

# THE CAUTIONARY TALE OF CAROLINA MARIA DE JESUS\*

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Carolina Maria de Jesús was a fiercely proud black Brazilian woman who lived in a São Paulo *favela* with her three illegitimate children (each with a different father). She had learned to read and write by continuing to study on her own after only two years of primary school. In 1958 fragments of her diary came to the attention of an enterprising journalist, Audálio Dantas, who helped her get it published. For a brief period, Carolina Maria de Jesús became an international celebrity as the author of the best-selling book in Brazilian publishing history. For many reasons, however, Carolina fell from favor: the rise of a military dictatorship in 1964, which led to an accompanying reaction against social criticism, and especially the ways in which she handled her fame and related to the press and the literary elite. Within a few years, she was forced to move back into the favela and scavenge for a living. A brief flurry of publicity in 1969 about her fallen condition prompted a slight improvement in her circumstances, but she was soon forgotten again. Carolina died in 1977, on the verge of indigence. Her complete life story has never been told, and most Brazilians today are unaware that a black *favelada* in the 1960s became the symbol (to foreigners, at least) of the struggle to rise above poverty. Most Brazilians neither read her books nor consider them noteworthy. Evidently, the author of what *The New York Times* called a “rarely matched essay on the meaning and the feeling of hunger, degradation, and want” touched no nerve in the Brazilian sensibility.<sup>1</sup>

Carolina’s story is a cautionary tale that reflects not only on her but on the social system of which she was a part. An impoverished black woman with an aggressive, mercurial personality, Carolina was remark-

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1. Cited in the 1993 Penguin USA catalogue *Modern History*, p. 21.

ably aware of the burden of the legacy of racism, gender prejudice, and political neglect of the marginalized. She did not conform to prevailing social values. For example, she claimed that she never married because she refused to become dependent on a husband. Journalists and politicians soon turned on her because although her ideas seemed docile enough in her diary, in public she expressed herself aggressively. Carolina was what some in the United States might call an “uppity” black. Nor did intellectuals on the left embrace her because her views were not strident enough for their class-based view of marginality. Worse yet, her attitudes were at times conservative and even racist. The larger issue of impoverished migrants fleeing to the cities during the administrations of Presidents Juscelino Kubitschek and Jânio Quadros (caused in part by the displacements resulting from multinational industrial penetration during the late 1950s) was a touchy one in an atmosphere where politicians strove for answers as the favelas expanded endlessly.<sup>2</sup>

Carolina Maria de Jesús was born in 1914 in the small interior town of Sacramento in Minas Gerais, the descendant of slaves probably brought to the mining region from the declining sugar region of northeastern Brazil.<sup>3</sup> She had to drop out of school after the second grade. Carolina had not been a willing student at first: her mother had to spank her nearly every day to make her attend. Carolina later claimed to have been influenced in her youth by her grandfather, whom she termed “an African Socrates.” When her mother took a job on a farm outside Sacramento, Carolina had to quit school because none was available in that area. She recalled spending her first days in the country crying. In time, however, she came to enjoy living in the country. At sixteen, Carolina moved southwest with her mother to the city of Franca in the state of São Paulo. There they both worked as cooks and maids.<sup>4</sup>

In 1937, at the age of twenty-three, Carolina followed a migration pattern typical of poor Brazilian women in setting out on her own from Franca for the metropolis of São Paulo. By that time, her grandfather had died (her mother’s fate was not recorded). Carolina slept under bridges and in doorways. She took various jobs, working as a domestic, cleaning

2. See the controversial study by Janice E. Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), esp. 242–45. Perlman found Rio de Janeiro favelados to be relatively well-organized, hard-working, and resourceful, but specialists working independently in the slums of São Paulo (including Nancy Cardia and Myriam de Castro) found those favelas not very organized and filled with independent types who did not trust one another.

3. Elsewhere Carolina was described as having been born as early as 1913 and as late as 1921. See Célia Pisa, introduction to the French translation, *Le Dépotoir* (Paris: A.-M. Métailié, 1982), 7; and Robert Collin, “Elle a écrit un best-seller,” *Le Monde*, Arquivo *O Globo*. This and all other clippings found in Brazilian newspaper files (*arquivos*) gave no further information as to dates or page numbers.

4. None of the prefaces or introductions to her published books offer more than sketchy details of her early life.

hotel rooms, working in a hospital, and selling beer. At one point, she even tried to join a circus. Carolina eventually found employment as a maid for a white family but was fired after four months: she was too independent, she said, to clean up their messes. In addition, she had become sexually active. She sought out white men, or they sought her. Even when employed as a maid, she would slip away at night to meet lovers. Carolina's forceful personality seems to have asserted itself in this realm.

Carolina held six jobs as a maid sequentially and was dismissed from each one. She worked for a short time for a physician, Euricles Zerbini, who gave her access to his books. In later years, she claimed also to have worked briefly for General Goés Monteiro, the *éminence gris* of the Estado Novo (1937–1945). She described him with her trademark bluntness as “physically repulsive but very smart.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1948 a Portuguese sailor impregnated and abandoned her. The white family for whom she was working as a maid barred her from their house. At that point, she had no choice but to move to a favela (a shantytown for migrants). By the late 1940s in São Paulo, fifty thousand favelados had settled in seven different locations.<sup>6</sup> Carolina selected the favela of Canindé because it was close to a junkyard. She carried boards on her head that she had removed from a church construction site five blocks away and built a shack with her own hands, covering it with scrap tin. Her son João was born three months later. The roof always leaked, rusting her pots and pans and rotting the mattress she had found. Carolina hung a sack over her window for privacy and used a rag to cover her nose to ward off the favela stench.<sup>7</sup> When she had soap, she washed clothes in the nearby Tieté River.

Carolina strapped her infant to her back and walked the streets collecting paper and odds and ends in a burlap bag. She foraged in garbage cans for food and clothing. She was paid one cruzeiro (a quarter of a U.S. cent) per pound for usable paper, bottles, and cans. On good days, she earned twenty-five or thirty cents, on bad days, nothing. Two years later a Spaniard (“who was white and gave me love and money”) fathered her second son, José Carlos. After his birth, she had to pick through garbage cans with two children strapped to her. Later she wrote that she met a rich white man who thought she was pretty. She would

5. Regina Penteadó, “Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?” *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31.

6. By contrast, less-industrial Rio de Janeiro contained by this time two hundred favelas with at least three hundred and thirty-seven thousand inhabitants. See David St. Clair, Translator's Preface, *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesús* (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), 8. See also Lea Ramsdell, “National Housing Policy and the *Favela* in Brazil,” in *The Political Economy of Brazil: Public Practices in an Era of Transition*, edited by Lawrence S. Graham and Robert H. Wilson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 164–85.

7. *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro), 24 Oct. 1972; and St. Clair, Translator's Preface, *Child of the Dark*, 8–9.

visit him, and he would give her food and money to buy clothes for her sons. She wrote, "He didn't know for a long time that I bore his daughter . . . ; he has many servants, and I guess that's where Vera Eunice gets her fancy ways."<sup>8</sup>

Feisty and independent, Carolina refused to conform to the behavior expected of a favelada. She claimed to have been rejected by her neighbors because of her airs as someone who could read and write and because she despised their violent behavior and penchant for lying. Carolina was especially hostile toward Northeasterners, whom she considered violent and unpredictable. As a kind of self-imposed therapy, she began to write poems, stories, and (beginning in 1955) a diary in notebooks fashioned from scraps of paper she found in the trash. Her first entry, dated 15 July 1955, typifies her hopeful yet rueful personal style: "The birthday of my daughter Vera Eunice. I wanted to buy a pair of shoes for her, but the price of food keeps us from realizing our desires. Actually we are slaves to the cost of living. I found a pair of shoes in the garbage, washed them, and patched them for her to wear."

Her diary expressed a revulsion over her miserable life softened with touches of gentleness: "The sky was the color of indigo," she wrote, "and I understood that I adore my Brazil. My glance went over to the trees that are planted at the beginning of Pedro Vicente Street. The leaves moved by themselves. I thought: they are applauding my gesture of love to my country."<sup>9</sup>

Carolina always claimed to have been at odds with her fellow favelados, but a close reading of her diary reveals that although she considered herself a "loner," she was viewed within the favela as a stable person who could be trusted. Many favelados knew that she could read and write, and they admired her for it. Some even sent their children to her to be cared for when they were released from the FEBEM (Fundação Estadual para o Bem-Estar do Menor), the institution for homeless and delinquent children. When a fight erupted, it was Carolina who called the police. Thus she acted as an agent of stability and decency in the sordid world of the favela.<sup>10</sup>

Some of Carolina's diary entries displayed bitterness. She wrote of watching restaurant employees spill acid in their garbage cans so that the poor could not use their leftovers, of sons who beat their parents, of drunkenness, prostitution, and excrement, and of undernourishment, hopelessness, and death. "Black is our life," she concluded, "everything is black around us."<sup>11</sup> Carolina chided politicians for displaying compas-

8. St. Clair, Translator's Preface, *Child of the Dark*, 10. Although St. Clair says 1943, he probably meant 1953.

9. *Ibid.*, 37.

10. I am grateful to Cristina Mehrrens for this observation.

11. *Child of the Dark*, 44.

sion during elections and then forgetting the poor. She also conjured up powerful images: "What I revolt against is the greed of men who squeeze other men as if they were squeezing oranges."<sup>12</sup>

In April of 1958, during a municipal election campaign, a twenty-four-year old reporter for the *Diário da Noite*, Audálio Dantas, was sent to cover the opening of a playground near Canindé (politicians providing election-eve benefits is an old Brazilian political custom). Born in north-eastern Alagoas, Dantas had come with his father to the state of São Paulo in the 1930s to open a food store in the interior of the state. Although Audálio had never studied journalism, he taught himself to write in a newsy style and to hustle stories, shooting photographs as well and submitting them on a freelance basis. Eventually he was hired by the *Folha de São Paulo* as a feature reporter.<sup>13</sup> At the playground, Dantas witnessed an exchange of curses between men standing in the crowd who had been competing with the neighborhood children for places on the seesaws and swings. He heard a black woman yell, "If you continue mistreating these children, I'm going to put all of your names in my book!"

When Dantas asked Carolina about her book, she took him to her four-by-twelve-foot shack (number 9 on Rua A in Canindé) and showed him pages filled with fairy tales, fiction about rich people, poems about the countryside, and entries from her diary. On reading the scraps of paper, Dantas found them to be what Carolina's English translator, David St. Clair, described as "crude, childlike words, much like a primitive painting done in words."<sup>14</sup> Dantas selected one of her twenty-six notebooks, which together covered a three-year span. At first, however, she refused to let him take it to his editor, saying that her diary was "filled with ugly things and ugly people."<sup>15</sup> Ignoring her protests, Dantas published excerpts from this notebook with an accompanying story.<sup>16</sup>

The news story awakened sudden interest in Carolina. She received no payment until much later, however, even though Audálio Dantas devoted a great deal of time to her work and capitalized on it professionally. As he announced to his readers, "I am not bringing you a newspaper story but a revolution."<sup>17</sup> The newspaper published more of Carolina's entries, and soon Dantas was made bureau chief of *O Cruzeiro*, Brazil's leading weekly magazine, which was published in Rio de Janeiro. As Carolina's agent and mentor, he work for a year editing her diary and publishing additional excerpts. But he refused to print any of her stories

12. *Ibid.*, 47.

13. Audálio Dantas, interview with Juliano Spyer, São Paulo, 7 July 1992.

14. St. Clair, Translator's Preface, *Child of the Dark*, 12.

15. *Ibid.* Juliano Spyer speculates that Carolina's diary entries for the years 1955–1958 may have been sparse when Dantas first read them and that he may have worked with her to add material.

16. *Folha da Noite* (São Paulo), 9 May 1958, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

17. Quoted in Carlos Rangel, "Após a Glória, Solidão e Felicidade," *Folha de São Paulo*, 29 June 1975, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

or poems, which she felt were more important. After encountering initial reluctance from several publishers to take the book as a whole, Dantas finally reached an agreement with an editor at Livraria Francisco Alves, Lélío de Castro. Ironically, however, although Livraria Francisco Alves was one of Brazil's most notable publishing houses (the publisher of Euclýdes da Cunha), even on the day that Carolina walked out of the favela at five o'clock in the morning with her children to see her book for the first time, she had to sell junk she had foraged in order to feed them.<sup>18</sup>

On the book's first day of sale in August, one thousand people queued up outside the publisher's book shop in São Paulo. Sitting at a table outside the store, Carolina signed six hundred copies, talking with each buyer.<sup>19</sup> Labor Minister João Batista Ramos told the press that the government would give her a brick house, something she had often dreamed and written about in her diary. Carolina replied that the favelas should be eradicated.<sup>20</sup> In three days' time, the initial print run of ten thousand copies sold out in São Paulo. Six months later, ninety thousand copies had sold. Within a year, Carolina was rivaling Jorge Amado as the most widely translated Brazilian author. National press attention on Carolina, in turn, helped establish the context in which she went on to become an international success. Her first book, *Quarto de Despejo* (literally, Room of Garbage), was published in thirteen languages in forty countries, including the Soviet Union and Japan. This rapid international success represented an astonishing feat: other books subsequently published in Brazil describing the wretched living conditions suffered by lower-class women never achieved even a fraction of the attention won by Carolina's writings.<sup>21</sup>

Audálio Dantas's introduction to Carolina's published diary reveals the extent to which he read his own assumptions into her words.<sup>22</sup> Carolina, however, perceived herself as neither a curiosity nor a heroine. Her testimony recorded reality as she saw it—no more, no less. But the publica-

18. Carolina Maria de Jesús, *Casa de Alvenaria*, 11.

19. Copies were sold exclusively at the Livraria Francisco Alves for a week and were then released to other booksellers. See St. Clair, Translator's Preface, *Child of the Dark*, 12.

20. *O Estado de São Paulo*, 14 Feb. 1977, Arquivo *O Globo*.

21. Such works included Elizabeth Burgos-Debray's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (London: Verso, 1983; São Paulo: 1984), about the life of a Guatemalan Indian peasant. Rigoberta Menchú later won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her story of life as a miner's wife, written with Moema Viezzer, *Se Me Deixam Falar* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1982; São Paulo: 1982). José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy notes that Carolina's diary became famous for different reasons in Brazil and beyond. Nationally, it addressed the current concern about questions of urban reform, poverty, the migration of Northeasterners to the South, and related issues. For international readers, the diary offered dramatic evidence of the dangers of underdevelopment.

22. For a theoretical discussion of the interventionist aspect of those editing testimonies by unlettered or lower-class subjects, see Claudia Salazar, "A Third World Woman's Text: Between the Politics of Criticism and Cultural Politics," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, edited by Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 93–106, esp. 98–99.

tion of her book, even if she were treated like a curiosity by her publishers, promised Carolina financial rewards beyond her wildest dreams. Her contract with Editora Francisco Alves guaranteed her 10 percent of the proceeds from the sale of each book, with an additional 5 percent allotted to Audálio Dantas.<sup>23</sup> Her royalties for *Quarto de Despejo* during the first three months of sales ran as high as sixty dollars a day. Four months after its publication, she and her three children moved out of Canindé with their belongings: a table, two beds and a mattress, a bookshelf, a wooden mortar, and six pots. As they were leaving, the favela neighbors surrounded the truck and jeered at Carolina. One man screamed at her that she was a “black whore” who had gotten rich by writing about faveladas but had refused to share any of her money with her neighbors. Rocks were thrown that gashed one son’s face and struck her daughter on the arm.<sup>24</sup>

Because of the stipulation in the publishing contract that Carolina share payments with Dantas and her lack of proper documents, she could not open a bank account in her own name. A joint account was therefore opened with Dantas into which publisher payments were deposited. He made a down payment for Carolina on a small brick house in the stable working-class neighborhood of Imirim (562 Rua Benta Pereira, Santana) on a nice tree-lined street. Although some members of the press scorned her house as a *barraco* (hovel), to her it was a palace: it had a modest-sized living room, a kitchen with a gas stove, electricity, running water, and a small garden. Dantas had no idea when he made the down payment that the house might still be inhabited. When the rented truck from the favela arrived at Carolina’s brick house, the previous owners, the Monteiro family, had not yet moved out. Carolina and her children moved in, and for some days the two families shared the house, the children playing together. One reporter described this situation with amazement, as if such coexistence between favelados and what he termed “normal simple people” was unnatural: “They are cooking on the same stove, washing their clothes in the same sink, bathing in the same shower.”<sup>25</sup>

Photographers posed Carolina sitting on a sofa sewing, with her daughter standing behind her and the boys stretched out on the floor reading. According to the accompanying story, Vera Eunice, who “never liked going without shoes,” now owned them and might someday become a pianist.<sup>26</sup> Other newspaper stories claimed that the house had been

23. Notarized contract, Livraria Francisco Alves, 1960 (date illegible on photocopy of contract), courtesy of Claudio Lacerda and Néida Piñón.

24. David St. Clair, Translator’s Preface, *Child of the Dark*, 14.

25. “Carolina Mudou de Casa sem Promover Despejo,” *Folha da Manhã*, undated clipping found in a book autographed by Carolina.

26. Maria de Lourdes Teixeira, “Diário da Fome,” *Manchete*, circa 1960, p. 10. Arquivo *O Globo*.

“given to her by the government,” but that was not true.<sup>27</sup> As it turned out, Carolina and her family never felt at home in the house of her dreams. The neighbors shunned them, and curiosity seekers showed up at all hours. When the police were called to stop fights between drunks and passersby, Carolina was blamed. From the day she moved into her Santana house, Carolina knew that sooner or later she would have to leave.

Public reactions to Carolina’s sudden fame varied greatly. Some journalists mocked her new notoriety. One wrote, “She lives in a government-financed house in industrial Santo André [Santana], she spends her days in the city, sometimes at the Fasano tea parlor frequented by the elegant people of Avenida Paulista. . . . With mascara-painted eyelashes and wearing high-heeled shoes, dressed in silk and elegant accessories from the best downtown shops, Carolina, accompanied by her three children, strolls twice weekly on Avenida Itapetininga, where Paulistas descended from the colonial elite also walk.”<sup>28</sup> This source continued, “Playing the part of a fashion model, the formerly humble chronicler of urban misery addressed Governor Carvalho Pinto himself with a sense of superiority, according to a social columnist. . . . [D]uring a visit by cultural figures to the governor’s Campos Elisios palace, she did not take the initiative to greet him. Instead, when he went over to her, at the end of the session, she said to him: ‘Ah, were you here?’”<sup>29</sup>

It may be, however, that this incident never happened. Carolina wrote elsewhere of her visit to the vice governor of São Paulo, Porfírio da Paz, and claimed that when she was there she felt “atonic and disoriented.”<sup>30</sup> The perception that she had acted arrogantly in the presence of the governor probably reflected her timidity rather than flippancy. In any case, Audálio Dantas commented that she became “drunk with success.”<sup>31</sup> Yet Carolina’s writing and her outlook on life were always hopeful, and she never threatened anyone. Eight years after she burst into the spotlight, she was living in poverty again but maintaining a stubborn optimism. As she often said, “God does not smile on indolents.”<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the media continued to judge her relentlessly, commenting on her manners and her clothing. As Carolina observed later, she was expected to appear in public docilely, accompanied by her daughter Vera in a starched white dress with ribbons in her hair. This “model” Carolina was also expected to answer questions sagely in a nonprovocative manner.

27. See, for example, “Da Favela para a Fama,” *O Globo*, 14 Feb. 1977, Arquivo *O Globo*.

28. *Tribuna de Imprensa* (Rio de Janeiro), 10 Mar. 1961, Arquivo *O Globo*.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Casa de Alvenaria*, p. 118.

31. Quoted by Neide Ricosti in “Carolina de Jesús,” *Manchete*, 21 Apr. 1973, Arquivo *O Globo*.

32. *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro), 11 Dec. 1969, Arquivo *O Globo*.





Illustration 1. Carolina Maria de Jesús visiting the favela of Canindé in São Paulo after the publication of her diary in 1960. (Photo from the collection of Audálio Dantas)

Realizing her place, she was supposed to allow her managers and editors to plan her appearances and “protect” her from her crude former self.

But Carolina refused to meet these expectations. Although she was politically neutral and temperate in her criticism, she nevertheless offended many educated Brazilians by refusing to conform in her personal behavior. For example, at the height of the military dictatorship in 1969, she told one reporter that she had read carefully all the speeches of the President, General Garrastazu Médici, and was planning to write him a letter telling him to provide government funds to permit slum dwellers to leave their favelas and go back home. On another occasion, Carolina praised General Ernesto Geisel by telling a reporter that “he is a good man and the people like his government.”<sup>33</sup> In an atmosphere in which radicals on the far left were engaged in kidnapping and urban guerrilla activity, her criticisms were remarkably mild. Even so, copies of *Quarto de Despejo* were never sold during the dictatorship—they were not banned outright but were censored by timorous publishers.<sup>34</sup>

Always self-confident, Carolina viewed herself as a professional

33. *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro), Arquivo *O Globo*; and Rangel, “Após a Glória,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 29 June 1975, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

34. Cláudio Lacerda of Livraria Francisco Alves Editora commented in 1991 that he doubted whether the dictatorship had applied specific pressure to have the book suppressed, pointing out that newspapers and the periodical press were much more subject to censorship than were book publishers. Letter from Claudio Lacerda to Diana Aragão, dated 16 Dec. 1991, Rio de Janeiro, provided by Dr. Ivo Barbieri.

writer who was free from censorship. In the spirit of the early 1960s, heady days for Brazilian political expression, investigative journalists were for the first time challenging the system and demanding broader rights for Brazilians, although always within “safe limits.” Some of Carolina’s advisors (including Audálio Dantas) urged her to write more about social injustice, but she disregarded such advice. She insisted instead on writing fiction, essays, and anything that popped into her mind. Carolina thus refused to be “handled,” and her sharp tongue and irascible habit of demanding respect and adulation for her unvarnished self quickly alienated her self-appointed advisors.

According to Carolina, however, she chafed under Dantas’s Sven-gali-like efforts to program her life: “I wanted to appear over the radio, to sing, to be an actress. I became furious with Audálio’s control over me, rejecting everything, canceling my projects.”<sup>35</sup> She accused him later of having altered her prose so much in the books following *Quarto de Despejo* that all of the “pretty” phrases had been taken out. In reality, it is not known to what degree Dantas changed or embellished her writing. He exerted two kinds of control over her writing. First, he improved her prose, although he argued in one interview that her work was completely hers and that he never could have written in her untrained style. Second, he edited out statements, leaving the telltale ellipsis marks. This practice was most apparent in her second book, *Casa de Alvenaria* (Brick House), especially in the section where Carolina discusses Dantas. Even so, he allowed some of her criticisms to be printed, such as her comment in *Casa de Alvenaria* that he “gave the impression that I am his slave.”

Foreign critics awarded Carolina more respect than the Brazilian media, treating her story in human terms and praising the author for exposing social miseries and having the courage to speak out. The *New York Herald Tribune* characterized her diary as “a haunting chronicle of hunger . . . , a dramatic document of the dispossessed that both shocks and moves the reader.” *Horizon’s* reviewer noted that the book contained “the seldom-told truth which inspires in some compassion, in some revulsion, and in others revolution.”<sup>36</sup> *Life* magazine devoted a page to her and *Paris Match* ran a longer story.<sup>37</sup> Novelist Alberto Moravia, in his introduction to the Italian translation of *Quarto de Despejo*, contrasted Brazil’s natural beauty with the ugliness revealed in Carolina’s diary, calling her the product of a “caste of pariahs” as damned as the untouchables in India.<sup>38</sup> Cuban writer Mario Trejo, in his prologue to the *Casa de las*

35. *Casa de Alvenaria*, 2.

36. *New York Herald Tribune* and *Horizon* comments taken from the book jacket of the Mentor edition of *Child of the Dark*.

37. Penteado, “Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?” *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31.

38. Alberto Moravia, preface to Carolina de Jesús, *Quarto de Despejo* (Milan: Valentino Bompiani, 1962), 6–7.

Américas edition (1965, reprinted in 1989), called Carolina a conscience, visionary, and the creator of a “subliterature rising out of the soil of underdevelopment.”<sup>39</sup>

*Quarto de Despejo* was published in Argentina under the title *La hambre es amarilla* (Hunger Is Yellow). In Japan at least three editions were published of a heavily abridged translation by Nobuo Hamaguchi, a professor of Portuguese literature at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.<sup>40</sup> In West Germany, *Quarto de Despejo* was published in 1962 as *Tagebuch der Armut: Aufzeichnungen einer Brasilianischen Negerin* (Diary of Poverty: Notes of a Brazilian Negro Woman) in Hamburg, where it sold well and was reprinted in 1968.<sup>41</sup> In 1983 an East German edition was printed. The total number of copies in German may have exceeded seventy thousand, although little profit could have accrued from the low-priced East German edition.<sup>42</sup>

In 1975 a documentary was produced in West Germany about Carolina, “O Despertar de um Sonho,” directed by Gérson Tavares. It was broadcast in Europe, but over protests from the Brazilian ambassador. In Brazil the film was censored and not allowed to be televised. Carolina was offered a copy, but she turned it down, saying, “What am I going to do with film cans?”<sup>43</sup> She did accept twenty-five hundred dollars for the film rights.

Some Brazilians did not know what to make of Carolina’s success. According to critic Carlos Rangel, her diary was a “kick in the stomach of the literary establishment of New York and Paris, [which were] obliged to accept *Quarto* as even a greater success than [the novels of] Jorge Amado.” He added that Carolina resembled Pelé, the soccer superstar, in being the perfect kind of hero for the North Americans: she came out of nowhere to achieve glory and fortune.<sup>44</sup> Brazilian readers, in contrast, reacted to Carolina’s diary in ways consistent with their own outlook on life or political

39. Mario Trejo, prologue to *La favela, casa de desahogo* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1989), vii.

40. Hamaguchi had been sent a copy of Carolina’s book by a Brazilian friend employed by IHI-Ishibrás, a Japanese firm. See *Karorina no Nikki*, 3d ed., translated by Nobuo Hamaguchi (Tokyo: Kawad, 1964). Information courtesy of Shigeru Suzuki.

41. *Tagebuch* was translated by Johannes Gerold and published by Fischer Bücherei in Frankfurt and Hamburg. A second version was published in Munich by Christian Wegner and Nymphenburger Verlagsbuchhandlung.

42. The East German publisher was Lamuv Verlag GmbH, who had signed a contract with the Swiss publisher Liepman AG. Royalties were sent to Liepman in Zurich, with shares designated for various persons, including Catalina de Wulff of Buenos Aires, who had sold the rights to Liepman. Giacompol in São Paulo, the broker for all of these book subcontracts, was to have received 90 percent of the royalties, with 5 percent of the remaining royalties to go to Liepman and de Wulff. It is not clear how much of Giacompol’s royalties, if any, were paid to Carolina or her family. Letter of 26 Mar. 1993 from Jens Hentsche to the author.

43. Penteado, “Carolina, Vitima ou Louca?” *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31; and Rangel, “Após a Glória,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 29 June 1975, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

44. Rangel, “Após a Glória.”

agendas. Jânio Quadros, who had been elected mayor of São Paulo as a reformer (and was the president of Brazil by the time the book appeared in print), had himself photographed embracing Carolina. Dom Helder Câmara, the “radical archbishop” of Recife, was quoted in a statement excerpted for an advertisement as saying, “there are those who will cry ‘communist’ when they face a book such as this.”

The responses of several other readers were cited in a foreword to *Casa de Alvenaria*. Herculano Pires opined, “*Quarto* is the response of the favela to the city. No one expected that the favela, sunk in mud, was preparing a response.” Luís Martins distanced himself from the author: “I don’t know if *Quarto de Despejo* is, rigorously speaking, a decent work of literature, but it is a book that leaves a mark.” Still others perceived the work as a manifesto that should be read by “politicians, administrators, and candidates for political office.” Walmir Ayala called Carolina a “person whose viewpoint is still not corrupted.” Others accepted the book without hyperbole or reservation. Finally, Vivaldo Coracy wrote that *Quarto* “is not a work of literature, and it is not a mere denunciation. It is a document, and, as such, has to be taken seriously.”<sup>45</sup>

At least one member of high society met with Carolina at an autograph session: student (later Senator) Eduardo Matarrazo Suplicy also invited her to his home.<sup>46</sup> She reportedly received dozens of offers of marriage. As journalist Elias Raide summed up the situation, Brazilians looked upon Carolina as “a curious animal.”<sup>47</sup>

More traditional Brazilian voices expressed surprise that the *povo* (the lower classes) could produce figures—in this case, a black woman—worthy of attention. Reformism in Brazil prior to the 1960s had been limited to projects carried out by upper-class volunteers to teach uneducated women (usually from neither the poorest nor the darkest groups) how to sew, prepare meals hygienically, or care for their infants. For example, one such effort in the 1930s in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo had been led by the “ladies’ auxiliary” of the crypto-fascist Integralist party before it was banned for political subversion in 1938. In the early 1950s in São Paulo during the presidency of Getúlio Vargas, Governor Francisco Prestes Maia worked to involve government agencies in relief for the poor. Through the late 1950s in Brazil, charity was provided either by the Catholic Church or by white upper-class women and was administered on a small scale in a sanitized, controlled environment. Two groups orga-

45. Statements published in foreword to Carolina Maria de Jesús, *Casa de Alvenaria: Diário de Uma Ex-Favelada* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Francisco Alves, 1961).

46. Courtesy of Cristina Mehrtens. Suplicy later became a prominent member of the labor party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores, and in the 1990s attained considerable success in elections in São Paulo.

47. Elias Raide, cited in Penteadó, “Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?” *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec., 1976, p. 31.

nized by women from the Paulista elite, the Sociedade Amigos da Cidade and the affiliated Sociedade de Amigos de Bairro, worked actively to help poor families. But despite these good intentions and efforts, as the industrializing city expanded in every direction but offered minimal services for the poor and virtually no services in the surrounding areas, existing favelas swelled in size, new ones were spawned, and millions of Brazilians were forced to live in squalid conditions in tenements and jerry-built houses like Carolina's.

Most of the Brazilian reporters who turned to investigative journalism in the late 1950s to uncover worthy stories had come out of this milieu. Moreover, most stories of this kind enjoyed little follow-up: they tended to be published for the sensationalist aspects of the subject and then dropped. Lack of a longer-standing tradition of investigative journalism in Brazil may also explain the patronizing and arm's-length treatment of women who were discovered like Carolina, and it was worse when they were black. Even when such women were praised, they were described stereotypically and with heavy-handed emphasis on their physical appearance. For example, Zulmira Pereira da Silva (who like Carolina hailed from Minas Gerais) also attracted attention from the press for her lifelong work of uncompensated charity. "Mother Zulmira" had spent most of her sixty-four years in the city of Governador Valadares caring for the destitute in her home out of her meager resources. She reportedly explained, "I cannot leave anyone to die outdoors and be devoured by vultures."<sup>48</sup> Yet the stories about Mother Zulmira were short-lived and always manifested a condescending edge: they constantly referred to her as "black and fat," "the goodly black woman," or "the old black woman," and the recurring implication, however faint, was that she must be slightly peculiar to choose to care for people who otherwise would have died in the street.<sup>49</sup>

#### CAROLINA'S SUCCESS

The published diary of Carolina Maria de Jesús became a sensation probably less because it revealed secrets or truths about slum life in Brazil than because it had been written by a slumdwelling self-taught woman who refused to play by the rules and demanded the right to dream of elevating herself and her children on her own terms. Sales surpassed even those of novelist Jorge Amado until the 1964 military coup. Yet the diary's message did not encourage the urban poor to challenge the system. Carolina's main concerns were not race but hunger and the constant struggle

48. José Franco, "Dona Zulmira: Guardião dos Pobres," *O Cruzeiro* (Rio de Janeiro), 9 Dec. 1961, pp. 57–58.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

to find food for her family.<sup>50</sup> Carolina scorned her fellow favelados, reviling them as she fought to elevate her own family from misery. Hence while *Quarto de Despejo* shocked its middle- and upper-class readers, it did not anger them. Carolina blamed the favelados (whom she called “human wrecks”) for their own misfortunes, arguing that they preferred drunken idleness, cursing, and fornication to working or self-improvement. Although she scolded politicians for their cynicism, she never advocated abrupt social change. Nor did she dwell in her writings on problems of racial discrimination.<sup>51</sup>

Instead, Carolina described her own dreams. She wrote about one she had after a day spent hunting for scrap and carrying it to the junkyard: “I am very happy. I sing every morning. I’m like the birds who sing in the morning because in the morning, I’m always happy. The first thing that I do is open the window and think about heaven.”<sup>52</sup>

Some days later, she reported another: “I dreamt I was an angel. My dress was billowing and had long pink sleeves. I went from earth to heaven. I put stars in my hands and played with them. I talked to the stars. They put on a show in my honor. They danced around me and made a luminous path. When I woke up I thought: I’m so poor. I can’t afford to go to a play so God sends me these dreams for my aching soul. To the God who protects me, I send my thanks.”<sup>53</sup>

In the United States, *Quarto de Despejo* was published by E. P. Dutton in 1962 as *Child of the Dark*. It had been ably translated by David St. Clair, a writer living in Rio de Janeiro. Critics lauded the book as “immensely disturbing,” adding their analyses of the causes of the conditions described by Carolina de Jesús to the debate over the ways to combat hemispheric poverty in the spirit of the John Kennedy administration’s new Alliance for Progress. The following year, *Child of the Dark* appeared as a Mentor paperback, published by the New American Library, and it has remained in print, although the trade imprint changed to Penguin USA. More than three hundred thousand copies of the Mentor edition paperback were sold in the United States. From this source alone, according to her original contract, Carolina and her family should have received more than one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. No evidence has been found that she received even a small portion of this amount.<sup>54</sup>

50. See George Reid Andrews, *Black and White in São Paulo* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). Carolina’s conservatism and her emphasis on food rather than race may have alienated her from intellectuals.

51. *Child of the Dark*, 103.

52. *Ibid.*, 229.

53. *Ibid.*, 105.

54. Letter from Marvin S. Brown, editor of the New American Library, to Robert M. Levine, dated 13 Feb. 1992, New York. Brown states that no records were kept on the number of hardcover sales. He declined to provide data on sales of the new Penguin USA edition or on the royalty arrangements for *Child of the Dark*.

Meanwhile, Carolina became a celebrity: she appeared on radio and television, gave dozens of interviews, lectured at universities, went on a tour of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile. In Buenos Aires, she was presented with the “Order Caballero del Tornillo.” Four months after her diary was published, Carolina was honored by the Academia da Letras of the renowned law faculty of São Paulo. She was also named “honorary citizen” of São Paulo and given the key to the city. As she traveled throughout Brazil, she constantly surprised her audiences by challenging questioners and making statements that were considered provocative. In person, Carolina was far more radical than readers of *Quarto* expected her to be. For example, when a black man appeared at her talk in Porto Alegre to protest racial discrimination, she joined with him, contending that he was right.<sup>55</sup> She also argued publicly with politicians like Carlos Lacerda (the governor of Rio de Janeiro) and Paulista Abreu Sodré. Yet Carolina also posed alongside politicians frequently, thus allowing herself to be used to further their careers.

Despite Carolina’s fame, her subsequent books sold poorly. In November 1961, less than a year after *Quarto de Despejo* had sold out its first edition, her publisher launched *Casa de Alvenaria: Diário de uma Ex-Favelada*, which was presented in the same diary format. The second volume covered the months after her departure from Canindé to a brick house of her own. Although Audálio Dantas and others claimed that the second book was as important as the first, it sold only three thousand of the ten thousand printed. Reflecting Carolina’s rejection by her working-class neighbors in Santana, *Casa de Alvenaria* sounded a much more aggressive tone than *Quarto de Despejo*. She adopted more extreme language, which might have been acceptable from a white-skinned radical student or intellectual but was intolerable from a black woman who lacked public manners. In her second book, Carolina blamed the politicians—even reformers who were later silenced by the military coup in 1964, including Miguel Arraes, Dom Helder Câmara, and Leonel Brizola. Consequently by the time of the military dictatorship in the middle and late 1960s, hardliners viewed Carolina as having gone from being a novelty to a communist, an advocate of strikes who quoted President Kennedy.<sup>56</sup> Literary critics, for their part, remained aloof. One simply dismissed her work as a “failure” in the marketplace, while another called *Casa de Alvenaria* a “pastiche” of the misery that she had already described.<sup>57</sup>

Carolina’s third book, *Provérbios de Carolina Maria de Jesús* (1969), was a collection of homespun homilies such as “Only the strong know

55. Interview with Audálio Dantas by Juliano Spyer, São Paulo, July 1992. Dantas was like Carolina in being a lone figure speaking out against society, and she therefore empathized with him.

56. *Casa de Alvenaria*, 135.

57. Rangel, “Após a Glória,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 29 June 1975, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

how to overcome the vicissitudes of life." In another example, she averred, "The greatest spectacle for the poor today is to have enough to eat at home." The Brazilian press dismissed the book as the work of "Carolina Maria de Jesús, writer from the favela."<sup>58</sup> Because no publisher had wanted the manuscript, Carolina had subsidized its publication from her royalties. *Provérbios* sold even fewer copies than *Casa*, however, and brought her no payments at all. She had exhausted her status as a curiosity, and her financial position suffered (it had continued to be precarious from the day she escaped the favela). No longer a celebrity, Carolina discovered that there was no market for her books as literature.

By the time her last book appeared, Carolina had turned to a less prestigious publisher. In 1983 Editora Aquila of São Paulo brought out *Pedaços da Fome* (Bits of Hunger), a novel along the lines of a television soap opera. Her new publisher tried everything to make the book succeed. The cover featured a drawing of a poor young girl holding an infant (although both appeared to be more Caucasian than black). The introduction was written by Finnish writer Eva Vastari, and the volume featured four pages of excerpts from critics extolling Carolina and her new book, ranging from Jorge Amado to such foreigners as an unnamed Dutton editor in New York, French critic Roger Grénier, and Nobuo Hamaguchi, author of the preface to the Japanese edition. The thesis of Carolina's novel was simple: personal wealth—not education, refinement, or social standing—makes one bourgeois. The novel's characters were criticized for their Manichean view of society. In Carolina's view, there were two types of wealthy people: rural landowners and industrialists. Her urban male figures were all vain and malicious, while the rural men who came to the city were seduced by it.

Critics examining her writing during the late 1960s and early 1970s showed in some cases a grudging respect for what they considered to be the improved quality of her grammar and accuracy, although they were quick to assume that her daughter Vera had helped her. One reporter from *O Globo* stated, "[F]or someone unschooled, the technical side of her writing is 'surprising.' She is also . . . erudite, although this manifests itself [in] a certain mental confusion [that] perhaps robs her of the authenticity she showed in the favela."<sup>59</sup> It is not surprising that Carolina made progress in her writing—she always worked hard to improve herself, buying a dictionary, desk encyclopedia, thesaurus, and daily newspapers. But few critics were willing to acknowledge this progression. Her discoverer Dantas commented later that Carolina "was a person subject to highs and lows" and that this pattern probably resulted from "a process of

58. *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro), 11 Dec. 1969, Arquivo *O Globo*.

59. *Ibid.*



insanity, or mental overexertion, brought about by all of the misery she had been through."<sup>60</sup>

#### BLAMING THE VICTIM

Newspaper reports on the amount of royalties received by Carolina varied widely. One story claimed that as of 10 March 1961, *Quarto* had earned Carolina six million cruzeiros (about thirty thousand dollars at the beginning of 1961 and twenty thousand by the end of that year).<sup>61</sup> Although she received small payments in dollars from her U.S. publishers (three hundred dollars in one instance), she was contractually prohibited from authorizing foreign translations. This right had been ceded to Editora Paulo de Azevedo, a branch of the powerful publishing house Francisco Alves. Carolina was supposed to receive 10 percent of the sale price of foreign translations, with 30 percent of her share earmarked for Audálio Dantas.<sup>62</sup>

In 1967 newspapers across Brazil and around the world published a photograph of Carolina picking up waste paper in the streets of São Paulo. Perhaps moved by her condition, Robert Crespi, a student, wrote her on Harvard University stationery in a "mixture of Portuguese and Spanish" to ask whether the story of her return to poverty were true: "I have just read the English translation of *Quarto*. I have never read a better book about Brazilian life. I have heard that you are back in the favela. This life of hunger and survival is sad; I do not understand why you had to return. I hope that you can soon take your children to a better place. . . . I don't know how one escapes from this kind of life. You may write to me if you wish. . . ."<sup>63</sup>

By 1969 Carolina had accumulated enough resources (presumably from royalties trickling in) to move further away from the hostile Santana neighborhood to Parelheiros, a weather-beaten, barren area down the hill from wealthy homes and the site of some of the poorest housing in the city's suburban zone. Taxes and prices for land were lower there, and Carolina hoped to find solitude.<sup>64</sup> The area was characterized by stark contrasts between rich and poor: fabulous houses of the elite stood adjacent to huts of the poor, which usually sprang up in valleys where the air was polluted by the heavily industrialized zone known as "the ABC." While Parelheiros was a poor neighborhood, it was the closest Carolina could come to approximating the countryside of her childhood without entirely leaving the city of São Paulo and its public schools, which her

60. Cited by Penteadó, "Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?" *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31.

61. Exchange rate provided by Cristina Mehrtens.

62. Notarized contract with the Livraria Francisco Alves, 1960.

63. *O Globo*, 11 Dec. 1969, Arquivo *O Globo*. According to the newspaper article, she did not reply in order "to avoid further scandal."

64. Interview of Vera Eunice de Jesús Lima by Juliano Spyer, 1 Mar. 1992, São Paulo.

children attended by bus. Carolina now spent much of her day alone, reading the daily paper and cultivating corn and other garden crops, despite her complaints that her gardening efforts cost as much as they yielded.<sup>65</sup>

When interviewed by a reporter, Carolina said that she hoped to enlarge her property, build a water tank for irrigation, and grow more food. According to this journalist, she was now living on the level of the "typical poor Brazilian *caboclo*," a pejorative term that suggested her lack of manners and rusticity.<sup>66</sup> Carolina's three children lived with her in the unfinished house, located two hours west of downtown São Paulo by bus. João José, now twenty-one, worked in a textile factory; nineteen-year-old José Carlos was enrolled in the first year of high school and sold items by the roadside to make money; and sixteen-year-old Vera was also attending school. Carolina's house was built on a modest plot of land, next to an unpaved road. Visitors walked on boards over mud to enter the pumpkin-colored house with green window frames. The press later reported that Carolina called her house the *Chácara Coração de Jesús* (the "Heart of Jesus Cottage," a pun on her name), but she denied it.<sup>67</sup>

Shortly after Carolina arrived in Parelheiros, all her Brazilian royalties stopped. She had so little money that she and her children spent some days collecting paper and bottles to sell, just as she had done in Canindé, although she now used part of the money earned by scavenging to buy colas or movie tickets. Carolina soon settled into a routine. From time to time, she delivered her homegrown avocados, bananas, and manioc to a woman who sold them for her at a local market. She also raised chickens and pigs. Newspaper reports claimed that Carolina was receiving "small but steady" royalty payments, but they were too small to lift her out of near poverty. While Carolina's family was living much better than they had in the favela, the level was far below what might have been expected for an author whose books were still selling well in several foreign countries.<sup>68</sup>

Carolina turned fifty-seven in 1970 but continued to show audacity in fighting for herself and her children. That year she wrote to the governor of the interior state of Goiás, asking him to permit her to live among the Indians there so that she could divide her property among her chil-

65. *O Globo*, 11 Dec. 1969, Arquivo *O Globo*.

66. *Ibid.*; also Ricosti, "Carolina de Jesús," *Manchete*, 21 Apr. 1973, Arquivo *O Globo*; and *Jornal do Brasil*, 14 Feb. 1977, Arquivo *O Globo*. The term *caboclo* is generally used to refer to a person of mixed Indian, Caucasian, and African blood, but in this newspaper article, it clearly implied a black person. It was employed much like José Bento Monteiro Lobato's usage of the term, to connote laziness and lack of industry.

67. Vera Eunice later denied this report, suggesting instead that the press had invented the story about the name for ironic effect. Information courtesy of Juliano Spyer.

68. See *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro), 11 Dec. 1976, Arquivo *O Globo*.

dren. The letter was leaked to the press, where it was ridiculed.<sup>69</sup> News of Carolina continued to annoy Brazilians. After the flurry of sensationalism following revelations that she had fallen back into poverty subsided, she continued to live in her bare house in Parelheiros. Critics blamed her for failing to adjust to the middle-class life her success had made possible, and reporters who were sent to write about her from time to time consistently showed irritation that this black and female social critic was still complaining. No one perceived that it would be understandable that a former slumdweller would have ups and downs or difficulty adjusting to a world that reviled people like her. Rather, by emphasizing Carolina's eccentricities, the elitist press trivialized her importance and depoliticized her message.

In 1972 Carolina let it be known that she was writing an autobiography about her youth, especially her family under the influence of her grandfather. The new book was to be titled "Brasil para os Brasileiros." Consistent with her tendency to view things in an upbeat way, the book would also contain anecdotes and humor. Yet despite this modest goal of capturing the world of her youth in a positive light, her intentions were belittled. One article spurned the project as "another effort by the writer to reconquer the fame and fortune that she had been unable to handle in the past."<sup>70</sup> The interviewing reporter evidently resented Carolina's reluctance to admit how much money she had earned: "[I]t seems that she understands that she was tricked, but she is confused about it. . . . To admit this publicly would be too strong a blow to her vanity."<sup>71</sup> Yet Carolina's quoted response seems more straightforward than confused: "I'm not sure how much I got. I am still receiving some revenue from France, where *Quarto* was successful. I earned about forty thousand cruzeiros" (about seven thousand dollars in early 1972). In another interview, she stated that the Eastern bloc countries had paid her nothing.<sup>72</sup>

Critics continued to denigrate Carolina. For example, Carlos Rangel belittled even her perceptions in a June 1975 interview, asserting that she called the "thread of water" near her "tiny homestead" a stream (*riacho*). A year later, Carolina was interviewed by Neide Ricosti of *Manchete*, a national feature magazine based in Rio de Janeiro. This journalist emphasized Carolina's personal bad luck and unpleasant appearance: "With mud-covered feet, badly dressed, and disheveled, the ex-favelada lamented that the worst thing that had ever happened to her was to have written four books." Once again, Carolina was blamed in elitist and racist terms for what had happened to her: "[T]he surprising success that had yanked

69. *Folha de São Paulo*, 9 Feb. 1970, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

70. *O Globo*, 24 Oct. 1972, Arquivo *O Globo*.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.* Exchange rate provided by Cristina Mehrtens. See also Rangel, "Após a Glória," *Folha de São Paulo*, 29 June 1975, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

her out of misery was too heavy for . . . an almost primitive upbringing."<sup>73</sup> Ricosti described the "discomfort and slovenliness" of Carolina's house on its "tiny plot of land" and the walls covered with yellow photographs, "showing that time has passed, fading one's illusions as well." Other details provided included the fact that electricity had been hooked up in 1974, and the house contained two television sets, one owned by her son who lived with her. But Ricosti also reported finding no copies of *Quarto de Despejo* or *Casa de Alvenaria* in Portuguese, although Carolina's bookshelves contained copies of the translations of her diary into other languages.<sup>74</sup>

The *Manchete* reporter also called attention to Carolina's vanity, quoting her wistful statement that she had once purchased beautiful clothing at the Bela Itália emporium. Carolina herself made light of the matter by adding with a broad smile that "both the store and I are finished." She was described as speaking in a firm voice in her "old manner," making eye contact "from bottom to top" of the person with whom she was speaking. Ricosti added, "A bit distrusting, she resists talking about the past." Carolina was quoted as saying, "I don't dwell on those days. . . . Things were very confused. I didn't understand what was happening to me. I went to Chile, Argentina, Uruguay. . . . Friends come only when one has money. With poverty, everyone disappears."<sup>75</sup>

According to Ricosti, Carolina claimed that although the press had reported that she had earned a lot of money, she actually had received very little. Carolina attributed her relatively better standard of living in Parelheiros to the fact that she had left the favela "for the country." There she could "eat vegetables, kill a chicken, make soup." As for what made her happy, she replied that her children "now had clothing to wear." The *Manchete* reporter then quoted Carolina as saying,

If I had to write *Quarto de Despejo* now, I wouldn't. I was very rude. . . . The book was a disaster for my life. . . . I wrote influenced by hatred, hunger, misery, in the harsh atmosphere of the favela. I was a kind of witch. It was hard to live in that atmosphere. In Brazil there is no need to have that kind of place: there is so much land. I don't know how people carry on there. People who live in favelas totally lack culture. A cultured person—one who doesn't get drunk, who reads, who behaves, who doesn't steal from employers—doesn't live in favelas. This is what my grandfather said, these were my grandfather's words.<sup>76</sup>

By this point, Carolina had incorporated into her own discourse about herself and her work the attitudes demonstrated so often by her critics. This development is not surprising. Now in her sixties, Carolina and her life had been filled with clashing values: pride in herself but a

73. Ricosti, "Carolina de Jesús," *Manchete*, 21 Apr. 1963, Arquivo *O Globo*.

74. Carolina claimed that she had bought copies of the Brazilian edition from time to time in used bookstores but that visitors had stolen them from her house. See Rangel, "Após a Glória," *Folha de São Paulo*, 29 June 1975, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

75. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*

stubborn unwillingness to adopt the behavioral niceties required to attain the things she aspired to; and anger at other marginalized individuals for their failure to control themselves and to elevate themselves. Even after Carolina withdrew to the isolation of her homestead in Parelheiros, the pattern of elitist and racist attacks on her continued, and she appeared to be growing more and more unwilling to respond in her old feisty way. The passing of time and the continued burdens of her life were wearing her out.

One last opportunity arose for Carolina to regain public recognition for her writing. In December 1976, a São Paulo publisher bought the rights to her first book from Editora Francisco Alves, which had fallen on hard times. The new publisher made arrangements to issue a new low-cost edition of *Quarto de Despejo* in the Edibolso series. The repressive atmosphere of the military regime had begun to lift, and publishers seemed more willing to take chances on releasing books discussing issues of race and poverty. Carolina was invited to sign copies at various bookstores and newspaper kiosks on the Viaduto do Chá (São Paulo's main artery), at the Shopping Center Iguatemi, in front of the old Matarazzo building, at the craft market at the Praça da República, and in other prominent places. She also autographed books in downtown Rio and Copacabana, signing each one carefully: "With affection, Carolina Maria de Jesús," or "God will guide you." Carolina showed excitement briefly about the prospects of further attention to her book, which had first been published sixteen years earlier. Some autograph sessions were filmed and broadcast over television, and newspaper reports claimed that a film would be made by a studio in the United States.

But the caption of the story in the *Folha de São Paulo* was terse and patronizing: "Carolina: Victim or Crazy?" The story itself was even worse. When reporter Regina Penteadó arrived unannounced at Carolina's house, she described Carolina's greeting as a "grunt." Penteadó noted with evident distaste that when Carolina had visited Montevideo, she had "shaken the hand of the President of the Republic," Víctor Hamedo, as if it was unnatural for a black favelada to make physical contact with a president. Readers were also misinformed that the Argentines had mocked Carolina by presenting her with the "Order of the Screwdriver" bearing the inscription "Only nuts achieve fame" ("Falta um parafuso a menos em quem alcança a fama").

Penteadó continued in the same vein, "The woman who taught the Argentines [about Brazilian favelas] and who dreamed about stars met us [at Parelheiros] wearing a pink dress covered with dust. Her legs were covered with ordinary stockings, a clear dark beige, with blue and white tennis shoes." The reporter conceded that Carolina's garden plot was well tended and the ground well swept, "with the exception of one spot covered with a piece of newspaper which apparently had been blown there

by the wind." The house's main room was described as messy but clean, with a cement floor. The bookcase held mostly "very old" works: Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Machado de Assis's *Quincas Borba*, and Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões*. Was a best-selling author being mocked for reading literary classics? According to the reporter, the books had been supplied by a used bookdealer.<sup>77</sup>

The resulting article, based on what may have been Carolina's last interview, argued that *Quarto de Despejo* had achieved great success because of its authenticity: it was a book by "a paper scavenger who narrated her day-to-day life in the hell of the Canindé favela" and because Carolina was the creation of the press—not because of Carolina's talent or insight. According to Penteadó, Audálio Dantas, now president of the Sindicato dos Jornalistas de São Paulo, had hinted as much in claiming that when he originally arrived at the Canindé playground in April 1958, Carolina chastised the men who were pushing the children off the swings "because she saw it was me." Dantas was quoted as saying, "She had been trying to get her book published since 1948," as if to suggest that a female black slumdweller could never have gotten anything published on her own.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Dantas's peers praised him for having done everything to get Carolina published and for working to set up a public commission to find ways to improve favela conditions.<sup>79</sup> There is, however, no evidence that the commission ever accomplished anything.

According to Penteadó's article, Carolina reported that priests in Parelheiros were giving her writing lessons. She complained that her son played the phonograph too loudly for her to be able to read. The caption for the photo announced that her "ideas, her complaints, her delirious head continue the same as ever."<sup>80</sup> In reality, Carolina had remained alert. Watching television and reading the newspaper, she was filled with ire about the continuing deterioration of slum conditions, high rates of infant mortality, pollution, and other issues of the day. She said that she knew how to write books that would be commercial successes but refused to do so because such books were "pornography." Her son was quoted as saying that Carolina was never really happy, but "she never made a big thing about it in her life."<sup>81</sup>

By 1976 two of Carolina's children, Vera and José Carlos, had mar-

77. The dealer was Hernani Ferreira, whom Carolina referred to as her "lawyer." See Penteadó, "Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?" *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31.

78. *Ibid.* If this assertion is true, Dantas must have been referring to Carolina's stories and poems because she did not begin to write her diary until 1955. For Carolina's part, she claimed in 1975 to have called the *Folha de São Paulo* to send a reporter to cover the playground story.

79. Elias Raide, cited by Penteadó, *ibid.*

80. Photograph in *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31.

81. José Carlos de Jesús, letter to *Folha de São Paulo Ilustrada*, 20 Feb. 1977, Arquivo *Folha de São Paulo*.

ried. José Carlos and his wife had three children. The reporter described Carolina's four-year-old granddaughter, Lígia, as a "light-skinned little *mulata* with a runny nose." Late in the several hours of questioning, Carolina, who had always tried not to express bitterness when being interviewed, lashed out at Audálio Dantas and "all of the Brazilian and foreign publishers" involved in her work. She showed the reporter a notebook, saying: "This is my way of getting back. I have terrible poems in which I will seek my vengeance. Here in this notebook I have all of my grief."<sup>82</sup> Specifically, she told the reporter that others were collecting royalties that should have gone to her, based on her understanding that she would earn most of the money, followed by Dantas and Lélío de Castro of Livraria Francisco Alves.<sup>83</sup> Carolina claimed that the only countries still paying her royalties were France and the United States. In response, Dantas accused her of having spent her money foolishly and blamed her for selling her house in Santana and taking an unnecessary loss. He added that much of Carolina's money had been squandered on unscrupulous lovers. No one ever attempted to explain publicly that although Carolina should have received tens of thousands of dollars for sales of foreign translations alone, she apparently received only a small portion.<sup>84</sup>

Where did Carolina's money go? No one knows for certain. She clearly took a loss on the sale of her brick house when she moved to Parelheiros. Although she was accused of spending extravagantly on clothing when she first became a sensation, Carolina had always been modest and it seems unlikely that she squandered all her income. Audálio Dantas claimed that unscrupulous lovers took from her as they had from the French writer Colette. In fact, her publishers drove a hard bargain in forcing her to use her royalties from *Quarto de Despejo* to pay for the publication of her three later books, none of them commercial successes. Audálio Dantas's career took off on a trajectory parallel to Carolina's in the beginning, but while hers soon derailed, his continued to rise until he

82. Penteadó, "Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?" *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31.

83. Carolina singled out for blame a Mr. [Ernest] Miller, who had arranged for author's rights in various countries, and Romiglio Jean Compoff, who had arranged for such rights in Germany and Italy (cited by Penteadó). Carolina told another reporter that Miller "took a good deal of advantage." She also stated that the Argentine agent (whom she called Juan Compol) "vanished." Here she may have been referring to Compoff. See *Jornal do Brasil*, 11 Dec. 1976, Arquivo *O Globo*. Audálio Dantas (who according to Penteadó asked her not to publish any names) stated that Miller had volunteered to help Carolina negotiate with foreign publishers. Miller spoke several languages, and Dantas vouched for his integrity. According to Dantas, the reason for the lack of domestic royalties was the poor sales of all of her books except the first one. Apparently, Carolina's Brazilian publisher deducted its losses on the subsequent books from the royalties due for *Quarto*.

84. Audálio Dantas, quoted in Penteadó, "Carolina, Vítima ou Louca?" *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 Dec. 1976, p. 31. In the United States, Dutton's book lines known as Signet, Signet Classic, Mentor, and others were acquired by Penguin Books USA in 1990.

became a nationally known figure, the president of his state association of journalists.

Carolina had no contracts or documents on author's royalties in her possession. She claimed in 1966 that she had been promised six million cruzeiros for rights to the German translation but received nothing. She said that one of her editors told her it was "pointless to give anything to a negro who behaves like you."<sup>85</sup> Although the first ten editions of *Quarto de Despejo* sold out, the eleventh edition of five thousand copies (which appeared in 1982) was still in print in late 1991, a sign the publisher interpreted to mean that "the book's trajectory has ended." *Casa de Avenaria* had sold out years before, and no records were kept of its sales or royalty payments. Carolina's publisher, Cláudio Lacerda of Livraria Francisco Alves Editora, asserted that in the 1980s royalties for a 1982 edition were paid regularly through the company's São Paulo office to Carolina's daughter.<sup>86</sup>

Carolina died of respiratory failure on 13 February 1977. On having difficulty breathing, she had taken a bus to her son José Carlos's house and told her daughter-in-law Joana that she had come to their house to die. Carolina and José Carlos argued, and when she said she was getting worse, he refused to believe her. Carolina died en route to the local first-aid station. Her children had no money to bury her. Although they appealed to the press for financial help, saying that they were penniless, none materialized.<sup>87</sup> Only days before her death, Carolina had been talking about visiting the United States to arrange for the movie about her life, believing that she would play herself in the film. Carolina did not invent this notion. Two weeks before her death, the editor of the Edibolso series told the press that a representative of her U.S. publisher, E. P. Dutton, had contacted Carolina to say that the Scarpelli film company had offered her an advance of fifteen thousand dollars for the film rights to *Quarto de Despejo*. Edibolso replied with a counteroffer demanding a larger payment. Carolina received nothing from any of these negotiations.<sup>88</sup>

Just as newspaper articles about Carolina had always judged her harshly, the obituaries in the Brazilian press blamed her for having failed to adjust to success. According to the prevailing view, Carolina had been unable to establish a beneficial relationship with the "right people" and was too proud to play by the elite's rules. The *Jornal do Brasil* obituary read in part:

Carolina Maria de Jesús, the author of *Quarto de Despejo*, died yesterday . . . , as poor as she had been when she began to write the diary that would turn into the major best-seller in Brazil of all time. . . . Her book royalties allowed Carolina, in

85. *Jornal do Brasil*, 6 July 1966, Arquivo O Globo.

86. Letter from Cláudio Lacerda to Diana Aragão, dated 16 Dec. 1991, Rio de Janeiro, courtesy of Dr. Ivo Barbieri.

87. *O Globo*, 14 Feb. 1977, Arquivo O Globo.

88. *O Estado de São Paulo*, 14 Feb. 1977, Arquivo O Globo.



1961, 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 began to lose the monies 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.<sup>89</sup>

Clearly, Carolina was being held to a higher standard than other Brazilians. The obituary all but blamed her for failing to transform herself into a mannered, docile member of the middle class, even though her neighbors in Canindé as well as in Santana had consistently ostracized her just as she had looked down on them. The obituary concluded, “When her body was discovered, the mayor of nearby Embu-Guaçu offered a valedictory.” Carolina was buried in the pauper’s cemetery of Vila Cipó, a polluted industrial suburb near Parelheiros, the place she had escaped to in search of fresh air and peace.

Shortly after Carolina’s death, a French publisher issued her fifth book, pieced together from manuscript fragments she had given to visiting French reporters. This was her unfinished project that was to have been entitled “Brasil para os Brasileiros.” It was published in Brazil only in 1986, under the title *Diário de Bitita*, and received little attention. In this work, whose title invoked her nickname, Carolina finally achieved her dream of writing about her childhood and the countryside. The work discusses poverty and racial discrimination but, like her other writing, tempers bitterness with a sunny outlook and dry humor. In one example, Carolina described her uncle’s disastrous visit to a photographer’s studio. The picture came out black—only his white suit could be seen. He refused to pay, protesting “I’m not as black as this.”<sup>90</sup> The book ends with Carolina thanking God for protecting her, even as a child, and asking only that she be allowed someday to buy a house and live in peace.

In view of the commercial success of Carolina’s first book, it is difficult to believe that she should have returned to poverty so soon after her meteoric rise to international fame. Given that reporters continued to beat a path to her door in Parelheiros throughout the 1970s and that she continued to write and demonstrate acute awareness of her misfortune, it

89. Alberto Buettemuller, “Carolina Maria de Jesús: A Morte Longe da Casa de Alvenaria,” *Jornal do Brasil*, 14 Feb. 1977, sec. B, p. 5. The statement that Carolina died “as poor as she had been” earlier is obviously incorrect.

90. *Diário de Bitita* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1986), 64.

seems extraordinary that no one bothered to explore her side, much less intercede on her behalf. Her respiratory ailment, a combination of emphysema and asthma, was treatable, and she might have lived much longer had she been able to move away from the polluted area in which her rude house stood. But Carolina alienated the respectable by refusing to temper her opinions, thus embarrassing everyone who clung to the myth that Brazilians are a tolerant people. Nor did Audálio Dantas remain her patron for long: she would not accept the less-than-equal relationship he sought to impose on her as her agent. But even after her value as a curiosity quickly dwindled, Carolina never asked to be defended or cared for—she was too independent for that. Dantas's explanation that he could not deal with Carolina's irascibility and that she soon became tiresome is consistent with the attitude of other journalists and intellectuals who also gave up on her. It may also be that her diary continued to sell strongly outside of Brazil, where readers sought in her words an expression of rage at poverty and suffering that Brazilians tired of because they considered her attitudes simplistic and self-serving. Carolina was a product of a society that tolerates 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.

In late 1991, Juliano Spyer, a history student at the Universidade de São Paulo, took a bus to Parelheiros and attempted to track down Carolina's family. There was no mystery about her children—it was simply that no one had asked in years. Vera Eunice de Jesús Lima and her husband Paulo, a metalworker, live nearby, but no one lives in Carolina's house except the caretakers hired by Vera to maintain the garden. While her mother was still alive, Vera became a teacher in the local public school. She also studied English at night at the private, low-prestige academy of Anhembi-Morumbí. Carolina's elder son, João José, died in 1977, shortly before his mother. Her second child, José Carlos, lives at times in Vila Cipó with his wife and their children and at other times on the street. An alcohol problem keeps him from working regularly.

What is remarkable about the saga of Carolina Maria de Jesús is that only fifteen years after her death (and thirty since the unanticipated success of *Quarto de Despejo*), even socially aware younger Brazilians have no more than a vague recollection of her saga. Her books disappeared from bookstores after the military coup in 1964, and it seems unlikely that any of them were assigned as reading in secondary schools or included in university-level course reading lists after that year (a fate shared by most women writers in Brazil).<sup>91</sup> When asked about Carolina in 1991, one

91. Translator David St. Clair wrote in 1962 that *Child of the Dark* had become "required reading in sociology classes," but this statement may have not been meant literally. See St. Clair, Translator's Preface, *Child of the Dark*, 13–14.

young female anthropologist in São Paulo remembered her as “a favelada que pirou” (the slumdweller who cracked up) but knew nothing about her writing. As has been shown, Brazilian scholars in general rejected the idea that *Quarto de Despejo* could have value, preferring to view it as a poorly written collection of homilies.

The fact that Carolina Maria de Jesús has remained far better-known in France, the United States, and the rest of the world than in Brazil reflects that fact that Brazil’s elite and middle class turned their backs on her because she did not fit their image of how a protester from the slums should behave. Nor was Carolina’s case unique. Another instance was that of the boy actor who played the title role in the film *Pixote*. Fernando Ramos da Silva won worldwide acclaim, became impoverished again, got a second chance with films and television but ended up being killed after taking part in a robbery. Yet another example was Flávio da Silva, a chronically ill twelve-year-old who lived in a Rio favela. Photographed by *Life*’s Gordon Parks, the boy was brought to the United States and treated for two years. But once he returned to Rio, he spent the funds provided by *Life* readers and quickly reverted to a marginal existence.<sup>92</sup>

As of 1994, the situation in Brazil has not changed much. Poor black women remain at the bottom of Brazilian society, although one black woman from the slums—Benedita da Silva, the daughter of a washer-woman born in a Rio de Janeiro favela—almost won her race against a progressive white candidate for mayor of the city. Unlike Carolina, however, “Bené” da Silva has devoted her life to the political cause of the marginalized.

Carolina Maria de Jesús, exhausted by her long personal struggle and her family’s needs, never viewed herself as a champion for the rights of others. She lacked money-management skills and any understanding of what educated Brazilians expected of her. Although portrayed as naive, Carolina was remarkable for her acute powers of observation and her uninhibited willingness to express herself on various topics and occasions. When her diary was published, she described President Juscelino Kubitschek as “a wise man living in a golden cage.” And when the Foreign Ministry ignored her request in 1966 to declare her diary property of the national domain, she responded, “I figured that I would be back on the streets looking for paper” but added that she never expected to have to fight for such a small honor.<sup>93</sup> Because Carolina never failed to touch a nerve, she had to be relegated to obscurity quickly.

Carolina’s story illustrates several themes running through Bra-

92. See Gordon Parks, *Flavio* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” *Life*, 16 June 1961, pp. 86ff; *Life*, “Flavio’s Rescue,” 21 July 1961, pp. 24–35; and Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives* (New York: Abbeville, 1991), 185–89.

93. *Jornal do Brasil*, 6 July 1966, Arquivo O Globo.

zilian society: the gulf separating the very poor from everyone else, the uneasiness of contact between members of the lowest classes and others, and the awkwardness of having to deal with a rough-hewn black woman who insisted on speaking out. In this case, class lines may have posed more of an obstacle to interaction than racial lines, but the ways in which Carolina's blackness was harped on by many of her critics cast light on the social expectation in Brazil that in order for a black person to be accepted, he or she must conform to white norms. Carolina either did not know how or did not want to conform to such norms and was therefore dismissed as an embarrassment.

Above all, *Quarto do Despejo* and Carolina's subsequent books unmasked the myth of Brazil as a racial democracy. This myth was so deeply embedded in the national mentality that any challenge, especially by a poor black woman from the slums, could not be tolerated. Virtually all the reviews and commentaries that were printed evaded the issues that Carolina wrote about: poverty, hunger, the fate of blacks and poor women. One after another, reputable critics focused on Carolina herself, painting her as a curiosity at best or a scold and a nuisance at worst. Carolina's fate at the hands of the Brazilian establishment has been shared by many prefeminist female authors on socially controversial subjects, but what was unusual was the lack even of grudging acknowledgement of her significance and her message by critics of any ideological stripe. It was as if Brazilian academics, journalists, writers, and politicians closed ranks to stifle her pointed truths about the lack of racial democracy in the country and the contempt felt for the underclass, especially its black and women members. Never did reviews of her work or commentaries about her life criticize the system that had produced misery for her and her fellow favelados. Thus for nearly two decades, critics patronized Carolina for her manner but refused to recognize her importance as one of the few public voices ever to emerge from Brazil's agitated but silent underclass.

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