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## MULTI-LAYERED SUBJECTIVITY ISSUES IN CAROLINA MARIA DE JESUS'S *UNEDITED DIARIES*

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**ABSTRACT:** Carolina Maria de Jesus, a Brazilian female black writer of the late 1950s, narrates in her diaries her harsh life as a slum-dweller. In the present work we aim to analyze the narrative elements through which the author constructs her subjectivity, at the same time revealing the marginalizing socio-political scenario of Brazil. We understand her diaries as an example of narrative power and a counter-narrative to social and economical stratification and to the mainstream white intellectual elite. Our source of research is the unedited edition of her diaries, alongside with biographies and articles on de Jesus.

**KEYWORDS:** Carolina Maria de Jesus, Afro-Brazilian literature, narrative power

## MÚLTIPLAS QUESTÕES DE SUBJETIVIDADE NOS DIÁRIOS DE CAROLINA MARIA DE JESUS

**RESUMO:** Carolina Maria de Jesus, escritora negra dos anos cinquenta e sessenta, narra em seus diários sua difícil vida como moradora de favela. No presente trabalho, objetivamos analisar os elementos narrativos através dos quais a autora constrói sua subjetividade, revelando, ao mesmo tempo, o cenário sociopolítico marginalizante do Brasil. Concebemos seus diários como um exemplo do poder narrativo e como uma contranarrativa à estratificação social e econômica e à elite intelectual branca dominante. Nossa fonte de pesquisa são as versões sem edição de seus diários, bem como biografias e artigos sobre de Jesus.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Carolina Maria de Jesus, literatura afro-brasileira, poder da narrativa



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## Introduction

Carolina Maria de Jesus is among the very few black female writers in Brazil. If investigated, this information alone would take us to a lot of issues concerning impediments which prevent African descendants from climbing the social and intellectual ladder in this country. Add to this statement the many raw entries that pervade de Jesus's diaries with facts of her harsh life and one may picture a good deal of the repugnant reality of Brazilian social stratification. However, hard as it was, Carolina Maria de Jesus chose writing as a way to shape her identity in such unfavorable scenario. Going, in a way, from rags to riches, the author tells us her saga facing otherness in the slum where she first lived in São Paulo, as her neighbours considered her *different* and strange since she could read and write and loved books, not to mention that people were afraid of being included in her *strange diary* and the hard alterity built up by middle and upper class people, as well as by intellectuals when she had her work published and finally moved into a cinder-block house in a middle-class neighbourhood. Besides, Carolina herself has always felt different, as any other poor black people living around her did not take books into such a high account as she did. People from her hometown "[...] thought that a black girl enamored of reading must be a creature of the devil" (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 6) and she affirmed that nobody missed her when she moved (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 72). She declares to have been refused for many job positions as the employers did not like her *poetic talk* and for this reason she did not like to talk to anyone. In the present work we analyze the seemingly contradictory dialectical dynamic in the construction of the author's identity which pervades her two diaries *Child of the dark* (Quarto de despejo) and *Casa de alvenaria*, reunited in *The unedited diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus* edited by North American historian Robert M. Levine and Brazilian historian José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, and the dialogical ethnic matters unveiled in this process concerning multiple personal, social and political issues that take part in the process of Carolina dreaming of becoming a published writer and turning herself into one.

*The unedited diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus* consists of the reunion of her two diaries previously published, *Child of the dark* (*Quarto de despejo – diário de uma favelada*, 1960) and *Casa de alvenaria – diário de uma ex-favelada*, 1961 (this title was not translated into English, but it means Cinder-block house – diary of a former slum-dweller). *Child* alone was published in 1960 and it encompasses de Jesus's life at a shantytown from the late fifties until the previous date of publication, a single woman raising her three children, Vera Eunice, João and José Carlos, by collecting and selling cardboard. A more literal translation



for *Quarto de despejo* could be “trash room”, which refers to Carolina’s ideas that society views people who live at slums like pieces of trash and so the *favelas* would be the dumpster where such rubbish is thrown. In this case, slum-dwellers are the ones evicted from a home, which any citizen should be entitled to have, who instead were *thrown away* from society. *Casa* is the account of the author’s life from the transitory period when she was moving from the *favela* until much of the time she spent in her so dreamed cinder-block house. What first differs *The unedited diaries* from the two separated editions above cited is a true-blue translation of original diary entries and other texts, such as poetry, personal comments and streamline thought, which had not been published at all and were being kept by Vera Eunice, Carolina’s daughter. Secondly, once “discovered” by a journalist, Audálio Dantas, her sponsor and the person in charge of publishing de Jesus’s *Quarto de despejo* (*Child of the dark*), one may say she has been rediscovered by Meihy and Levine, mainly because new and different bits and pieces of Carolina’s life were brought about in their publication. Then, we have an extended account of Carolina’s life and essays on her work written by the above mentioned authors. And last, Carolina’s blunt voice, muffled in Audálio Dantas’s edition, is pretty much the tone of Meihy and Levine’s version.

The release of *Child of the dark* attracted lots of publicity both to Carolina and to Audálio Dantas and made her famous overnight as it sold ten thousand copies in three days – and over one hundred thousand in a year – *Child* eased her way out of the *favela* and inserted her into social circles from which she had always been marginalized. She has “come back into the human race and out of the Garbage Dump” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 7), claims Carolina. *Casa de alvenaria* refers to the period after she bought a house and moved out of the *favela* and into Alto de Santana, a middle-class neighbourhood in the North of São Paulo. In the Portuguese version of *Child of the dark* the author’s voice fades into a resigned Carolina whereas the original entries reveal a fierce personality and a grip for life. Although the original text never left Dantas’s hands, *The unedited diaries* encompass 42 notebooks in which her primary entries were hand-copied by the author herself. One of the reasons for choosing the English version of the diary to write this work despite the fact this article could well have been written in Portuguese meets our objective of displaying the sad reality that a Brazilian black writer that gives a deep account of a poor life in Brazil is, ironically, more famous and more respectfully treated outside her country than she ever was in her own language and place of birth. According to Meihy and Levine (1999) *Child of the dark*



[...] has been in print continuously since 1962 and has been on the assigned-reading list in Latin American studies courses and women's studies courses in the United States and Canada of a generation of college-level students [...] (MEIHY; LEVINE, 1999, p. 8).

Differently in Brazil, the book has been out of print since 1976 and most university students have either never heard of Carolina or have not been interested in reading her books, with very few exceptions. Anyway, Carolina was aware of the arid terrain on which the publishing market in Brazil was settled.

I told him that I was sending the originals to the United States, because the publishers in Brazil didn't help poor writers. An embryo that doesn't evolve. An atrophied embryo (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 33).

Apart from the many copies at the time of publication, *Quarto de despejo*, published in 12 different languages, is estimated to have sold around one million copies.

While *Child* featured Carolina aspiring for a better future, *Casa* portrays a disappointing depiction of shattered dreams. "Sometimes she is so lonely that she goes back to visit the streets where she used to scavenge for paper" (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 199). These visits perhaps were a way to be in the places where she used to have the hope that now was gone.

## 1. Contradiction

Carolina's subjective voice in her diaries is a spontaneous one, as she openly expresses her impressions on politics, social life, the economical problems in Brazil, not showing any concern about being dubious or even contradictory in her declarations. For example, she declares that Dr. Adhemar (in reference to the Mayor of São Paulo, Adhemar de Barros) is the "only decent politician in Brazil" (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 21), only to state further that he had "forgotten his words" (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 22) and to declare later on that she would vote for him for president. Such dubiety or contradiction is part of Carolina's inquiring soul, whose writing mirrors the seemingly inconsistent thoughts of someone who is discovering the world pretty much on her own. Still, the world was the only school she had, therefore any mistakes, achievements, doubts and so on were taking place at the moment of speech, with no intention of being accurate. Her literary aesthetic comes from daily entries that mirror her mood rather than following pre-established rules of good literature. We insist that such rules are established by academic standards which embrace a privileged body of texts and do not match our opinion of Carolina's work. There is an aura



of purity and sincerity around her work reflecting oral discourse and inner feelings along with an original spontaneous aesthetic that displays the many dimensions a literary work may achieve.

The twenty handwritten notebooks that resulted in *Child of the dark* do not stem from the narrative of someone who had herself in so high an account that believed her life could well be transformed in literature. It is instead the work of a compulsive writer who desperately needed to print words in order to make sense out of her existence, which is exactly why she wrote diaries and not autobiographies. Sometimes it is the individual voice that leads the narrative, “I wanted to be like the other Blacks who know how to be assertive” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 28); on the other hand, the collective “I” appears in many other entries on which she talks about the poor and the blacks:

So many things I wished to do  
But prejudice checked my tracks  
If I die I want to be born anew  
In a country run by blacks (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 19).

We can see that Carolina was aware of the ethnic burden she carried. Nonetheless she navigated between her desire to not be black and poor, as these two conditions were on the same pack in her discourse. She loathed lazy blacks as much as she had group consciousness “We, blacks, are always classified as inferior, we are human merchandise [...]” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 174). She declared in an interview to an Argentinean newspaper that the whites in Brazil “(...) offer opportunities for Blacks to improve themselves” (DE JESUS, 1990, p. 133), which is one more example of the kind of statement which made her work be considered contradictory. Fact is that Carolina did not know herself for whom she wanted to speak out but herself and her identity as a black person lied in a limbo of doubts about what having a black subjectivity meant, often associated with negative aspects:

The day that senhor Vili Aureli told me: Carolina you are a poetess, on that day I buried happiness that accompanied me just like my shadow Up to that date my heart dressed itself in bright colors. After that it dressed in purple. – And now ... in black. I think I am black inside out (DE JESUS, 1990, p. 56).

But if on one side blackness means deep sadness, on the other it is part of what being a poet is on Carolina’s account. Therefore, even unconsciously, being a black woman was already entangled in her writing.

Being a poor literate cultured black woman, Carolina was not easily accepted among her kin; she would be taken as a witch of some sort and, when time came, she was rejected by the intellectual white elite:



besides being black, she was not considered a canonical intellectual. During her first interview to a television channel, right after the publication of *Quarto de despejo*, she declared that many editors had rejected her manuscript for considering her incapable of anything worth publishing, suggesting she should write on toilet paper. She was criticized for not having the linguistic accuracy of high literature writers and for saying that intellectuals were arrogant and racists.

Sometimes I think: - The white states with arrogance that he is what he is the superintellectual – where does this superintellectuality come from? Whoever is an intellectual, is learned. And learned ones are not boastful. Prejudice is a manifestation of pride if the whites were wise they wouldn't have sold blacks. Leave the past alone! (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 55).

She was laughed at for her bad manners and ill-matched clothing. She made money for herself and for many others, but was never oriented about how to employ it. She met politicians, but never had any help from the government in order to create material conditions to be inserted into society. What she understood from politics is that “[...] the only thing that a white doesn't scorn is a black's vote [...]” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 54). Clever as she was, she perceived that contradiction was not only a privilege of her own, otherwise lied in the “high cast” of Brazilian society.

## 2. Laziness

Out of the several themes that one could choose to talk about Carolina's black subjectivity one that is most appealing is her desire and her struggle to overcome poverty alongside with the author's opposing force to laziness. “I can't stand my children because they are lazy” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 32), claims Carolina among several other entries in which the concept of idleness appear to be one of de Jesus's deepest concerns. “She disliked most of her fellow blacks, whom she considered lazy” (MEIHY; LAVINE, 1999, p. 6), state Meihy and Levine. Laziness is often associated with weakness and immorality, perceived by Carolina as the evils of human beings. “He is lazy. And weak. He ruined his life from the beginning” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 35), declares her about a fellow *favelado* whom she called Black. Her despise for laziness is reinforced in her multiple entries that describe her daily life. A substantial majority of opening statements of each day on her diary says the time she woke up, which was normally between four and five-thirty in the morning. Right after the awakening hours comes the description of the hard task of hauling water after waiting in a long line of slum-dwellers. Along with these entries, there are detailed accounts of her long walks around



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town trying to sell scrap metals and cardboard even though many times she had not eaten anything before working. She described her struggle and praised herself for being a hard worker even though her money was not enough to buy food for her family.

At first it seems only sensible that someone on the verge of starvation would praise working as a way out of a miserable life. Nonetheless there are various implications behind this assumption that deserve a second look. The very idea of having someone in such precarious condition having the strength to work so hard and exposing it verbally anytime she could is already a rare accomplishment, but, on the other hand, it may be a source of inquiries that surround the context in which Carolina is inserted: she was a black woman, descendant of slaves to whom the ability to work was more of a doom than a gift. She then made an effort to show through her writings how much she appreciated working, implying the idea of how much she was different from the “other blacks”, because the world of cinder-block houses she aimed for was inhabited by the mainstream white cultural elite. While living in Alto de Santana Carolina hired a white maid, which displays her wish of having a white person’s life, in reverse roles so to speak. Nonetheless it is said that Carolina did not command her maid as she should, doing lots of work for her. She herself states in many entries that the whites should have the blacks to work for them. But she wanted to be a white person in the sense that being a good negro would earn her a place among intellectuals. Carolina was raised as a maid and a maid’s daughter and got into school because her mother was admired by her boss for being a hard worker. Working was the way to live a life of white people. Of course being black never gave her a peaceful life. She was ostracized at school and dreamt of getting a white face as her mom’s boss promised her she would. She was not, of course, blessed with a white face but her stubbornness, self-determination and an incredible drive for living kept her working and desiring being inserted into a world of whites. No wonder her working and her loathe for laziness fill her entire diary, which mirrors her sadness for being so poor and working so hard but at the same time her faith that being a “good negro” would pay off someday.

The conception of the “good negro”

[...] is associated with well-defined expectations of submission, loyalty, and conformism to the interests of the dominant race. The more the Negro and mulatto identify with the democratic ideals of personality linked to the image of the citizen and to the basic rights of the individual, the more they are misunderstood, judged ethnocentrically, and deprecated. Inversely, the closer they adhere to the model



of the faithful and devoted servant or strive for the related attributes, even if they are not servants or dependents, the more they evoke affection standing, and esteem in the heart of the white (FERNANDES, 1969, p. 169).

Therefore, Carolina was just trying to play along with the white cards being held in to her, because the whites were the only ones that could do it. The black slaves were valued by their capacity to work. The free slaves were no longer useful and considered lazy and useless. Still, Carolina did think of the whites as lazy people who had slaves to do all their work. She even stated that she was planning a “life of working as little as possible” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 39). It seems that once she was in what was considered a white person’s position she was allowed to be lazy.

The social transformation of her thought bore fruits inside her own house:

José Carlos went to do his homework – He told me that he wants to study to get a job because he wants to be well dressed. And he wants to marry a woman like Dona Diva his teacher. That his teacher is not lax. That she is not lazy. That she knows how to make use of time. That he doesn’t want to marry a woman like Seu Chico’s Dona Alice. Because she is very lazy [...] (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 59).

Her son’s ideas on an ideal woman had their roots on her perception of women:

I saw Policarpo’s woman. The gossiper. Her tongue has grooved. She slammed the door in my face I began to cuss her out for her laziness. That she prefers to starve than work. It is terrible to argue with a lazy person (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 43).

The very construction of her femininity is embedded in the power to work. Lethargy is viewed by Carolina as the sick predicament to stick one in poverty and misery. Nonetheless she calls melancholy as the “cancer of the soul” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 109), so emotional scars and laziness are equaled as illnesses to be combated.

Carolina slept few hours a night when living at the *favela*. Her early day took her anywhere she could find something to sell, from scraps of metal to cardboard. But writing was both a job and a pleasure, one of the very few she allowed herself to have. Moreover, writing was the very air she breathed, the path she chose instead of flunking her harsh life into alcohol addiction as many surrounding her did. Considering writing as a task eased her mind into not being lazy.





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The orderlies at the Central asked me if I still write. I answered yes. The male orderly said he knew me. And seeing that I am not lazy – I enjoyed the eulogy. I thought: I am out of fashion because the wagging tongues say, that poets are lazy (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 35).

Working was a way of putting aside her grief, as getting lazy meant that she was conscious of the poignant reality of poverty, violence and hunger of her life. “Today I am sad! God should give a happy soul to poets. I was lazy in bed” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 51).

No wonder Carolina became a poet and a writer. She perceived at an early age the narrating usefulness of words. Even being young, working hard at home already, two years of schooling were enough to arise in her the need to write in order to create a space where she belonged. Nothing was accomplished easily. In Sacramento, people used to call her a “devil” as such an urge to write was not a Negro business.

Carolina died as she lived most of her life: a poor working ostracized woman. She was marginalized at her home town, at the *favela* and even more when she finally reached her dreaming social position. The one thing she did not accomplish was living in the countryside where she could work and write apart from the mankind she failed to merge in.

She grasped the power of the written word “the illiterate black has to endure injustice whereas the educated black rebels” (DE JESUS, 1999, p. 174), but her rebellion and hard work was a lonely war she had always fought with herself.

## Conclusion

Carolina got published because she was lucky (at first she thought). Nonetheless, she became an exotic artifact being a black woman with such an exquisite talent. Nobody helped her go further. Not before she wrote not after. She died the way she was born because nobody cared for really helping her ascend the social and intellectual ladder she desperately wanted to climb. She was before anything else the icon of a dreadful reality of an educational system not all inclusive, poverty, prejudice and marginalization even though it was not the primary intention of her writing.

Apart from its value as literary work, what is imperative is to realize the importance of narrative alone in Carolina’s life. What impelled her to write was the need for becoming alive through her words which were being under construction much before she could dream of getting published. She became someone through words – others’ and her own. Behind all this is the sad reality of Brazilian poverty which implies in



no access to good education whatsoever, at least not enough to allow anyone to get published. It is not only a canonic or non-canonic matter that lies under this fact. The true colours are the exclusion by the very ones that should ease these people way into the so desirable high culture or high literature, whatever those things mean. There is a circle of social and educational power impeding people to achieve better days no matter how much they try. Something is very wrong in Brazil's intellectual space, which ironically should be responsible for education and social changing but instead is wrapped up by the very stratification-minded discourse that once compelled intellectuals to become what they are. Carolina was sincere in her declarations, true to what she believed, contradictory as any human soul. So, a lost cause already when she popped up in intellectual circles. She gave a freak show instead of setting an example of how much our education system should empower people instead of segregating them. It makes us think that it was the real reason Carolina was banished: she was a living proof of a rotten society.

Carolina's writings bear a quarrelsome dialogism among a multitude of interlocutors both in social and political fields. It stirs questions of all kinds of prejudice into readers' minds; takes us to a multilevel-issued matter of ethnic, economic and political empowerment; unveils a reality that we, as citizens, do not want to take any responsibility for. No wonder Carolina had a troublesome subjectivity, as it is reserved to the bright outcast a "paradoxical" issue in a capitalist and individualist society. Carolina Maria de Jesus has been a black spot in the sun, swept under the rug of our educational system, a writer-to-be that never was considered as such in the pyramidal system in which the top belong to the ones whose writing does not need correction, whose outstanding brightness lead them to overcome any "flaws" in their education. Carolina has been a spot in the sun in the "flawless" intellectual world that falls victim of its own lack of responsibility.

There may be many Carolinas out there, waiting for getting one chance of going to school, of expressing themselves through literature and, most of all, of not being ostracized neither as a poor nor as a black person.



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