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The Parallels of White Supremacy Discourse in *Bitita's Diary* and *Racism in a Racial Democracy*

Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914-1977) came into the public eye when her book *Quarto de Despejo* (*The Dumping Room*), a series of diary entries, was published in 1960 in Brazil and became an instant bestseller internationally. The publication signified the first time that a slum dweller provided a first-hand account of living conditions in the *favelas*. De Jesus defied the stereotypical notions of semiliteracy and abject poverty, eventually publishing five books. *Diário de Bitita* (*Bitita's Diary*), Carolina's last publication, was published posthumously in 1982 and offers significant appeal because it focuses on her childhood years, appropriates the black Bildungsroman genre, and provides insight into Brazil's economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, expanding on the effects of the Great Depression and the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship.

The renowned anthropologist Gilberto Freyre's (1900-1987) proposal of a racial democracy, a concept promoting cultural hybridity as evidence of the absence of racism, serves as the main point of contention in this comparative essay. While the effect of white supremacy is not always perceptible, it varies in shape and form within geographic spaces. This study measures its function in a rural Brazilian context, whereas current scholarship focuses predominantly on racial dynamics in urban areas. France Winddance Twine's ethnography *Racism in a Racial Democracy* (1997) serves as an ideological basis through an analysis of racial attitudes and the implications of whitening philosophy in Carolina Maria de Jesus's¹ *Bitita's Diary*. This study demonstrates how systemic and rampant racism and colorism continue to weigh on the psyche of Afro-Brazilians. Carolina Maria de Jesus, arguably a victim of white

¹ For the purposes of this essay, Carolina and Bitita are used interchangeably, referring to the same person.

supremacist ideology in Brazil, succumbs to the ideals of Gilberto Freyre's expansion of the racial democracy myth even as she seeks to oppose its debilitating effects on Afro-Brazilian society.

Gilberto Freyre's racial democracy ideology, originally coined "social democracy" (34) in his seminal anthropological work *Casa Grande e Senzala* (*The Masters and the Slaves*) in 1933, remains commonplace throughout Brazilian society. My definition of white supremacy in this study is a concoction of racism, miscegenation, and indoctrination that promotes the idea of whitening (*embranquecimento*), not only on an individual level, but most importantly, on a macrolevel throughout Brazil. Although white supremacy connotes an unequal relationship of dominance and control favoring whites over non-whites, the Afro-Brazilian component of non-white groups is the most affected socioeconomically, psychologically, and culturally because of lack of access to higher education, political visibility, economic stability and prosperity, and visibility in media outlets due to the preferential treatment of white Brazilians. The sentiment of *Racism in a Racial Democracy* shares a congruous perspective with my idea of white supremacy. Twine, in her study of race relations in Vasalia, a town in the state of Rio Janeiro, interprets white supremacy through the absence of Afro-Brazilians in meaningful professions; instead, blacks must settle for menial wages performing manual labor due to class inequality (67-68). Interestingly, Twine draws upon her respondents' reactions to explain the weakening effects of the racial democracy myth. The Afro-Brazilians in her study interpret the lack of access to more desirable occupations as a product of class struggle and poor education, without ever attributing systemic racism as the primary cause to such economic disenfranchisement. Similarly, in *Bitita's Diary*, Carolina condemns the visible white supremacy in her rural space—such as the presence of military police and the upper-class white professionals' flaunting of their wealth—but

synchronously opts to ignore invisible forms like the books that she reads while gaining her semiliterate status, such as *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*) (De Jesus 60). Carolina overlooks the reinforcement of white Portuguese colonialism and supremacy during her reading of the poem. Thus, both Sacramento (Bitita's hometown in the state of Minas Gerais) and Vasalia (the location of Twine's study) share similar elements of rurality, but most importantly, a numbness of consciousness of overt and covert racism among Afro-Brazilians. Additionally, analyzing *Bitita's Diary* in extensive detail requires alternative perspectives on the promotion of white supremacy. Niyi Afolabi affirms, "Instead of confronting the reality of racism, the mostly white-dominated Brazilian government spends energy trying to defend racial democracy that is nonexistent" (3). Carolina's experiences with racial alienation and racist insults ultimately alter her self-esteem in *Bitita's Diary*. The debunking of racial harmony and equality in Twine's book confirm the predominance of a white Brazilian elite propelled by the historical and present-day effects of an imposed inferiority onto Afro-Brazilians in all aspects of life.

While acknowledging questions of subjectivity in Bitita's commentary on Brazil's social issues during the 1920s and 1930s, *Bitita's Diary* serves as a cultural and historical artifact due to the inclusion of a black woman's conceptualizations of white supremacy in a first-person account. Carolina's position in Brazilian society represents varied levels of marginalization, reflecting her victimization as a result of white supremacy. Even in her own family, Carolina faces rejection. Relatives who are deemed mulattos, her white godparents, and even her black family members refer to her as "a little nigger girl" (26). Bitita experiences rejection by the white elite in Brazil and by her own family members who represent different social statuses and races. Her darker complexion is the subject of family ridicule, as her black family members play into

the politics of colorism. In reality, Bitita experiences marginalization on numerous levels: her race, family, space (*favela*), gender, and wider (white) society.

Difficulty lies in determining Carolina's actual views on race in *Bitita's Diary* due to the inconsistency of her commentary and her crude writing style, attributed to her young age and semiliterate status. Dawn Duke addresses Carolina's writing inconsistencies in *Critical Perspectives on Afro-Latin American Literature*, "Although her views may not always coincide logically, they interweave, creating internal textual conflict that has opened the author up to criticism" (191). Nevertheless, one thing is certain: Carolina desires to confront her blackness even as a child, but white supremacy proves inimical in her discovering of self-worth as a black Brazilian girl, so she opts for promoting white supremacy because of her community's (neighbors and family members in Sacramento) negative portrayals of Afro-Brazilianness. Moreover, Carolina views herself through the lens of others, particularly the white Brazilian establishment with respect to beauty aesthetics associated with whiteness. For example, Carolina comments retrospectively about her mother's father's appearance: "He was the most handsome black man I have seen in my life" (4). At first glance, this may be viewed as an innocent statement from a young girl, but it confirms the indoctrination of white supremacy that causes blacks to question their own beauty. The complexity of her statement is reflected in the fact that she references his blackness. He is now reduced to his skin color and placed under the microscope of a white hierarchy of beauty aesthetics. Nevertheless, she compliments black males in her narrative, but offers no such admiration of black female beauty in *Bitita's Diary*. She reserves positive assessments of beauty for her descriptions of the white and mulatta women in her life. So, one must question Bitita's conceptualization of black female beauty in Brazil. Considering a parallel of white aesthetic preference in Twine's study, one of her respondents,

Moema, a white Brazilian female, offers a candid perspective of beauty as it pertains to white supremacy: “I think that the majority [of blacks] reject people of their own color...I think our problem as white Brazilians is that we always define someone beautiful as white” (92). Afro-Brazilians such as Carolina Maria de Jesus struggle to encounter an environment that collectively promotes black pride and self-value from a beauty standpoint; nevertheless, the closest thing to blacks embracing themselves positively is a reference made by one of Carolina’s grandfathers, referring to Zumbi Dos Palmares and Quilombismo. Moreover, the absence of any guise of black activism in her rural, poverty-stricken environment debilitated Carolina’s reasoning of positive role models of blackness. Whites speak more comfortably about the negativity of aesthetics of blackness (perceived bad hair and dark skin) and benefit from their *boa aparência* (good appearance); this evidence in Twine’s interviews demonstrates the prevalence of whitening ideology in the social psyche.

Carolina’s promotion of white supremacy through emphasis on her mulattanness is prevalent in *Bitita’s Diary*. Carolina exhibits similarities to Mayotte Capécia’s desires, as Frantz Fanon writes, “Instead of recognizing her absolute blackness, she proceeds to turn into an accident. She learns that her grandmother was white” (32). Even though Carolina is defined as *preta*, literally black in Brazilian context, she emphasizes her white ancestry and her relationships with other whites as a social barometer of success and prestige. Twine elaborates on this common tendency among Afro-Brazilians:

Mixed-race Afro-Brazilians typically avoid naming their black ancestors when reciting the oral history of their families. The Afro-Brazilians interviewed did not pass on memories of the experiences of their own African-descent family members. This was in

striking contrast to the descriptions that they willingly provided of their European ancestors (generally plantation owners) and mixed-race ancestors. (122)

Ironically, Carolina becomes a victim of her own mulattanness because even though there is evidence to her white ancestry, her phenotype does not match the appropriate level of mulattanness to gain access to higher socioeconomic privilege; in other words, she is considered too black and is treated as such, even by other black family members. *Bitita's Diary* heavily emphasizes racial hierarchization and special value is attributed to non-blackness to achieve financial success and a certain level of prestige in the community. Bitita's forced familial racial connections include her mother's mulatto cousin José Marcelino and her three godmothers in the chapter "The Godmothers" (8). For instance, Bitita acknowledges the fortuitous link to possible access to wealth due to her mulatta godmother, "My godmother gave him ten thousand réis. Wow! She has a lot of money! I am important now, I have a rich godmother!" (8). This striking occasion demonstrates Bitita's disconnect with her reality. Carolina wants to benefit from Godmother Matilde's social class (a rich mulatta), but unfortunately she is not a part of Matilde's social circle or class. Her constant role models are whites and mulattos; Carolina internalizes the notion that blackness alone cannot help her escape abject poverty, and she ultimately relies on interracial familial connections to ascend the socioeconomic ladder.

Carolina has three godmothers—each one white, black, and mulatta—and she entertains the idea of a favorite godmother, but ultimately ascribes positive attributes to each one; however, the portrayal of Siá Maruca, her black godmother, draws unfavorable comparisons to servitude. Interestingly, her white and mulatta godmothers are referred to as *Dona* and *Godmother*, respectively. Considering the appellation of her godmothers and Carolina's distinction in a broader context, Siá refers to a title given during slavery, effectively linking her black

godmother's race to a recent slave past. If Siá Maruca were referenced in isolation, and not in comparison with the other two godmothers, there would be fewer questions regarding the slavery implication, but the fact that her juxtaposition of the godmothers based on class and race insinuates unfavorable notions of blackness, and consequently, whiteness and *mestiçagem* (miscegenation), the preferred traits of Brazilian society, reconfirm the enduring presence of white supremacy. Carolina's constant internalization of racial self-consciousness and shame places a decreased value on blackness due to the white Brazilian establishment's control in promoting Brazil as a racial democracy that supposedly exemplifies racial harmony. Gilberto Freyre offers an eerie parallel to Carolina's internalization of racial hierarchies in his poem "O Outro Brasil que vem aí" (The other Brazil that is coming) with his reference to "*brancas, morenas, pretas, pardas and roxas*" (white, olive-skinned, black, brown and purple women) (9). Before she considers her own blackness, Carolina prioritizes racial terminologies associated with lighter-skinned females. The power of desirable *mestiçagem* indoctrination has solidified its legacy in a negative, detrimental way at the expense of Afro-Brazilians feeling shame in their own blackness.

Carolina's relationship with her godmothers illustrates the importance of vanity and relationships between godparents and godchildren in Brazilian society. Bitita recognizes the potential opportunity to gain prestige and a better life in her environs through the sponsoring of her whiter godmothers. Bitita's relationships with Godmother Marlinha and Dona Matilde function as relationships based on convenience. The godmothers benefit from their relationships with Carolina by claiming to provide financial assistance for their black goddaughter, and emphasizing the importance of vanity. Secondly, the child's blackness potentially functions as reaffirmation of superiority over the perceived inferior other. Finally, Marlinha's and Matilde's

proximity to Bitita justifies their legitimate connection to Bitita. Ironically, Bitita becomes constantly haunted and ridiculed—even by those belonging to her class, race, and family—as a result of her illegitimacy. As Twine illuminates in her book, the idea of upper-class whites in proximity with blacks is a relationship of convenience: “When asked to define racism, middle-class and elite Euro-Brazilians would point to the adoption of Afro-Brazilian children as an example of the absence of racism within their families” (35). In these instances, white Brazilians use blacks as pawns to conceal their own maneuvering within the white supremacist ideology.

In chapter 7 of *Bitita's Diary*, “My Family” (46), Bitita undergoes a maturation process, reflecting the Bildungsroman nature of the diary/novel. In fact, *Bitita's Diary* encompasses several literary genres (autobiography, memoir, autobiographical fiction, testimonial) and draws favorable comparisons with the Cuban testimonial *Reyita, sencillamente: Testimonio de una negra cubana nonagenaria* (*Reyita: The Life of a Black Cuban Woman in the Twentieth Century*). The multifaceted nature of genre categorization in *Bitita's Diary* points to the fact that Carolina possesses a literary consciousness and she clearly demonstrates literary aspirations as a young child. Geta LeSeur contends that within the black Bildungsroman subgenre, black writers use personal experiences and appropriate the Bildungsroman to protest racial issues, slavery, and the white establishment (1). Although Carolina still exhibits naiveté about a range of persistent social issues, she gains a sense of understanding regarding the complex racial dynamics in her household and Brazilian society as a whole. By contrast, the tone of “My Family” (46) presents of a critique of mulattanness and the racial democracy myth; in “The Godmothers” (8), Bitita expresses a favorable opinion and appears to adopt Freyre’s racial myth ideology. In “My Family” (46), Bitita serves as the opponent of Brazilian white supremacy. Moreover, she publicizes how the trio of races in the book (black, white, and mulatto) fail to meaningfully

interact due to persistent conflicts of interest. Marilyn Grace Miller addresses the idea of *mestiçagem* and believes that in anthropological jargon, the myth of the three races resembles symbolism more than a tangible reality (118). In other words, in most Brazilian towns like Sacramento, a de facto segregation can be found in daily interactions and intermingling in public spaces. Bitita insinuates that whites do not accept mulattos, blacks are not permitted in mulattoes' homes, and overall, a strong prejudice persists among whites, blacks, and mulattoes. Twine expands on Bitita's observations of white supremacy's prevalence and racial self-segregation; Afro-Brazilians only recently discontinued the common practice of avoiding walking on sidewalks in Vasalia (121). Thus, Bitita's perspective on race is unique, because as an Afro-Brazilian *favelada*, her book offers the sole insight into race relations in rural Brazil during the 1920s and 1930s. Her raw and authentic perspective warrants further examination in Brazilian historical, literary, and sociological studies, particularly in the twenty-first century. Although Bitita is not erudite or a scholar, she offers her personal insight and credible storytelling from a unique, poverty-stricken Afro-Brazilian perspective.

Carolina's oppositional stance to Brazilian white supremacy further develops through her divulcation of numerous social issues and policies that specifically target Afro-Brazilians. She openly criticizes Brazil's idea of *ordem e progresso* (order and progress) with an implicit criticism of changes in immigration policy that favor the immigration of Italians, particularly; Italian immigrants were handpicked by the Brazilian government to not only become tenant farmers, but to also "whiten" the Brazilian population in the 1920s and 1930s, which was then predominantly black and mulatto. Bitita's commentary on land ownership and migration are revealing from a *favelada's* perspective, considering that she reports what she witnesses and records Brazilian history through her optic. Bitita's description of Brazil's economic system is

particularly reminiscent of the Southern United States during Reconstruction. The rural community of Sacramento operated on a system of sharecropping in which blacks were tied to a plot of land; although they farmed the designated area, they never earned enough money to buy their own home, as in Bitita's situation. Carolina shares her view of Italian landowners in the book *Unedited Diaries of Carolina Maria de Jesus*: "I felt that landowners indirectly contribute to implant the favelas in the large cities" (Levine and Sebe Bom Meihy 127). Another aspect of Bitita's frustration deals with the fact that new immigrants at the turn of the century—such as Italians and Syrians—capitalized on the Brazilian government's opportunities to become prominent, wealthy landowners and ultimately gained higher socioeconomic status, unlike the black native Brazilians who remained in a state of destitution. In *Freedoms Given, Freedoms Won*, Kim D. Butler comments on immigration in Brazil:

The social and cultural objectives of Brazilian elites in the post-abolition years directed them toward policies aimed at containing the African element in public life. An ideal of physical whitening combined with acculturation was intended to yield a new, European-based Brazilian culture. (40-41)

Furthermore, Bitita exposes the military police's abuse of blacks in rural Brazil and reveals flaws in the education system. Implicit in the heavy criticism of the police presence in Afro-Brazilian *favelas* is the poor quality of education that even the police receive. Thus, their experiences result from a trickling-down-effect of white supremacy. Not only do blacks like Carolina experience constant vigilance and societal subordination, but the deliberately failed education system for Afro-Brazilians and high levels of illiteracy also exacerbate these realities, considering that the same governmental police force that enforces white supremacy is just as illiterate, but holds a position of power because of white privilege.

Expanding on the literary concept of the Bildungsroman, Carolina's developed consciousness as a result of her character growth puts to rest any possibility of naiveté with respect to understanding race relations in Brazil. Specifically, "The Rules of Hospitality" (120) includes Carolina's honest statement about her value as a destitute black woman in Brazil. She proclaims, "But black was my fate" (123), and underscores the debilitating effects of rampant white supremacist ideals; moreover, her powerful declaration may be multileveled in interpretation. Unfortunately, Carolina accurately predicts her own demise. She was born black and destitute and died accordingly, even after her short-lived international fame and flash of critical acclaim due to her literary aspirations. In terms of Carolina's fate, black is synonymous with hopelessness and doom, but is even more so a self-reflexive condemnation of her black womanhood. Recognizing a universal feminist stance in the book remains difficult, because Bitita's concern is her future as a black woman, not a mulatta or even a white woman. Bitita was not always willing to refer to her blackness; at this moment in the novel, Bitita accepts her blackness within a racial oligarchy, not a racial democracy.

The implications of Bitita's failed education and her subsequent lack of access to higher education leads her to unknowingly promote white supremacism. Bitita's dilemma is not only obtaining literacy, but rather how she obtains it. In "The Blacks," Bitita declares that the illiterate Brazilian has no means of progressing (44). However, Bitita's literacy still does not imply a cultural understanding of the content. Precisely for this reason, Bitita promotes and embraces the same white supremacist ideals that hindered Afro-Brazilians' vital intellectual and psychological progress. Bitita is indoctrinated with Luso-Brazilian history, which is translated as the official history of Brazil and disregards Afro-Brazilian history, except for references to Quilombo dos Palmares and Tiradentes- Inconfidencia Mineira in "The Blacks" (39). Referencing Vera Moreira

Figueira, Twine observes that in textbooks blacks are depicted as socially inferior to whites, stereotyped as animals, excluded from references in history or social science texts, and are reduced to traditional Africans when mentioned in history books (55). Carolina's immense praise of Ruy Barbosa and Isabel, Princess Imperial of Brazil, reveals her indoctrination and how whitewashed her worldview becomes as she promotes colonial Brazilian history. Jerome Branche exposes an unfavorable portrayal of Brazilian abolitionist Rui Barbosa through Barbosa's burning of slave documents to hide Brazil's violent past (157). Not far removed from slavery herself, Carolina's lack of any collective black consciousness movement (or women's movement for that matter) impedes her ability to progress intellectually as an Afro-Brazilian woman in the 1920s and 1930s. After reading *The Lusíadas* and investigating the War of the Farrapos, she receives nothing valuable from an Afro-Brazilian perspective, but instead falls victim to captivation with Portuguese colonial and epic history, learning nothing more than gaucho culture and Luso-Brazilian history, thus indirectly promoting white supremacy.

In conclusion, *Bitita's Diary* bridges the gap between the official Brazilian history and the history of the marginalized, even if it only offers insight into a roughly fifteen-year period in the 1920s and 1930s. At times, the author's language and erratic literary style send mixed messages to the reader; additionally, it appears that Bitita does not comprehend what she experiences as an Afro-Brazilian child in her hometown of Sacramento. Nevertheless, she reports the social occurrences around her to the best of her ability. Through the reading of *Bitita's Diary*, the acquisition of historical consciousness correlates with evidence of Brazil's continued racial strife over the span of a century. A comparative study between the Cuban testimony *Reyita, sencillamente* and *Bitita's Diary* warrants further consideration due to the protagonists' common interests in Allan Kardec's Spiritism and shared narratives of Afro-descendant struggles in Latin

America. Through Bitita's story one better understands the victimization, promotion, and opposition of the workings of white supremacy in a recent post-slavery Brazilian context, and the continued implications for the plight of Afro-Brazilians.

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