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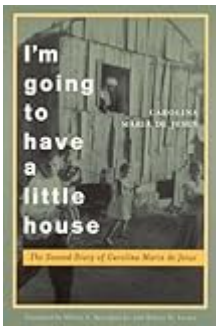

Carolina Maria de Jesus. *I'm Going to Have a Little House.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. 181 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-7599-7; $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2583-1.

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No More Hunger, No Less Misery

Favelado/a. The word is a Portuguese adjective derived from *favela*, or slum, and refers to the inhabitants of these marginal areas. However, for most Brazilians, the term *favelado/a* can be a much heavier load. To be called (or labeled as) a *favelado/a* does not only imply that one lives or has once lived in the slums, it also implies exclusion from society, with almost no chance of overcoming such exclusion.

I'm Going to Have a Little House is the second diary written by Carolina Maria de Jesus. The book should be an account of an *ex-favelada*, but instead, it is the desperate efforts of a woman trying to leave the *favela* world and get into middle class.

Carolina Maria de Jesus was a black Brazilian woman born in 1914 in rural Minas Gerais, who like so many others emigrated to the city of Sao Paulo looking forward to a better life. Like many others, after working for a while as a maid, de Jesus went to live in the *favela* in a little shack she built herself. She had three children with three different fathers, none of whom assumed any responsibility for them. Like many others, de Jesus raised her children alone, walking the streets of Sao Paulo collecting cardboard, aluminum or other things she sold for small amounts of money. Like many others, de Jesus had attended only two years of school and had to drop out because her parents needed her with a hoe more than with a notebook.

However, unlike many others, de Jesus developed a passion for reading and writing. de Jesus wrote lyrics for sambas, poems, short stories, and kept a diary that caught the attention of a reporter. After appearing as fragments in a newspaper, *Quarto de Despejo* was published in 1960. (English translation: *Child of the Dark*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962). de Jesus was catapulted from the *favela* into the Brazilian media spotlight, becoming a celebrity virtually overnight. Her book sold 90,000 copies in six months, a record for a Brazilian publication at that time, and was translated and published in every major western country. Her second diary was published in the following year as *Casa de Alvenaria: Diario de Uma Ex-favelada*, and never repeated the enormous success of the first one, although its message is just as important as the earlier book.

In comparison with the first diary, the second lacks

the tragic account of hunger and poverty, but touches on other problems that are no less serious. Written between May 1960 and May 1961, de Jesus does not collect garbage nor struggle for food anymore, but still writes about exclusion. Unprepared to have a "normal" middle-class life, *I'm Going to Have a Little House* shows de Jesus desperately trying to escape the label *favelada*, and tragically failing. With the royalties from her first book, de Jesus was able to make the down payment on a house in the neighborhood of Osasco, her so long dreamed for *Casa de Alvenaria* (cinder-block house). The diary shows de Jesus' new routine: autographing copies of her diary at book signings around Brazil, meeting politicians and wealthy people, and giving interviews to local and foreign journalists. But the diary also shows de Jesus trying to educate her children in their new environment and trying to learn how to deal with simple things she never experienced before, such as opening a bank account or making an airline reservation. When the initial rush of book signings and traveling started to fade away, we perceive in her writings the struggle to integrate herself and her family into a middle class that refuses to accept her. She hires a white maid who leaves her because she "can't stand uneducated people." Used to collecting scraps of paper or metal herself, she does not know how to deal with the people that now come to her asking for money. She does not even know how to manage her home's provisions, and buys a little of everything each day, as she used to do in the *favela*.

One of the strengths of *I'm Going to Have a Little House* is the careful afterword written by Robert Levine. Compared with the preface written by David St. Clair for the 1962 American edition of the first diary, Levine's text illuminates the diary, while St. Clair's preface seems excitingly naive, maybe due to a cold war context. Levine provides an elaborate account of Brazilian society, but his insights into de Jesus' life are even better. Writing about the second diary, Levine tells us that "in it there is a bit of happiness, the sense of awakening discovery, the satisfaction of a filled stomach, the perplexity about things and people who are *different*, and a bitter fact: misery also exists in the cinder-block world, in different forms" (p. 153). No longer screaming from hunger, de Jesus still shouts from misery.

For scholars interested in the developing world, gender, or racial issues, *I'm Going to Have a Little House* is a document as astonishing as *Child of the Dark*. From the sociological perspective, the second diary shows the process of exclusion in Brazil. Carrying the label *favelada* stamped on her forehead, de Jesus is received but never accepted into Brazilian society. In her own desperate words: "I am struggling to find my place in this "middle class" way of living. I just can't" (p. 122). Robert Levine touches on that problem in the book's afterword, but a better account of de Jesus' rise and fall can be found in his book, co-authored with J.C. Meihy, *The Life and Death of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

From the urban perspective, the book shows the process of push and pull factors experienced by poor rural Brazilians during the twentieth century. Incapable of sustaining themselves in an increasingly mechanized rural economy and attracted by the dream of a better life, millions of rural workers migrated to the big cities. However, for most, living conditions in the cities were not much better than the ones they left behind. While some of them were able to enter the middle class, the majority of the new urban inhabitants built shacks in the *favelas* in the unoccupied areas on the periphery of the city. The growth of the city–fed by new waves of immigrants and the increasing speculative value of the land–forced new arrivals to live further and further away from the downtown area. Born from this system of push and pull factors, the *favelas* have developed from simple shelter conglomerates into a complex structure in which drug dealers, corrupt policemen and religious missionaries coexist with the low income working families. de Jesus was herself pushed further away, and spent her last years in another shack in what was once a rural area and gradually became one of the poorest peripheral areas of Sao Paulo.

From the political perspective, de Jesus' diary depicts a time of tenuous but vibrant democracy in which social problems were at least addressed, if not solved. Her diary shows bitterness towards Jucelino Kubitschek and tenderness towards Adhemar de Barros, while their places in Brazilian political history are quite the opposite. It is interesting to note, however, that most of the names she mentioned almost forty years ago are still important public figures in Brazil today, such as Leonel Brizola (governor of Rio Grande do Sul in 1962 and leader of the Social-Democrats' PDT nowadays), Miguel Arraes (mayor of Recife then and governor of Pernambuco nowadays), and Eduardo Suplicy (senator nowadays). The military dictatorship (1964-1985) interrupted democracy in Brazil for more than twenty years. The lack of a generation of politicians from the 1970s due to the repression explains the presence of Brizola and Arraes on the present-day political scene. The most important new factor in the Brazilian political realm since then, the *Partido dos Tra-*

balhadores (PT) and its leaders such as Eduardo Suplicy grew out of the same industrial periphery of Sao Paulo in which people such as de Jesus lived.

It seems inevitable to compare de Jesus with senate representative Benedita da Silva, a black female from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro. The changes in Brazil and its political structure since the early 1960s have been contradictorily small and enormous at the same time. The social problems have remained the same, if not worse, but Benedita, another *favelada*, has a seat in the national senate and almost won the election for Rio de Janeiro State governor. de Jesus' diary can provide interesting insights into the political institutions before the military dictatorship that may contribute to an explanation of what has changed and what has remained the same in Brazil during the period from the 1960s to the 1990s.

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