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The Favela as Neocolonial Wound: Gender, Voice, and the Politics of Survival in the Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus

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Abstract

Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* (1960) is a searing testimonial from the heart of São Paulo's Canindé favela, offering an unfiltered chronicle of racialized poverty, gendered marginalization, and urban dispossession in mid-twentieth-century Brazil. Written by a self-taught Black woman scavenger, the diary transcends literary conventions to become a document of neocolonial survival—where the favela functions as a spatial and psychic wound, echoing the unresolved legacies of slavery, internal colonialism, and state abandonment. This article reads Carolina's narrative through a postcolonial feminist lens, arguing that her voice is not merely confessional but insurgent: a counter-epistemic act that challenges the myth of Brazil's racial democracy and reclaims agency through literacy and testimony. By foregrounding her daily struggles—garbage-picking, motherhood, literacy, and social ostracization—the study illuminates how Carolina's gender, race, and class intersect to produce both vulnerability and resistance. Her writing becomes a politics of survival, exposing the structural violence embedded in Brazil's modernity while asserting the dignity of the dispossessed. Far from passive victimhood, Carolina's diary enacts what this article terms "embodied epistemic resistance"—a radical refusal to be silenced or erased.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, favela, neocolonial wound, Carolina Maria de Jesus, Black feminism, subaltern voice, internal colonialism, urban poverty, testimonial literature,

Introduction

Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914–1977), a Black Brazilian woman from Minas Gerais, spent most of her adult life in the Canindé favela of São Paulo, surviving as a scavenger while raising three children alone. With only two years of formal schooling, she taught herself to read and write, keeping detailed notebooks that would become *Quarto de Despejo*—published in English as *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*—after journalist Audálio Dantas discovered her writings in 1958 and arranged for their edited publication in 1960 (de Jesus 1–15; Dantas, "Translator's Preface" n.p.). The diary's raw, unfiltered chronicle of favela life—marked by hunger, violence, and racialized poverty—catapulted Carolina to national

fame, making her book the best-selling Brazilian publication of its time (Dantas, "Translator's Preface" n.p.).

Yet the text's reception has long been shadowed by questions of mediation. Dantas significantly edited the original twenty-six notebooks, excising Carolina's fictional works and reshaping her diary into a cohesive narrative that catered to middle-class literary expectations (de Jesus xiii–xv). This editorial intervention has led scholars to debate whether the published diary represents Carolina's authentic voice or a co-authored artifact calibrated for marketability (Goldstein 38–42).

Crucially, the favela itself must not be misread as a marginal byproduct of urbanization but as a spatial manifestation of Brazil's neocolonial order—born from the forced migration of drought-stricken northeasterners, systemic land dispossession, and the state's calculated neglect of Black and poor populations (Caldeira 45–48; Quijano 537). This article intervenes in existing scholarship by rejecting readings that reduce Carolina's text to "poverty porn" or reinforce the myth of Brazil's racial democracy—a national ideology that masks deep-seated anti-Blackness under claims of harmonious miscegenation (Nascimento 45–47). Instead, I center gender and literacy as modes of epistemic resistance, arguing that Carolina's writing enacts a politics of survival.

The study pursues three objectives: (1) to theorize the favela as a *neocolonial wound*—a site where historical trauma and structural violence converge; (2) to analyze how Carolina's gendered subjectivity shapes her narrative authority; and (3) to reconceptualize voice not as linguistic conformity but as a strategic discourse of endurance. The article proceeds through sections on spatial violence, gendered testimony, and embodied resistance, culminating in a reclamation of Carolina's legacy as insurgent witness.

Theoretical Framework: Neocolonialism, Internal Colonialism, and the Subaltern

To read Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* as a postcolonial text requires anchoring her testimony within a framework that recognizes the persistence of colonial structures beyond political independence. In Latin America, Aníbal Quijano theorizes this continuity through the "coloniality of power," a system in which Eurocentric racial hierarchies remain embedded in the organization of labor, knowledge, and space long after colonial rule ends (537). Similarly, Walter Rodney argues that neocolonialism in the Global South operates through economic dependency and the extraction of surplus by metropolitan centers, leaving peripheral regions—like Brazil's favelas—in states of underdevelopment and social abandonment (243–45). Maria Lugones further clarifies that this coloniality is gendered: "the colonial imposition of gender" stratifies bodies along racial and sexual lines, rendering Black and Indigenous women especially vulnerable to systemic dehumanization (744–45).

Brazil exemplifies what Michael Hechter terms "internal colonialism," wherein dominant regions (the industrialized South) exploit peripheral zones (the drought-stricken Northeast) as reservoirs of cheap labor (Hechter 32–35). Carolina's migration from rural Minas Gerais—part of Brazil's semi-arid Northeast—to São Paulo's Canindé favela is not anomalous but emblematic: displaced peasants, mostly Black or mixed-race, are funneled into urban peripheries where they are spatially segregated and economically precaritized. The favela, then, functions not as an accident of urbanization but as a deliberate outcome of internal colonial policy—a reservation for surplus labor that sustains the city's formal economy while being denied its benefits.

The question of voice is central to subaltern studies. Gayatri Spivak's seminal query, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", cautions against romanticizing marginalized subjects as

transparent agents of resistance, noting how their speech is always already mediated by dominant discourses (Spivak 287). Carolina's diary, heavily edited by journalist Audálio Dantas, indeed bears the imprint of this mediation. Yet as Richa Nagar and Gayatri Gajjar argue, subaltern women often "speak through silences, omissions, and strategic self-representations" that destabilize elite narratives even within constrained textual forms (Nagar 121; Gajjar 35). Carolina's writing—fragmented, urgent, unpolished—is not a failure of voice but a tactical performance of survival.

This intersectional marginalization is best illuminated through Black feminist thought. bell hooks insists that "racism and sexism converge in the lives of Black women in ways that are not additive but multiplicative" (hooks 59). Patricia Hill Collins elaborates this through the concept of a "matrix of domination," in which race, class, gender, and geography interlock (Collins 226). In the Brazilian context, Lélia Gonzalez identifies how Black women are rendered doubly invisible by both racial democracy myths and patriarchal norms, making literacy itself an act of epistemic rebellion (Gonzalez 105).

Finally, the favela may be read through Saidiya Hartman's notion of "living in the wake"—a condition of "social death" inherited from slavery yet animated by defiant survival (Hartman 18)—and Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, wherein certain populations are exposed to conditions that render life precarious by design (Mbembe 27). Carolina's diary emerges from this wounded urban landscape not as lament but as testimony: a testament to those who endure, document, and resist from within the garbage dump of modernity.

Discussion

The Favela as Neocolonial Wound: Spatial Violence and Historical Continuity

The favela documented in Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* is not an anomalous byproduct of urbanization but the spatial embodiment of Brazil's unresolved colonial legacies. Though slavery was formally abolished in 1888, its logics of racialized labor, dispossession, and spatial segregation persist in the architecture of São Paulo's urban periphery. As Carolina observes, the Northeast—ravaged by cyclical droughts and economic neglect—functions as an internal colony, its impoverished, predominantly Black and mixed-race populations funneled into cities like São Paulo as surplus labor (de Jesus 8). Displaced nordestinos, lacking education or formal skills, are denied entry into the wage economy and relegated to marginal zones: "Those who couldn't find work settled on low unwanted swamplands in Sao Paulo… and built their shacks. Thus the favelas… began" (de Jesus 8). This migration is not voluntary but structurally coerced—a continuation of forced displacement under a different regime.

Carolina's diary refracts this spatial violence through piercing metaphors that expose the favela as the repressed underside of Brazilian modernity. In one of her most quoted lines, she writes: "São Paulo is a queen that vainly shows her skyscrapers that are her crown of gold… but with cheap stockings underneath—the favela" (de Jesus 43). The city's glittering modernity is performative, dependent on the concealment of its racialized underbelly. Elsewhere, she clarifies this dynamic: "The Governor's Palace is the living room… and the city is the garden. And the favela is the back yard where they throw the garbage" (de Jesus 35). The favela is not external to the nation's progress; it is the necessary dumping ground that enables the "living room" to remain pristine. Her refrain—"We are in the garbage dump and out of the garbage dump"—captures the liminal, dehumanizing condition of favela life: always marked by proximity to waste, yet striving for reintegration into the human (de Jesus 39).

State presence in the favela is not protective but punitive. Police appear not to ensure safety but to contain disorder: Carolina recounts calling the "Radio Patrol" during a domestic dispute, only for officers to arrive as spectators of chaos, reinforcing fear rather than justice (de Jesus 27, 87). Politicians, meanwhile, materialize only during elections, making "big promises" they promptly abandon once elected (de Jesus 9). Welfare systems, far from alleviating poverty, deepen humiliation. Carolina's harrowing encounter at the "Social Service" reveals a bureaucracy that "only want[s] to know… name and address," treating the poor as data points rather than people (de Jesus 43). When she seeks aid at the Governor's Palace, a soldier presses a bayonet to her chest, and she is "taken back to the favela" like a fugitive (de Jesus 43)—a stark illustration of how the state criminalizes need.

Daily survival is mediated through infrastructural precarity. The single public water spigot becomes a site of gendered labor and social surveillance: women queue for hours, their private lives dissected in gossip ("Their tongues are like chicken feet. Scratching at everything," de Jesus 18). Electricity is illegally siphoned from a single connection, with monopolizers like "Senhor Heitor" charging exorbitant fees—yet Carolina still "need[s] money to pay the light bill. That's the way it is here. Person doesn't use the lights but must pay for them" (de Jesus 21). These conditions are not accidental but engineered: the state withdraws services while maintaining extractive control.

Ultimately, the favela is constitutive—not contradictory—to Brazilian modernity. As Teresa Caldeira argues, São Paulo's urban development relies on the production of "spaces of exclusion" that sustain elite enclaves (Caldeira 48). Carolina's testimony confirms this: Brazil's wealth is built on the backs of the discarded, and the favela is the wound that bleeds the truth of that bargain.

Gender, Voice, and Narrative Agency in a Hostile World

Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* is not merely a chronicle of poverty but a gendered testimony that exposes how Black motherhood in Brazil's favelas functions simultaneously as moral compass and crushing burden. Carolina's daily struggle is defined by the visceral awareness of her maternal responsibility: "How horrible it is to see your children eat and then ask: 'Is there more?' This word 'more' bounces inside a mother's head as she searches the cooking pot knowing there isn't any more" (de Jesus 32). This haunting refrain encapsulates the emotional labor of motherhood under scarcity—a condition rendered more acute by the absence of state support and the constant surveillance of neighbors. Yet Carolina refuses to perform maternal victimhood; instead, she asserts a fierce moral code that prioritizes her children's dignity over communal conformity. When accused of neglect or immorality, she responds: "My kids are not kept alive by the church's bread. I take on all kinds of work to keep them" (de Jesus 21). Her self-reliance becomes an act of ethical resistance in a space where poverty is conflated with moral failure.

Central to Carolina's agency is her pointed rejection of respectability politics. Unlike many favela women who seek validation through marriage or religious charity, Carolina explicitly disavows matrimony: "I never got married and I'm not unhappy" (de Jesus 21). This statement is not a confession of regret but a declaration of autonomy. She critiques the performative morality of her neighbors, particularly their "gossip that I'm not married, but I'm happier than they are" (de Jesus 21). Her disdain for "favela women" whose "tongues are like chicken feet. Scratching at everything" (de Jesus 18) reveals a deep skepticism of communal judgment rooted in patriarchal norms. Rather than conform, Carolina isolates herself, choosing

solitude over complicity. This social withdrawal is not passivity but strategic self-preservation—a refusal to be disciplined by the very community that denies her dignity.

Carolina's voice—raw, unfiltered, and linguistically unconventional—is a site of epistemic resistance. Her Portuguese is "not the flowing classical language spoken by the upper classes, but the short choppy urgent speech of the poor" (St. Clair, "Translator's Preface" n.p.). She makes no attempt to "beautify" her prose; instead, she records "what she saw in such a way that she makes the reader feel it too" (St. Clair n.p.). This aesthetic of immediacy rejects the literary expectations imposed by Brazil's white literary establishment. Her diary, therefore, functions as a counter-archive: a textual space where the silenced favela dweller documents state abandonment, economic exploitation, and racialized gender violence. When neighbors threaten or shame her, she weaponizes her pen: "I'm going to write a book about the favela… and you with these disgusting scenes are furnishing me with material" (de Jesus 25). Writing becomes both shield and indictment—one that transforms everyday indignities into historical testimony.

Most powerfully, writing is Carolina's primary mode of survival. In moments of unbearable reality, her notebooks offer psychic refuge: "When I was writing I was in a golden palace… with crystal windows and silver chandeliers… Then I put away my book and the smells came in through the rotting walls and rats ran over my feet" (St. Clair n.p.). This oscillation between fantasy and squalor is not escapism but a form of emotional endurance. The act of writing reclaims her subjectivity in a world that renders her disposable. Even her literacy—acquired with only two years of formal education and honed through reading "labels in the drug store window and the names of the stores" (St. Clair n.p.)—becomes radical. In a society that denies Black women intellectual capacity, her self-taught pen asserts cognitive sovereignty. As one neighbor sneers, "You think you are high class now, don't you, you black whore" (St. Clair n.p.), Carolina's literacy is perceived as transgressive precisely because it challenges the epistemic hierarchy that positions Black women as voiceless subjects rather than thinking agents.

Ultimately, Carolina's narrative agency emerges not despite her marginalization but through it. Her gender, race, and literacy converge to produce a form of testimony that is defiantly embodied, ethically grounded, and aesthetically unassimilable. As she declares in a moment of public confrontation: "I'm going to write a book… you are furnishing me with material" (de Jesus 25). In this sentence lies the core of her resistance: a refusal to be erased, a refusal to be silent, and a refusal to let the favela remain invisible. Her diary is not a cry for help, but a manifesto of survival written in the language of the marginalized.

Politics of Survival: Embodied Resistance and the Ethics of Testimony

Carolina Maria de Jesus's survival in São Paulo's Canindé favela is not a condition of passive endurance but an active, daily praxis of resistance. Every act—scavenging paper, trading bottles for bread, writing in salvaged notebooks—is a tactical maneuver against erasure. As she recounts early in her diary, "I washed three bottles and traded them to Arnaldo. He kept the bottles and gave me bread" (de Jesus 17). This exchange is not charity but barter—a micro-economy of self-reliance that refuses the logic of dependence. Her survival is political precisely because it refuses the roles assigned to her: the grateful recipient of pity, the silent victim of structural abandonment, or the exoticized "slum Negress" of bourgeois fantasy.

Central to Carolina's resistance is a rigorous moral code that asserts dignity in the face of degradation. She explicitly rejects religious charity: "My kids are not kept alive by the church's bread. I take on all kinds of work to keep them" (de Jesus 21). This declaration is not pride but principle—a refusal to internalize the shame imposed on the poor. Similarly, she shuns the pervasive *pinga* (cane liquor) culture that numbs others to their suffering. Despite its omnipresence—"Pinga is the favorite drink of Brazil's poor, who can get drunk on it for less than ten cents a bottle" (Translator's Preface n.p.)—Carolina abstains, stating, "I don't want that curse. I have responsibilities. My children!" (de Jesus 25). Her sobriety is ethical; it preserves her agency and models restraint for her children.

She fiercely protects them from the favela's moral decay. When neighbors stone her children or accuse them of theft, she responds with defiance, not submission. She isolates her family not out of misanthropy but to shield them from normalized violence: "I don't mingle with those I can't stand," she writes, "I refused to lower the standards I had set for myself and my children" (Translator's Preface n.p.). This boundary-drawing is an act of care, not judgment alone.

Her relationship with neighbors is complex—a tension between alienation and reluctant solidarity. She condemns gossip ("Their tongues are like chicken feet. Scratching at everything," de Jesus 18) yet intervenes in crises, once preventing a mob from harming a man falsely accused (de Jesus 89). She is both outsider and witness.

Most significantly, her diary functions as ethical testimony. She names names—Dona Rosa, Leila, Senhor Heitor—and documents violence, drunken brawls, and political hypocrisy with journalistic precision. This is not poverty porn but accountability: "I'm going to write a book about the favela… you are furnishing me with material" (de Jesus 25). Her pen indicts the powerful and the complicit alike.

Unlike victim narratives that render the poor as objects of rescue, Carolina is strategic, observant, and future-oriented. She plans escape: "If God helps me, I'll get out of here" (de Jesus 25). Her resistance is not rebellion for spectacle but survival with eyes fixed on exit—a politics of endurance that insists on the full humanity of the discarded.

Conclusion

Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Child of the Dark* stands as a searing indictment of Brazil's neocolonial order, where the favela functions not as a spatial anomaly but as a deliberate wound—a site of racialized dispossession, gendered precarity, and epistemic erasure. Through her unflinching diary, Carolina transforms scavenging, mothering, and writing into acts of embodied resistance. Her voice—raw, unedited, and defiant—refuses the tropes of victimhood and instead asserts a radical moral and intellectual agency. In documenting daily humiliations—from the water spigot's gossip to police indifference and the predatory logic of welfare—she exposes the myth of Brazilian racial democracy and reveals how modernity is built on the backs of the discarded. Crucially, her literacy becomes a form of insurgency: a self-taught Black woman claiming narrative authority in a society that denies her humanity. Though mediated by editorial intervention, her testimony endures as ethical witness—not for the gaze of the voyeur, but for historical accountability. Carolina's legacy reminds us that survival, when coupled with self-articulation, is itself a politics. Her favela is the "garbage dump" of national

progress, yet from within it, she pens a manifesto of dignity that reverberates far beyond São Paulo—speaking to all who endure, document, and resist from the margins of empire.

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