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Life Narratives: Racial Issues

The objective of this article will be a comparative analysis of two literary works. One is the trajectory of Carolina Maria de Jesus, 60 years ago, with her *“Quarto de Despejo”* (*Dump Room*) (2020 edition) and the other is the repercussion in 2020 of José Falero’s work, *“Os Supridores”* (*The Suppliers*). Within this comparative analysis, the question we ask is the same that makes us think about the, among many, reflections on racism in Brazil and how it all appears – or disappears – in the works of male and female black authors. This is the hypothesis that emerges: after so many years the literary situation, literature with black characters and male and female black authors, does not seem to take a different direction. The narratives of the two authors would not have changed regarding the social horizons of the places where they live. The comparative and social analysis will provide these elements in Carolina’s autobiographical speech, a life narrative, and in Falero’s speech, in literary fiction of youngsters working in a supermarket. And, in this sense, it will also listen to the recent speeches of contemporary writers such as Paulo Scott, Jeferson Tenório and Itamar Vieira Júnior.

Introduction

For a long time, Brazilian literary works have placed the black people stereotyped in various ways (BANDINO, 2021). From victims, from rogues, to women who drive men crazy for the erotic beauty they show. And, on the other hand, in addition to being characters, both black men and women were also ostracized as male and female authors of and in Brazilian literature. Furthermore, some were bleached as Machado de Assis. Despite the vast representation of the population, both black men and women continue to disappear from the pages of literature, even in the contemporaneity. Still publications of black authors (male and female) are quite scarce, due to the lack of dissemination. For example, despite the greatness of the work of Conceição Evaristo (2021), in fact, the author became recognized and studied after achieving some feats such as applying for the position for the Academia Brasileira de Letras (Brazilian Academy of Language and Literature), in 2018. Although she was rejected by filmmaker Cacá Diegues, whose merit is not discussed, it is noticeable how prejudice still prevails. She is one of many examples of a black woman writer who emerged from a poor family dealing with financial difficulties. In order to study, Conceição Evaristo was even a maid, which also does not take away the merit of the worthy profession. Master and PhD from Universidade Fluminense (in Rio de Janeiro), she achieved what few can, especially women. She had already been to the FLIP – Feira Literária de Paraty (Literary Fair of Paraty, Rio de Janeiro), in 2017, participating in a roundtable that was a resounding success and ovation.

Like this predecessor, another contemporary woman, Carolina Maria de Jesus, who is studied in this article, almost 60 years earlier, was discovered by chance by journalist Audálio Dantas. However, she did not follow the same trajectory and remained forever linked to the 60s with her *“Quarto de Despejo”* (*Dump Room*) (2020). Carolina only managed to leave the *favela* (shanty town) and move to a simple house, and as soon as several administrative issues took place, she found herself collecting paper, despite such success. The merit of Carolina Maria de Jesus’ trajectory is that she became – or was considered to be – the first black woman in Brazilian literature, at least the first to be recognized as such. There is a short-time gap between Carolina and Conceição Evaristo, but the fact that Conceição has taken academic flights may have helped her in her literary rise.

In this way, the objective of this article is to make a comparative analysis of two literary works. One is the pathway of Carolina Maria de Jesus, 60 years ago, with her “*Quarto de Despejo*” (*Dump Room*), 2020 edition, and the other is the repercussion of José Falero’s work, “*Os Supridores*” (*The Suppliers*), in 2020. Within this comparative analysis, the question we ask is the same that makes us think about the, among many, reflections on racism in Brazil and how it all appears – or disappears – in the works of male and female black authors. This is the hypothesis that emerges: after so many years the literary situation, literature with black characters and male and female black authors, does not seem to take a different direction. The narratives of the two authors would not have changed, regarding the social horizons of the places where they live. The comparative and social analysis will provide these elements in Carolina's autobiographical speech, a life narrative, and in Falero's speech, in literary fiction of youngsters working in a supermarket. And, in this sense, it will also listen to the recent speeches of contemporary writers such as Paulo Scott, Jeferson Tenório and Itamar Vieira Júnior.

From “*Quarto de Despejo*” to “*Os Supridores*”

As we have already pointed out, “*Quarto de Despejo*” (*Dump Room*) is a diary of a *favelada* (a person who lives in a *favela*), the great book of the 60s dealing with serious social issues of the contemporary world in most Brazilian *favelas*. Although journalist Audálio Dantas (1993), in the preface, points out that he has modified some sentences for a better understanding of the text, Carolina's writing is synthetic and appears exactly in the form of a diary. These are notes from July 15, 1955 to January 1, 1960. Soon after, the material would be published in a book by the publishing house Francisco Alves and, before that, it appeared in newspaper articles of *Folha da Noite*, in 1958, and in the magazine *O Cruzeiro*, in 1959. There is a recent controversy about having Audálio discovered Carolina. The irony of this discovery can be seen in the excerpt below taken from the magazine *Quatro Cinco Um* (2021, p. 22):

The writer was “discovered” by journalist Audálio Dantas, in the 1950s. Carolina was in a boulevard adjacent to the community, when she noticed that some adults were destroying the toys installed there for the children. Without thinking, she threatened to denounce the offenders, making them characters in her memoir book. Upon witnessing the scene, the young journalist started a dialog with the woman who had numerous notebooks in which she narrated the drama of her indigence and her daily life in Canindé neighborhood. Dantas immediately became interested in the “phenomenon” he had in his hands and committed himself to gathering and disseminating the material.

There is a greatness in this diary that is not only the miserable account of a daily suffering, but the explicit metalanguage of the first-person narrator who also explains the writing process, as it appears below in which the author – and this happens in other passages – makes it clear to the reader that she would wake up early to write, before the daily toil, and nature gave her encouragement. We even realize the use of a periphrasis to point the Sun. Grammar gives way to poetics as there was no understanding on her part about prepositions before time, in this case:

July 20 – I got out of my bed 4 am to write. I opened the door and stared at the starry sky. When the luminous celestial body began to peep, I walked to fetch some water. I was lucky! The women were not on the pump. (JESUS, 2020, p. 21)

There is a constancy in the choice of unusual expressions, which contrasts with what is considered a grammatical error in this writing. What can be seen is an effort to transform that daily routine into an aura of literature, exactly as the author perceived in her readings. And she would always read, despite the people in the *favela*, who considered her proud in the pejorative sense that the word implies. It means thinking that Carolina was aware of

the difference established between common people and writers. In the example below there is a sequence of verb usage followed by pronouns exactly as the grammar predicts, in the form of an enclisis. It is the first entry in this diary as published:

July 15 – [...] I bathed the children, I nursed them, and I bathed myself and I nursed myself. I waited until 11 o'clock, for a certain someone. He did not come. I took a Bayer Aspirin™ and lay down again. When I woke up, the luminous celestial body glyded in space. My daughter Vera Eunice would say: “Go get some water, Mom!” (JESUS, 2020, p. 11).

Here we can already see the constant presence of the periphrasis for the word “Sun” (luminous celestial body), a striking element for the author, a kind of creative axis, at the beginning of the day, of thoughts of good things. The use of the verbs “bathe” and “nurse” marks what we said earlier: a search for poetic signifiers for writing. The fact that we have misconceptions such as the absence of the preposition “at” before time (I got out of my bed 4 am...) or the use of “glyde” with “y” instead of “i” are, in fact, unimportant in the face of beauty and the desire to transcribe misery as poetry. The misery is revealed in the hardness of the constant work that awakens in her daughter's request telling her mom to fulfill the chores. The chronological mark of an era, in addition to the dates, appears with the use – constant in her narrative – of “Bayer Aspirin™”, the metonymy for pills that relieve pain. There are many reported pains, especially those that refer to the lack of money for the simple things in life such as buying bread, putting beans on the plate, having some protein to complete lunch. I wish I had money for the basics:

When I was at the tram stop, Vera started crying. She wanted pastries. I only had 10 cruzeiros¹: Cr\$ 2.00 for the tram and Cr\$ 8.00 to buy ground beef.” (JESUS, 2020, p. 50).

The passage clearly shows the hard situation of the family, mother and children, even though she went out every day to pick up paper on the streets, her profession. It is also noted in the passage the presence of the transport of the time, the popular “tram”, as well as the “*cruzeiro*” bills. This currency replaced the “*mil-réis*” (ancient Brazilian currency since its colonization until October 5, 1942) and was in effect until 1967. Due to inflation, it was soon replaced by “*cruzeiro novo*” (Brazilian currency that circulated transitorily in the period between February 13, 1967 and May 14, 1970). In fact, throughout the narrative, Carolina's financial difficulty shows how much the currency had devaluated, which ended up causing even more damage to her family, to many families in the *favela* and outside it.

Raciality issues are present throughout this life narrative from the moment we know that Carolina de Jesus was black. However, in this diary it is not clear whether the author suffered prejudice due to her color. The reports refer much more to serious financial issues, as we have seen. In the passage below, which is significant, the issue appears with an account that reveals the situation of how blacks were treated at the time and, unfortunately, now:

The *favela* is hot today. During the day Leila and her companion Arnaldo quarreled. Arnold is black. When he came to the *favela* he was a boy. But what a boy! He was good, polite, sweet, obedient. He was his father's pride and of those who met him.

"This is going to be a 'black-yes-sir'!"

In Africa, blacks are classified as follows:

¹ The Cruzeiro (Cr\$ or G\$) was the monetary standard in Brazil from 1942 to 1967, from 1970 to 1986 and from 1990 to 1993. Its adoption took place for the first time in 1942, during the *Estado Novo*, in the first change of monetary standard in the country, with the purpose of standardizing the money in circulation.

'Black-you'.

'Black-*turututu*'.

And 'black-yes-sir'!

'Black-you' is the more-or-less black. 'black-*turututu*' is who is worth nothing. And the 'black-yes-sir' is the one of high society. But Arnaldo became a 'black *turututu*' after he grew up. (JESUS, 2020, p. 51)

The racial issue is seen according to the behavior of black people. If polite, gentle and obedient, they are even considered to be of high society. However, the alcoholic, stupid or pornographic black man is transformed, like Arnaldo, into "black-*turututu*". This classification is remarkable because being obedient, gentle and polite reveals servitude. That black, like so many that could be mentioned, those of "high society", those who, unlike the misfits, could never be considered as citizens. Recurrent in Carolina's speech, including why she looks for literature, reading and writing, as if – and in fact this happens – there were recognition of the black. Including hers. However, we know Carolina only manages to leave the *favela* to live in a poor peripheral neighborhood and, as soon as she achieved fame and money, she lent sums to so many people that she found herself facing financial difficulties again. A story that is a little different from that of another writer, Conceição Evaristo, as we have already pointed out. Differently, she perhaps did not earn so much money, but she managed to live a life without so many upheavals thanks to her academic performances. In both, the writings reveal hardships in financial matters. The striking fact, however, is the dignity of being a black woman. Respect for women's rights, for black women, is the most dignified life in the sense of right to education, right to food, right to housing, as already mentioned; in short, rights to which Carolina had little access. Let's say that Conceição Evaristo had access to these rights and knew how to struggle for them.

And so we are in the hypothesis of this article, that is, these rights continue to be vilified. To be worthy after 60 years of this narrative by Carolina Maria de Jesus. To be recognized in literature and to have expression in literature beyond the narratives in which blacks are employed in minor functions. As we have already pointed out, there are many male and female black authors, who took over the narrative and had publications in excellent publishers in 2021. We mentioned a few earlier. Some of them, including Itamar Vieira Junior (2018), with his work "*Torto Arado*" (*Crooked Plow*), an overwhelming success in the media. In it, the narrative revolves around a family of humble rural workers descendants of slaves, standing for a complaint about the struggle for the right to land. The same toil as Carolina had for the right to a home, which she finally managed to have, the dignity of seeing this family portrayed in "*Torto Arado*" (*Crooked Plow*) with the grandeur of the history of these descendants of slavery with tributes to religiosity, despite all the struggle.

For the purpose of this article, the choice fell on writer José Falero, born in 1987, long after Carolina de Jesus, long after the publication of "*Quarto de Despejo*" (*Dump Room*). The dignity we have been mentioning is present in the speech of contemporary author Jeferson Tenório (2020) to Falero, on the book flap of "*Os Supridores*" (*The Suppliers*):

Justice in *Os Supridores* passes through an ethics based on human integrity, on the right to exist with dignity, whatever the cost. The tension that is established in the construction of hard, intelligent and ironic dialogs puts the reader in a state of alert and complicity in the face of this undertaking. (TENÓRIO, 2020, book flaps)

This first novel by Falero is not a diary like the work discussed here by Carolina Maria de Jesus. In this way, it could not be said that the account is exactly autobiographical like that of "*Quarto de Despejo*" (*Dump Room*). In fact, the social denunciation of poverty is present in both works. Falero's narrative in this work is in third person, but there is a continuous flow between the narrator and the characters to a point in which this narrative speech seems to both of them, there is a narration of autofiction similar to Pedro Almodovar's narrative, Spanish

filmmaker, in his film *“Dor e Glória” (Pain and Glory)* (2019). Pedro and Marques enter this case as characters in constant dialog in this continuous flow. They are both residents of a *favela*, the so-called *vila*, in the region of Porto Alegre (capital of Rio Grande do Sul, a Southern Brazilian state). A kind of ghetto excluded from the elegant city. A dose of autofiction, as we pointed out, since Falero is also from Porto Alegre. The friends work in a supermarket in the central region of the city, they are suppliers, hence the title of the work *“Os Supridores”*. Being a supplier is to provide someone with something. Ironically, the title shows their profession and at the same time points to how much they are not supplied by society, how much work reveals itself as a slave in the same line of poverty in which Carolina de Jesus lived. She, at least, supplied herself as a paper picker and, in that sense, owned her own supply, even if insignificant and also dependent on large official pickers from the big recycling companies that were starting to appear at that time. Pedro and Marques are servants. Employees in a supermarket that feeds a lot of people, but barely feeds those who work there. The constant surveillance prevents that, but even so they enjoy products they want, such as the pastry desired by Carolina's daughter. A luxury item. The two boys, however, find loopholes in the prohibitions and manage to eat the chocolates they wish.

As we have pointed out, Carolina de Jesus bets on poetic or cultured words in her diary; here, José Falero created this strong narrator whose language differs from those of the *vila* where Pedro and Marques live. The language is purposeful for this narrative credibility so that the figure of this narrator is not underestimated. To this language is placed that of the characters who already identify the city where they live right on the first page: *“Bah², is that right, tché³? But what a barbaric thing!”* (FALERO, 2020, p. 7). This is the speech of Geraldo, Fênix supermarket's manager, where the boys work. Not only does the supermarket exist in the region, but it is possible to clearly identify some neighborhoods mentioned in the work. The *vila*, for example, differs little from large *favelas* such as those in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, but it is located on the peripheral zones of Porto Alegre where poverty reigns. In this relationship, Carolina and Falero clearly leave open the wounds of big cities.

The narrator's language, as mentioned above, is cultured and intelligent, capturing in free indirect speech the lines that are mirrored in characters, especially in Pedro:

Fueled by tobacco and marijuana, Pedro saw the possession of a weapon as one of the most fundamental things in his daily life. But, after all, how had he forgotten *the fucking lighter?* It'd have been better if he forgot to put his pants on, for God's sake! (FALERO, 2020, p. 21)

In the excerpt above, it is possible to realize Pedro's speech, *“the fucking lighter”*, literally since it appears in italics, and then *“for God's sake!”* also pointing to Pedro without the italics identifying him. These entries are interspersed with the narrator's speech itself, as seen in *“tobacco”*, for example. Pedro or Marques would not use that term.

If Carolina writes choosing her own words, Falero in this work also chooses not his own words, but those of the narrator, the supermarket manager and those of the characters of the *vila*, the suppliers like Pedro and Marques: *“What's up, Roberto, is that alright?”*

“Alright, Pedro. How's things?” (FALERO, 2020, p. 22).

There is a recovery of the orality of these characters, and the educated and cultured speech of the narrator joins it. In the diary, Carolina narrates and uses dialogs with characters in a similar way: with those words from that daily life. In turn, Falero makes a difference. Carolina would be illiterate; the narrator of Falero, in this work,

² A Southern Brazilian interjection to express admiration, amazement, or surprise.

³ A Southern Brazilian expression of greeting and exclamation, used to refer to someone and has the same meaning as "guy", "companion", "boy", "friend" and other synonyms.

would not. The author was not born clinging to books either, he was a bricklayer, a supplier like his characters. But, like his character Pedro, Falero does not believe that only a few can write a book, just like Carolina de Jesus. Falero continued for a long time as a bricklayer and supplier, at other times he was unemployed. During that time, he would write and work. Or he would just write. Not long ago did he manage to make a living from writing or participating in events. If he will continue to write, if his life will change, this is still too early to take into account. There are, therefore, the same reasons for poverty between Falero and Carolina. If Carolina's successful work is her own narrative, Falero's does not present itself in this way, despite the fact that he is also a supplier. An interesting fact that appears in *“Os Supridores” (The Suppliers)* is the Marxist theory exemplified in a very simple and enlightening way, in addition to being put into practice by Pedro when he proposed his friends a business in which no one would own, but in which all the profit would belong to everyone. The young man, who sees the drug business as the only opportunity for the poor, has the idea of selling marijuana in the community since he and his friends were no longer able to buy it due to the business of stronger drugs. But the idea of this business is exactly to treat it from the point of view of social justice. At a certain point, after setting up the business, Pedro feels he needs more people for this job. His friend, Marques, already sees in this expansion the idea that the new members will be employed, but Pedro contradicts his friend:

“The two *person* we call to sell marijuana to us have to earn the same thing as us, bro. We'll always divide the entire profit into four equal *part*”.

“God...damn it! I can't believe ya're gonna shit everything with those fucked up ideas of yours!”

Pedro sighed.

“Fuck, Marques, it's not just ideology, homeboy. When ya said ya wanted to sell marijuana with me, what were ya gonna think if I wanted more money than ya? Fuck, bro, I'm tryin' to improve my life, because I need to improve my life, but ya also need to improve yours, so, kinda, how was I gonna offer ya less buck? What'd be my face if I proposed ya such a stuff? (FALERO, 2020, p. 130).

In the example above, in addition to the idea of profit sharing, we can observe the language that denotes Pedro and Marques as being from a specific region. In Portuguese, the pronoun “*tu*” was used (instead of “*você*” – “you”) – here represented by “*ya*” (just to differentiate from “you”). “*Tu*” is commonly spoken in the Southern region of Brazil. Moreover, it is noticeable a speech that does not use formality or grammar as in the case of “the two *person*”, without the *s* of plural that denounces the cult narrator in any way: “the two *person*... have...”. The verb “have” explains that it is plural, and the plural is identified in “two person”. It may even be a note to show the narrator or the disappointment of Falero who allowed the form “have” (instead of “has”, if agreeing on “person”). If we go back to *“Quarto de Despejo” (Dump Room)*, that character-author often repeats her honest nature. At no time does she intend to earn money illegally, even if she has no lack of opportunities. There were many in the *favela* that Carolina considered outcasts. And she always corrected saying there were also many honest people in the *favelas*, she was one of them. In *“Os Supridores” (The Suppliers)* this morality is far from existing. The boys were workers, but they observed people earning money illegally on a daily basis. They would not change their situation of poverty in a honest way. There were dreams of eating candies from the supermarket and they had no money or rights. Carolina felt sorry for her daughter who wanted to eat pastry and have new shoes so she could walk, but she continued as a paper picker. Many times, the most they did was to be lucky enough to have someone donating something to them. Being a beggar was something Carolina did not allow herself to be. The boys and their friends were not beggars either, they were workers. But they did not even see a chance to leave the *vila*, that miserable neighborhood, to have some dignity. As it often happens, resorting to drug use is a way out, the luminous celestial body of these boys. More than users, it would be a dream for them to become drug dealers.

They latched onto it. And, like Carolina, Falero – actually the pseudonym of José Carlos da Silva Junior – sees injustices and his works denounce them. In an interview with Paulo Nogueira (2020), from *“Estado de Minas Pensar”*, the author, in order to point out the language used in his work, said it could shock many people, due to its rawness. However, it represents people from very poor areas, from places like the one he comes from:

The people who produce literature in Brazil are white, mostly men, heterosexual, upper-middle class. When the Brazilian people pick it up to read, they do not find themselves in it.

In this last speech by Falero in the interview, we can clearly see that, in his work *“Os Supridores” (The Suppliers)*, there is the mark of an Afro-descendant place of speech pointing to the ills of places where Falero and Carolina de Jesus come from. The criticism that the author places on a type of literature, in the Brazilian case, shows that these speakers, literary authors and literary critics, do not take the opportunity to look at people around them. People whose social issues are also impregnated with what Almeida (2019) specifies in his work *“Racismo Estrutural” (Structural Racism)*. In this sense, Falero and Carolina de Jesus make the social denunciation using the literary place of speech, their works, and the social place of speech, interviews, among others.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

After the comparisons, what cools down is realizing that we find the book by José Falero presenting us characters who are very close to his daily toil after 60 years of Carolina Maria de Jesus’ work. Therefore, despite being victims of the system that does not see them, they decide to create a new survival system, a fairer system even if using illicit means.

As for Carolina, if the figure of the luminous celestial body marks our reading, in Falero’s work there is a metaphor that is given to Pedro when he finds himself swallowed up by the legal system because one of the members of the narrative commits treason and he goes to prison and loses faithful friends to death. The “soup” metaphor. Avelino, known as Véio, comments that things did not go as Pedro and Marques wanted and says: “Ya salted your soup too much” (FALERO, 2020, p. 297). The metaphor had come from a conversation between Avelino and his mother some time ago; she said it was necessary to be careful not to salt the soup too much because later on, the salt would be impregnated in it. According to Avelino, the soup is only ready, however, when you die and, of course, there is nothing else you can do. After all, the soup is life itself. And, following the metaphor, Avelino will explain that everything is not always lost if people, realizing that they have salted the soup too much, manage to put potatoes in the soup, carrots in the soup, which is a way to make the soup better. This metaphor, in fact, is the one that makes the boy (Pedro) keep his faith, when he is arrested and spent a long time in jail. Pedro, just like Falero, one day begins to read and to read and to read. Time comes when he manages to write a book named *“Os Supridores” (The Suppliers)*. He is saved by the work, by the work within the work.

Thus, Falero (Pedro) and Carolina (Carolina) write to be able to observe the luminous celestial body, in order to improve the soup of life, to denounce the unfair ills imposed by a society that tries not to see the minorities (the excluded), so that they can simultaneously show a world that is not seen.

In dealing with the time of the diary, Carolina ends the maxim work as follows:

“January 1, 1960 – I got up 5 am and went to carry water”. (JESUS, 2020, p. 191). Falero ends the work by addressing the other who accompanied him with the reading: “And if you, reader, are reading this, *três bien*. It is because Pedro managed to write everything he wanted.” (FALERO, 2020, p. 301).

Pedro and Carolina used literature in an unthinkable world since, as they said, this art is always made by white, straight, cisgender men. As we have pointed out several times in this article, what weighs on readers is realizing

that few things have changed in this soup. At least, each of them offered us potatoes and carrots and chayotes so that we would be less salty, watery and hard. And, in this sense, even though the two works are distant in time, they leave us an alert: how are we cooking?

As mentioned, judging by the controversy about the re-edition of Carolina Maria de Jesus' work by the publisher *Companhia das Letras*, we understand the whole discussion exposes racism, as Professor Acauam Oliveira (2021) says:

If even readers who recognize Carolina's literary greatness believe that the distancing from the cultured norm is an index of exoticization that needs to be corrected, what will the great mass of readers say?

What "exoticization" is the author talking about? That of some who consider Carolina's work to be a literary canon, someone who receives an inclusive treatment. Thus, like Conceição Evaristo, the greatness of the authors does not matter. They will always be excluded if the language by which they operate is not taken into account. The so-called way in which Carolina de Jesus writes is not something exotic, but a place of speech that denounces the exclusion within the Portuguese language itself that disregards what Lélia Gonzalez (1980) called as "*Pretuguês*" (a neologism made of the combination of "*preto*" – black + "*português*" – Portuguese) in order to reveal an African ancestry when speaking, which is passed on generations.

Pedro and Marques, José Falero's suppliers, are also excluded, if we do not take into account the social issues that permeate his speeches in a place where the master's discourse continues as a capitalist discourse between masters and slaves, according to Lacan (1992). And that is exactly the point of Pedro in looking back at the division of assets in the dreamed-up company he constitutes, a company in which there are no masters. Everyone is called to work. Everyone is called to profit. They are no longer suppliers. All of them are provided.

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