

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrea Paula dos Santos. *Ponto de Vida: Cidadania de Mulheres Faveladas*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1996. 151 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-85-15-01432-3.

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Five years ago, a team of graduate students in oral history under the direction of Jose Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy of the University of Sao Paulo (USP) set out to track down not only the surviving children of the black diarist and writer Carolina Maria de Jesus, but also to interview persons influenced by her during her lifetime and after her death in 1977. One of the students, Andrea Paula dos Santos, discovered a small group of indigent women in the small city of Guarujá, who belonged to a women's center named after Carolina de Jesus and who called themselves "Carolinas." After many visits and extensive life history studies of the women, the author learned that they only faintly knew who their namesake was, but that the study of their own lives revealed fascinating and important features of the lives of black and mixed-race Brazilian women living on the economic margin of society, just as Carolina Maria de Jesus had done.

After an introductory statement by Bom Meihy and an explanatory section by the author, the book presents in their entirety life study interviews with six of the "favelada" women in the Guarujá association: Ana, Cecilia, Luiza, Penha, Veronica, and Marlene. Two were raised locally; the others migrated from the Northeast (two from Bahia, one from Pernambuco, one from Paraíba).

Cecilia is the leader, born in 1958, married, and with two daughters, 19 and 20. Her goals are clear and ambitious: to maintain the Carolina de Jesus center; to see the establishment of a local woman's legal rights center; to organize a free theater; to create a clinic for alternative (non-allopathic) medical treatment. She is politically astute, feisty, and realistic. "The women who started the Carolina center," she concludes, "question things, fight, and know that they have to create something new, or else

they will be lost. We cannot always remain dependent on others.... We are filled with hopes, but as long as we do not achieve them, we remain trapped between the day-to-day struggle to survive and our longing to arrive at a higher place."

Although they share many traits in common, each of the women presents a varied and different life story. Bonding together in their association named for Carolina Maria de Jesus, they reveal collectively what the literary critic Marisa Lajolo terms "a feminine identity less mutilated" than the ordinary. Their testimonies dwell not on the hopelessness of lower-class life but evidence that with a minimum of assistance from outside (in this case, state and local social services) and with the strength of association derived from mutual support, women such as these are elevating the quality of their lives.

The author provides a concluding chapter in which she classifies the women according to their outlooks on life, their coping strategies, their relationships to institutions and to women's problems, and their individual personalities. She chooses to let Ana, one of the six "Carolinas," provide the summary statement for the interviews: "I'm finished. I started out to talk about myself, about my own life.... But thinking about it, I realized that my life is really good now. I have matured, I have grown as a human being, I am a better person, I can confront things with greater serenity than before.... I think this is positive.... Me, who didn't believe in anyone over the age of thirty! Today I am thirty-six and I believe that life is worth living! I have learned to believe in myself...."

This short book speaks volumes about the lives of these proud and self-realized women. Andrea Paula dos Santos has challenged stereotypes and provides invaluable insight into the lives of six poor women who other-



wise would not be heard.

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