

JESUS, Carolina Maria de. *I'm going to have a little house: the second diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus.* Translated by Melvin S. Arrington Jr. and Robert M. Levine. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. 181 p.

JESUS, Carolina Maria de. *The Unedited Diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus.* Translated by Nancy P.S. Naro and Cristina Mehrrens and edited by Robert M. Levine and José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999. 233 p.

Since the publication of her diary *Quarto de despejo* in 1960 [*Child of the Dark*, 1962], which depicted in austere detail life in a Brazilian favela, Carolina Maria de Jesus has, alternately, been the subject of intense scrutiny and general disregard. Despite the unparalleled commercial success of *Quarto de despejo*, which remains the best-selling book of all time in Brazil and was eventually translated into more than a dozen languages, Carolina's second diary, *Casa de alvenaria* (1961), went largely unnoticed, and by late 1962 her literary career was essentially moribund. By 1963 she had been forced to sell her typewriter in order to feed her three children, while, ironically, the Russian translation of *Child of the Dark* was being prepared abroad. Indeed, the contrariety of events that made up Carolina's life also fueled the initial interest that Brazilians took in her. How was it possible that a semi-literate, black, single mother from the *favela* could produce such a poignant testimony? This question sparked a debate over the authenticity of her diaries and the involvement of Brazilian journalist Audálio Dantas as Carolina's editor and "discoverer."

Searching through the debris of Carolina's extraordinary rise and fall, a team of Brazilian researchers, led by Robert M. Levine and José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, has spent the better part of the last decade resurrecting her work and legacy. Carolina died in 1977, after spending the last years of her life in relative obscurity on the outskirts of the city of São Paulo. Since 1990 Levine and his team have succeeded in locating her family's whereabouts as well as unearthing notebooks containing unedited diary entries, plays, poems, short stories, essays, and novels penned by the author over a span of more than ten years. Their efforts culminated in an agreement between the United States Library of Congress and the Brazilian National Library to microfilm this vast collection, an undertaking that should be completed by the year 2000.

The most recent offshoots of this project have been the publication of two books in English: *I'm Going to Have a Little House: The Second Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, translated from the original *Casa de alvenaria: diário de uma ex-favelada* by Melvin S. Arrington Jr. and Robert M. Levine, and more recently, *The Unedited Diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, translated by Nancy P.S. Naro and Cristina Mehrrens and edited by Robert M. Levine and José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy. These books follow in the wake of a similarly renewed Brazilian interest in Carolina Maria de Jesus with the recent publication of unedited diaries (*Meu estranho diário*) and poetry (*Antologia pessoal*), a biography, and numerous newspapers articles in her home country.

An international best-seller in more than forty countries, Carolina's first diary was arguably the first personal account of dire poverty to reach a global audience in the modern era, one that successfully elevated "hunger" to the status of protagonist. *I'm Going to Have a Little House*, covering the period from May 1960 to May 1961, roughly begins where *Child of the Dark* left off, still in the favela but on the verge of the diary's release, an event that would catapult Carolina into the limelight and out of the shantytown. Indeed one of the diary's most dramatic moments comes as Carolina describes how she and her children, while carrying away their few belongings in a rented truck, were stoned by resentful neighbors as they left the Canindé favela. Later, when she arrives at her temporary residence in

the middle-class neighborhood of Osasco, she wonders why Dantas, who had been so instrumental in bringing her story to light, has not bothered to appear: "...could it be that he didn't want me to move out of the favela?" (32).

Carolina's question reveals that she possesses enough savvy to know that her *favela* image has real market value: "Several people had said that Audálio had transformed me into a rat for the cats. But the rat runs faster than the cat. I ran to Osasco" (32). In retrospect we know that the cats eventually caught up to Carolina, as more and more opportunists descended upon the *ex-favelada's* doorstep. Prophetic glimpses like this one lend her second diary a foreboding tone, in contrast to the earnest hopefulness that characterizes the daily struggles depicted in the entries of her first diary. With each royalty check, Carolina and her children become increasingly astonished at the changes that have taken place in such a short period of time. They suddenly have enough money to buy food and clothes whenever they want. On a premonitory note, Carolina's daughter Vera asks her mother, "Are we always going to live this way?" Carolina responds, "I'm in the cinder-block house now." (62) Carolina's triumphant idealism is short-lived, however, and is soon replaced by a growing sense of ambivalence about her transition from Brazil's "garbage room" (*favelas*) to its "living room" (middle class), where she confesses: "I am (still) looking for a place to sit" (47).

Generally speaking, Arrington Jr. and Levine's translation of *Casa de alvenaria* does justice to the author's direct and scrubbed-down narrative style. The "Afterword" is informative but suffers from occasional lapses into a kind of popular biography, for example: "If she [Carolina] was Cinderella, Professor Mendoza was her prince" (171). The book's real value lies in the remarkable "rags to riches" story and the glimpses it affords us of the precious few euphoric moments of the author's life, as Carolina, for a brief moment, journeyed through Brazil to advertise her book and articulate the plight of less fortunate *favelados*.

If, on the one hand, *The Unedited Diaries* offer the reader more of the same, they also make an important contribution to our overall understanding of Carolina Maria de Jesus and her literary work. Translated directly from Carolina's handwritten

notebooks, *The Unedited Diaries* not only dispel nagging questions of authenticity once and for all, but, as the editors point out, this volume also provides insight into the author's complexity. With entries from 1958, 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1966, *The Unedited Diaries* allow us to examine later writings which have never before been published, as well as the extent of Audálio Dantas's original editing of the first two published diaries.

In the book's "Afterword" Levine and Meihy make the claim that Dantas's cuts rendered Carolina "docile" and "single-minded," and removed the more politically charged content from her diaries (206). To be sure, extensive cuts were made, sometimes giving the entries in *Child of the Dark* a simplistic and moderated tone. However, Levine and Meihy's suggestion that *The Unedited Diaries* present a wholly different woman seems overstated. Rather, a close comparison of the unedited entries with corresponding dates in the original edited version, supports the editors' comment that, in the case of *Child of the Dark*: "its simple brevity contributed to its power as a social document and testimony," and that without those cuts, the book would probably have never been published (206-207).

In fact the most compelling passages in *The Unedited Diaries* are not those that Dantas left out, but rather, those that were written after Carolina's career had already begun to wane. The entry on November 2, 1961, All Souls' Day in Brazil, is a fine example. In contrast to the merely descriptive entry of the same event in 1960, Carolina's narrative a year later reveals a more refined sense of irony:

Today is the day of the dead [All Souls' Day]. I observe the hypocrisy of the living carrying flowers to the dead. When a person is alive, they are mistreated and looked down upon. The society, that instead of calling it society, should be called moral rot excludes, and selects people wounding noble sensitivities. After they die they cry and praise them...

Today I am going to stay home writing. Vera is going to play with the white girls, who receive her

with disgust accepting her superficially. Like the living selecting and dividing the classes (94-95).

While pointing out the peculiarity of a society that treats its dead better than its living, Carolina's social commentary simultaneously focuses on those racist attitudes that have excluded her and her children from the benefits of *this* life. Interestingly, four days later, in her entry for November 6, Carolina describes a dream she had had the previous night:

i was sick at night dreaming that i was wandering around a cemetery looking for a place to bury myself. My coffin was glass. I saw my body through the glass adorned with colored glass flowers. I looked at the plots and didn't like any of them. I woke up to the voices of the kids who were going to class (107).

Even imagining her death, Carolina senses that she is "out of place," a figure whose restlessness was becoming transparent to herself and to those around her.

The entries that make up *The Unedited Diaries* range from 1958 to 1966, providing the reader with a greater awareness of Carolina's progression and range as a writer. By comparison to *Child of the Dark*, the later diary entries possess more of a lyrical quality and greater subtlety. Some of the change in the narrative voice may be due to Carolina's realization that she was no longer writing for herself, but rather for a much wider audience. According to Levine in his "Afterword" to *The Unedited Diaries*, it was this audience in Brazil that eventually abandoned Carolina and the social causes she represented. He claims that "...most Brazilians saw her as a sideshow freak" (215) and that "no one attempted to understand her" (194). Certainly Carolina confronted enormous socio-economic barriers and blatant racism during her life. However, Levine too readily equates Brazilian society's diminishing interest in her and her books with a kind of unilateral national complacency for social issues. Could it be that her readership had simply lost interest in the novelty of her diaries? Ultimately, by insisting on the

wholesale rejection of Carolina by Brazilian intellectuals, feminists, and the media, Levine limits her status to that of victim and, in so doing, glosses over the breadth of her expression as a writer as well as the complexity of her character as an individual.

Nevertheless, in his analysis of the socio-political climate in Brazil at the time of Carolina's emergence, Levine is right on the mark. During the late 1950s and early 1960s Brazil's own counter-culture had begun to flourish and, correspondingly, tentative steps towards social reform were initiated under President Juscelino Kubitschek: "To Brazilians in 1960, Carolina became a powerful symbol of the belief that with help people could rise out of poverty and transform themselves"(189). Moreover, as an (inter)national symbol, Carolina represented Brazil's potential to rise out of its Third World status (the global *quarto de despejo*) into the First World's "living room."

In North America the timing was equally fertile for the emergence of previously marginalized voices. In 1963 African American journalist Alex Haley interviewed for *Playboy* magazine another rising star with roots in the underclass, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, or Malcolm X. Over the next few years Malcolm X would continue to meet with Haley to tell his story, resulting in the 1965 publication of his autobiography, which also became a national bestseller. That Malcolm X's highly politicized denunciation of American society is far removed from Carolina's unyielding patriotism for Brazil tells us much about the different histories of race relations in each country. While it seems highly unlikely that a Malcolm X could have emerged in Brazil in the early 1960s (or even today), it was perhaps equally as improbable that a Carolina could have emerged in the States, if only because most Americans then had turned a deaf ear to the voices of poor black women.

Ultimately, the recent publication of Carolina's edited and unedited diaries raises an important question: What is Carolina's relevance to readers today, particularly in the United States and Brazil? Needless to say, the voices of underprivileged black women in both Brazilian and American society remain dramatically underrepresented, and for this reason alone, Carolina's diaries continue to be a source of powerful social commentary. The written documentation of personal testimonies

by the poor and disenfranchised remains scarce both in Latin America and North America. Carolina's legacy is an important one, not only because her life story is extraordinary but also because it reminds us to listen more carefully to the marginalized voices of our own time. This is as true in the multicultural, yet often apathetic 1990s as it was in the idealistic 1960s. Much like her dream, in which she wanders through the cemetery looking for a burial spot, Carolina's "place" remains as elusive in death as it was during her lifetime. If the works reviewed here have not necessarily resurrected the "real" Carolina Maria de Jesus, they do make an important step towards confirming why she captivated the world, if only fleetingly.

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