

## Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada, by Carolina Maria de Jesus

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Carolina looks at me from the other side of the room. I feel the weight of expectation in the eyes of the writer portrayed by Ori Fineart<sup>1</sup>. In “Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada” (2014)<sup>2</sup>, Carolina Maria de Jesus writes a journal describing her daily life in Favela do Canindé, in Sao Paulo (Brazil), the place where she lived in the 1950s. As a researcher, I aimed to reflect on the ways that people who have no right to dignified living actually live. That was how I found Carolina, as well as other people, through whose words and experiences I have understood some of my limitations regarding the referred approach. The weight of expectation comes from a process that is far from complete, but that I wish to share in this text on the work by Carolina Maria de Jesus and the search for Carolina’s space and for other Carolinas’ spaces in my own research. In fact, I have little to add to the considerations and praises already made to the author and to her book. I will use some of them to talk about Carolina Maria de Jesus and her book “Quarto de Despejo” namely, the awarded thesis by Gabriela Leandro Pereira (2019)<sup>3</sup>, the comic book Carolina (2016)<sup>4</sup> which shows a bit of the author’s history and the exhibition at IMS - Carolina Maria de Jesus: Um Brasil para os brasileiros<sup>5</sup>.

Despite these and other praises, in my opinion, the knowledge about Carolina Maria de Jesus in Portugal and in the field of urban studies is still lacking. Therefore, we should take advantage of all opportunities to talk about the importance of “Quarto de Despejo” and other of the author’s works while Carolina is still not a recognizable name.

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Carolina Maria de Jesus was a Brazilian writer, born in 1914 in a small town in the state of Minas Gerais. She was black, she descended from slaves, and she moved to Sao Paulo in search of a better quality of life and for more opportunities. However, her move only allowed her to live at “barraco nº 9 da rua A” (shack nº 9 in street A) in *favela* do Canindé, in the banks of the Tiête river. In the 1950s, Carolina earned some money by collecting materials she would then sell for recycling. She was an only mother of three and lived a life of poverty that was rather common to many others at that time in a city that was expanding and would become the biggest city in South America.

**“18 de maio de 1958** - ...Aqui na favela quase todos lutam com dificuldades para viver. Mas quem se manifesta o que sofre é só eu. E faço isto em prol dos outros. [...]

... As oito e meia da noite eu já estava na favela respirando o odor dos excrementos que mescla com barro podre. Quando estou na cidade tenho a impressão que estou na sala de visita com seus lustres de cristais, seus tapetes de viludos, almofadas de setim. E quando estou na favela tenho a impressão que sou um objeto fora de uso, digno de estar num quarto de despejo” (JESUS, 2014: 36-37).

Between poverty and hunger, and despite having attended school for only a few short years, Carolina wrote. She wrote about her life, about life in the *favela*, about the world and about the city. And she read. She read newspapers, magazines, and other documents she collected on the streets of Sao Paulo before earning some money by selling them. In 1958, the journalist Aurélio Dantas, while searching for stories in the favela do Canindé, found Carolina and her more than 20 journals. The journals published by the journalist became the book “Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada” launched in 1960. In a few months, the book became a best-seller, talked about in the radio and in the newspapers, not only in Brazil but also abroad. The first edition sold 30,000 copies and by the 3rd edition, 100,000 copies had been sold. In Brazil, it is now in its 10th edition, published by Ática in 2014<sup>6</sup>. It has been translated into more than 13 languages and distributed in more than 40 countries. In Portugal, in 1961, it was banned for publication by the dictatorship, and for the biographer Tom Farias, that is the reason why the book has not been widely disseminated among the Portuguese-speaking African countries, which were occupied by Portugal at that time.<sup>7</sup>

The success of the book made it possible for Carolina to leave the *favela* and get a brick house Casa de Alvenaria (1961)<sup>8</sup>, as well as go to places that were unthinkable, especially for a black, poor woman from the *favela*. Besides “Quarto de Despejo”, Carolina Maria de Jesus published three more books during her lifetime, and six other books were published after her death. The success of “Quarto de Despejo” was filled with controversy, among which, doubts on the authorship of the book and on its merit. The book was also used to justify the destruction of the *favela*, which would take place a few years later. Carolina’s recognition while she was alive was short and occasional. In 1977, she passed away, apparently forgotten.

I cannot say much about the literary contribution of “Quarto de despejo” besides the feelings and emotions that her words arise in me. As an architect and urban planner, I am sure of the importance of the book for urban studies. Carolina describes the city and the *favela* with her feet on the clay. She writes what she thinks and describes what she sees. Some parts of her book cause discomfort, they disturb the reader. I believe that happens because, in the words of the writer, who expresses her truth and her

contradictions “é preciso escrever e dizer só a verdade” (you need to write and to tell only the truth). And that leads me to think about the true” city which was and is still being built today.

*Favelas*<sup>9</sup> which were becoming bigger and more common, not only in Sao Paulo, but in other cities in Brazil (and the world) are forms of expressing, in urban terms, the oppression and the violence of the world we live in. Places like Favela do Canindé in São Paulo, viewed as exceptions, are in fact the rule and the only option for the poorest in the world. Carolina does not need to present data to talk about the difficulties of living in such a place. Instead, she presents the main character of her book (and of her life): hunger. And she tells us about her daily struggle against this character.

“**12 de outubro de 1958** ...Já faz tanto tempo que estou no mundo que estou enjoando de viver. Também, com a fome que eu passo quem é que pode viver contente?” (JESUS, 2014: 125)

In her descriptions of survival modes for herself and her children, Carolina tells us about the infrastructures (or lack of infrastructures) of the *favela*, the difficulty in accessing water, the lack of a sewage system or of street pavement, the weakness of the materials her shack and those of her neighbours’ were built in.

“**11 de julho de 1958** Deixei o leito 5 e meia. Já estava cansada de escrever e com sono. Mas aqui na favela não se pode dormir, porque os barracões são umidos, e a Neide tosse muito, e desperta-me. Fui buscar água e a fila já estava enorme. Que coisa horrível é ficar na torneira. Sai briga ou alguém quer saber a vida dos outros. Ao redor da torneira amanhece cheio de bosta. E quem limpa sou eu. Porque as outras não interessam”. (JESUS, 2014: 91)

She also tells us about other issues in her life and in the life of those close to her, such as the way the community living in the *favela* was criminalized because of the place they lived in, as well as about machismo, racism, and domestic violence. Besides her truths, Carolina has a political understanding of the world and the conditions she lives in. Being black and poor in Brazil conditions the place you live in, which is in the dumping ground of Sao Paulo. After a false abolition of slavery, without historical reparation to the centuries of violence resulting from colonization and slavery, most descendants of the enslaved population live in the poorest living conditions, often in the *favelas* of Brazil or of other countries which have undergone colonization processes.

“**13 de maio de 1958** - Hoje amanheceu chovendo. É um dia simpático para mim. É o dia da Abolição. Dia que comemoramos a libertação dos escravos. [...]

... Choveu, esfriou. É o inverno que chega. E no inverno a gente come mais. A Vera começou a pedir comida. E eu não tinha. Era a reprise do espetáculo. Eu estava com dois cruzeiros. Pretendia comprar um pouco de farinha para fazer um virado. Fui pedir um pouco de banha a Dona Alice. Ela deu-me banha e arroz. Era 9 horas da noite quando comemos.

E assim no dia 13 de maio de 1958 eu lutava contra a escravatura atual - a fome!” (JESUS, 2014: 30.32)

Perhaps the fact that Carolina Maria de Jesus’s success was occasional might be

justified if the previously referred situations no longer existed. However, in Brazil and in the world, the poverty and injustice that Carolina endured are still true, renewed and reinforced every day. I first knew the work by Carolina Maria de Jesus in 2015 in my first year of the master's program at FAUUSP<sup>10</sup>, but in the eight years that I have been living in Sao Paulo, I have met many Carolinas. Women (and men) who struggle every day for survival, whether for better living conditions (food, water, sewage system, housing, transportation, work, services, leisure, etc.) for themselves and their families, or against immaterial forms of oppression imposed by the racist, chauvinist, patrimonial, capitalist structure we live in.

Why is not "Quarto de Despejo" by Carolina Maria de Jesus a work of reference in more programs in Architecture and Urban Planning? Why is it not a reference for all training programs on space, the city, social studies, and urban studies? Who is the reference for each and everyone of us and for our work as space scholars? I do not claim that we need to agree with Carolina or that each one of us should fight against the injustice she suffered (though I do believe so). But to not know the truths told by Carolina does not reduce their existence nor does it omit our individual and collective responsibility for them.

The truth is that Carolina has been forgotten only by the media. In 60 years, she has been read in peripheral fights and movements and, in the past 15 years, she has gained importance in academia. We may suspect that this is one of the consequences of public policies regarding the access of the non-white poor population to higher education in the past few years, especially through racial quota policies adopted by public universities throughout the country<sup>11</sup>.

In the current movement, her work has been heavily researched and this year (2021), Carolina Maria de Jesus was awarded the title of Honorary Doctor by Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. A title duly awarded to an author whose contribution we cannot yet quantify both in terms of literature and of urban studies. Also in 2021, "Quarto de Despejo" was finally published in Portugal.

However, it is important to recall that Carolina Maria de Jesus may, once again, be forgotten. This reminder should reinforce other more important ones: the injustice portrayed in "Quarto de Despejo" is more real and current than ever in the life of many Carolinas and the struggle against oppression and violence is a constant and continuous one. No conquest is everlasting.

That Carolina may be a reference for that reminder and for the fact that struggles are also everlasting.

Carolina is here!

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<sup>1</sup> *Ori Fineart* (<https://orifineart.com.br/>) is the brand of Brazilian artist Laerte Barcelos Heredia de Paiva.

<sup>2</sup> JESUS, Carolina Maria de - *Quarto de despejo: diário de uma favelada*. São Paulo: Editora Ática (10th ed.), 2014.

<sup>3</sup> PEREIRA, Gabriela Leandro - *Corpo, discurso e território: a cidade em disputa nas dobras de Carolina Maria de Jesus*, ANPUR / PPGAU-UFBA, São Paulo, 2019. PhD thesis presented at UFBA (Universidade Federal da Bahia), awarded by ANPUR - Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Planejamento Urbano e Regional, published as a book.



<sup>4</sup> BARBOSA, Sirlene, PINHEIRO, João – Carolina. São Paulo: São Paulo, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Exhibition scheduled to open in June 2021, at IMS - Instituto Moreira Salles, curated by Raquel Barreto and Hélio Menezes. For more information, go to: [expocarolinamariadejesus.ims.com.br](http://expocarolinamariadejesus.ims.com.br)

<sup>6</sup> According to the publishers, this edition fully respects the language and the writing of the author “respeita fielmente a linguagem da autora, que muitas vezes contraria a grafia e a acentuação das palavras, mas que por isso mesmo traduz com realismo a forma de o povo enxergar e expressar seu mundo” the excerpts included here are from that edition.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, watch the piece: LUSA, Chega a Portugal livro proibido por Salazar, que personificou a voz das favelas do Brasil, *DN*, 19 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.dn.pt/cultura/chega-a-portugal-livro-proibido-por-salazar-que-personificou-a-voz-das-favelas-do-brasil-13853319.html> [Retrieved on 21/06/2021].

<sup>8</sup> JESUS, Carolina Maria de - Casa de Alvenaria. São Paulo: Ed. Francisco Alves, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> *Favela* is used here from a wider perspective, as part of cities where there is exploitation, as places of resistance, as well as places that evidence the need to reaffirm human rights. Places that have similar features may have different names in different regions or cities.

<sup>10</sup> FAUUSP - Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Universidade de São Paulo.

<sup>11</sup> For more information, watch the piece: CEARÁ, Lianne; AMOROZO, Marcos; BUONO, Renata - Diploma, acesso e retrocesso, Piauí, 10 May 2021. Available at: [https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/diploma-acesso-e-retrocesso/?utm\\_source=NexoNL&utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_campaign=OQEL](https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/diploma-acesso-e-retrocesso/?utm_source=NexoNL&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=OQEL) [Retrieved on 15/05].