de Jesus* (Rio de Janeiro: Editoria UFRJ, 1994); Robert M. Levine and Melvin S. Arrington Jr., *I'm Going to Have a Little House* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Robert M. Levine, ed., *Bitita's Diary* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy and Robert M. Levine, eds., *Meu Estranho Diário* (São Paulo: Editora Xama, 1997); and Robert M. Levine and José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, *The Unedited Diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

2. See George Wilson Pierson, *Tocqueville in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

3. Marisa Lajolo, Preface to Meihy, *Cinderela Negra*, i-ii.

SUGGESTED READINGS

On life in Brazil's *favelas* or slums see, for example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley, 1992); and Janice E. Perlman, *Rio's Favelados and the Myths of Marginality* (Berkeley, 1973). For more views from Brazilian women of various backgrounds see *Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories*, interviews edited and translated by Daphne Patai (New Brunswick, 1988); on poor women and respectability see Sueann Caulfield, *In Defense of Honor: Sexual Morality, Modernity, and Nation in Early Twentieth Century Brazil* (Durham, 2000); and on race and racism in twentieth-century Brazil see George Reid Andrews, *Blacks and Whites in São Paulo, Brazil, 1888–1988* (Madison, 1991). For an overview of populist politics and society in the era of Getúlio Vargas see Robert M. Levine, *Father of the Poor? Vargas and His Era* (Cambridge, 1998).