

---

ROBERT M. LEVINE and JOSÉ CARLOS SEBE BOM MEIHY: *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus*. Albuquerque, U. New Mexico Press, 1995.

Carolina Maria de Jesus lived a life filled with irony. She was born into a poor family in Minas Gerais, but became world famous; she was a poor black woman who managed to become Brazil's best selling author in the 1960s; and she is well known among North American and European students of Latin American history, yet hardly remembered in Brazil. Robert Levine and José Carlos Sebe untangle Carolina Maria de Jesus's complicated life and legacy in their highly readable and informative study of her life and work. Levine, a North American, and Sebe, a Brazilian, acknowledge from the start that they had radically differing views of Carolina and her significance when they began the book project. They work through those differences as they trace Carolina's life and work, and in the process give the reader a number of valuable insights about Brazil and how it is viewed from abroad.

Carolina Maria de Jesus was born in 1914 in a small town in Minas Gerais, near the border with São Paulo. Although born into a poor family, she was able to attend school at age seven, due to the philanthropy of an area landowner's family. Even the two years of formal education she received were exceptional for a poor female of color in rural Brazil of the 1920s. Girls, especially black girls, were not supposed to learn to read and write. Carolina's literacy and her interest in the written word not only separated her from the typical experience of girls of her class and racial background, they also alienated her from some in her family and made her seem "uppity" to many rich and poor. The story of Carolina's childhood is fascinating and Levine and Sebe tell it well.

Carolina eventually migrated to the city of São Paulo and worked as a domestic servant. She lost this employment when she became pregnant with the first of her three children. This forced Carolina to eke out a meager existence in one of São Paulo's burgeoning *favelas*. She collected scrap cardboard and other trash to sell to buy food and clothing for her children. At the same time, she began writing a diary of her existence on scraps of paper she found in the trash. This act changed her life. A young newspaper reporter, Audelio Dantas, stumbled upon Carolina and her diary and quickly arranged to have it published. The diary was first excerpted in a newspaper and then published as *Quarto de Despejo* ("The Garbage Room") in 1960. The book quickly became a best-seller in Brazil and was translated and sold throughout the Americas and Europe. The book's English version, *Child of the Dark*, is still in print in the United States.

Her sudden fame threw Carolina's life into a tailspin. Levine and Sebe

---

closely analyze her position in Brazil and abroad as a voice for Brazil's urban poor, especially women of color. As the authors make clear, however, Carolina saw herself more as a poet and writer than an activist. Her failure to embrace the status granted by white Brazilian society and her desire to be taken seriously as an artist (along with a prickly personality that Levine and Sebe detail) combined to make Carolina little more than a footnote to 1960s Brazilian history. Levine and Sebe are at their best when they analyze the reasons Carolina was not able to transcend her status as a poor, black woman. Indeed, their study is a clarion call for integrating the categories of race, class, and gender, and understanding how they operate together in history.

The one shortcoming of the book is that it is a bit too short. Its length (less than 150 pages of text) makes it an obvious companion to *Child of the Dark* for class assignments, but the brevity of the book prevents the authors from exploring a number of intriguing issues in greater detail. Carolina, for example, is often mentioned as a typical partisan of populist politicians and her support of Getúlio Vargas and Adhemar de Barros are both noted. This fact certainly could have been probed by analyzing the relationship between race and populism. Vargas's nationalism, for example, often appealed to people of color more than to the children of European immigrants and this fact helps explain, in part, why he was more popular among workers in Rio de Janeiro than among Paulistanos. Carolina was also a recipient of the sort of sporadic and individualized assistance given by populists. Her life experiences, which are well recorded in many writers, could have been used to explore how segments of the poor related to populist politics and practices. Finally, it is a bit surprising that the authors don't put Carolina into a broader context by comparing her experiences in the public arena with those of the child Peixote, whose life was fictionalized in the film bearing his name, or with recent scholarship such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes's study of violence and everyday life among the poor in Brazil's Northeast.

These comments notwithstanding, *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus* is an innovative, highly readable study of a woman's life and how that life has been interpreted and misinterpreted by a number of Brazilian and foreign writers. Anyone who has read *Child of the Dark* should read this fine study.