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*Carlota Lucia de Brito: Women,  
Power, and Politics in  
Northeast Brazil*

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Brazil experienced less upheaval upon independence than did the Spanish-American nations. Under the 1824 constitution, Emperor Pedro I (1822–1831) allowed upper-class Brazilians to exercise some political influence, especially at the local and regional levels. Pedro I abdicated in 1831 in favor of his five-year-old son, Pedro II. A decade of disorder and uncertainty subsided in 1840 when young Pedro II began his official rule. His forty-nine-year reign represented political and legal continuity and generally was remarkable for its stability, moderation, and prosperity. Brazilian intellectuals worried less about the issues of civilization and barbarism, the conflicts between order and reform, than did their Spanish-American counterparts.

Still, rural areas and small towns in Brazil often experienced violence that belied the nation's reputation for tranquility. The central government, like the colonial Iberian administrations, could not control all of the vast national territory. Regional political leaders, allied with the rural poor and with backcountry bandits, enforced order with informal personal armies. Elites held together their networks of family, friends, and retainers by dispensing favors, protection, and jobs. Thus when Emperor Pedro II in Rio de Janeiro dismissed a Liberal ministry and called on the Conservatives to govern, the effects rippled far beyond the capital.

Carlota Lucia de Brito, an attractive young woman, was allied with her lover, a local politician, and his Liberal friends in a small town in the northeastern state of Pernambuco. In 1848, when the emperor changed ministries in Rio, the region erupted into a bloody feud between Liberals and Conservatives. Carlota ordered the assassination of a Conservative enemy and was condemned to life imprisonment by an imperial court for her role in the crime.

Carlota's story demonstrates not only that patron-client networks protected women but also that they sometimes allowed women, at least in backwoods areas, to act independently. The subliminal issues of family and individual honor often intersected with overtly political issues. Politics as practiced in midcentury Brazil was complex. So, too, was justice. Did

Carlota's sentence punish her for the crime of murder? for being a political enemy of the party in power? or, perhaps, for being a woman who had become too strong and independent?

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Politics in nineteenth-century Brazil centered primarily around family. Patterns of power and deference within it prepared each member for a role in the larger society. Families, by both portraying and reinforcing patron-client relationships, incorporated and thus perpetuated the acceptance of a social hierarchy with "protectors" at the top and "protected" at the bottom. The father's responsibility lay in protecting and controlling the women and children. To the fathers and older sons fell responsibility for preserving the family's integrity, in particular, for safeguarding the "honor" of female relations living within the household. The virtue of the women thus reflected the control men had over female family members. Men shaped the political world in which women lived. Women's most important political role appeared to be to acquiesce to the marriages that strengthened the extended family alliances upon which local politics rested. But women, at times, also acted as catalysts for political change. Some of the women who most directly influenced politics were not bound by traditional family roles; they exemplified an alternative to the ideals of a rigidly hierarchical society while functioning under the constraints of that very order. Carlota Lucia de Brito, the mistress of a powerful Paraíba politician, had a dramatic impact on political life in one Brazilian province during the midnineteenth century.

Carlota was a survivor. A refugee from catastrophic drought, she rebuilt her life in a new community, battled prejudice, and fought for her lover's political position. She survived a death sentence (commuted to a life term in the penal colony on the island of Fernando de Noronha) and finally died a free, very old woman in Recife around the turn of the twentieth century. The resilience that characterizes her story points to a strong, unusual woman, but her struggles were shared by many other Brazilian

women. Carlota's story illuminates issues of class, gender, politics, and justice in nineteenth-century northeastern Brazil.

For those who lived in the backlands, in the northeastern *sertão*, periodic droughts severely disrupted normal life. About every thirty years the intensity of the drought would push men, women, and children from their familiar world, forcing them to begin anew in an area with more plentiful rainfall. All levels of society could be affected by the drought that scorched crops and destroyed fodder. The wealthy, bemoaning the loss of their cattle, often found refuge with relatives in the coastal region. The very poor, sometimes the last to leave because they had nowhere to go, died of hunger or exposure while searching for relief; the luckier of this group swelled the indigent contingent in the towns. The middling group, usually owning at least some portable property, also moved to the urban centers to rebuild their lives. For all, drought meant drastic change. Families, by and large, attempted to move together during droughts; the bonds of blood would help ease the transition and earn acceptance into a new community. Often, nonetheless, drought disrupted families as well. Fathers and brothers, insisting that women and children move immediately to healthier surroundings, might stay with the family goods until the last hope of salvaging crops and herds was gone. In the flight from the scorched backlands, adults and children succumbed to disease and death, destroying family balance. Lashing out against the hopelessness of their situation, men turned to banditry, abandoning their wives and children. And women who felt tied to undesirable marriages used the disruption to free themselves from unwanted husbands.

Drought years altered social conditions in both the countryside and the towns. Population exploded in the areas unaffected by the drought, pressuring the minimal social services available. The ties of familiarity and even of patronage and camaraderie that had bound backlanders to the city dwellers disintegrated. While the swelling mass of the poor frightened the staid urban society, many profited from the misery of others. Women and young girls from the backlands arrived in the towns laden with all their earthly possessions, trusting that the value of their gold jewelry would keep them clothed, fed, and sheltered until they found a new means of survival. The value of gold, in response to the sudden supply, always dropped precipitously. Townspeople bought up the cheap gold, saving it for the inevitable price rise

when they would realize handsome profits. Once all their ornaments had been sold, women from the interior who had lost the protection of male kin might find in prostitution their only alternative for replenishing cash reserves and thus assuring survival.

In the drought of 1845, Carlota Lucia de Brito was among those who left the backlands of the province of Pernambuco and settled in the town of Areia. Situated in the humid *brejo* region of the province of Paraíba, Areia was not subject to dryness. An important market center in the midnineteenth century, it served as entrepôt for the coastal plantation region and the cattle-ranching *sertão*. Its merchant families also maintained close commercial ties with Recife, a major port and capital of the province of Pernambuco. The prosperity and wide-ranging connections of Areia's elite families placed the town among the most influential in provincial politics. Carlota arrived in Areia with a daughter, but no husband. She claimed to be a widow and later would be implicated in the murder of her husband. But in 1845 she was concerned primarily with building a new life. While hers had certainly not been a life of luxury, neither had it been one of penury. She had owned some land, she survived the move to Areia, and she quickly settled into a situation that seemed rather comfortable: she came under the protection of Areia's leading Liberal politician, Joaquim José dos Santos Leal. Apparently a woman of considerable beauty, Carlota did not possess the social status (nor did her family have the political ties) necessary to make her an acceptable wife for a member of the Santos Leal family. Nevertheless, she was soon installed in Joaquim José's town home and behaved as though the two had indeed legally married. She had found an important male protector, but in forfeiting the acceptable role of an "honest" woman, she became a target for accusations against her own and her lover's morality. While many sons of important Brazilian families enjoyed liaisons with women who were not their wives, these affairs were to remain discreet. Townspeople who readily accepted even frequent forays to the local houses of prostitution would pass harsh judgment on those men who, they believed, flaunted immorality by openly living with women they were unwilling to marry.

From 1844 to 1848 the Liberal party controlled the government ministries in Rio de Janeiro, the capital city of the Brazilian empire. Liberal ascendancy in the capital was reflected in the provinces. In 1846, Joaquim José dos Santos Leal, lieutenant colonel and commander of Areia's National Guard, was elected

to and served in Paraíba's legislative assembly. His chief Conservative opponent was Trajano Alipio de Holanda Chacon, another illustrious citizen of Areia who had served as deputy in both the national and provincial assemblies, as president of the province of Paraíba (1839–40), and as municipal judge of Areia from 1840 to 1848. It was during the Liberal ascendancy that Carlota and Joaquim José set up housekeeping together. Townspeople, suspicious and envious of Carlota, could do nothing but murmur. Trajano Chacon (Joaquim José's neighbor in town), however, let it be known that he considered Carlota nothing more than a prostitute; neither he nor Carlota disguised the distaste each inspired in the other.

In 1848 the Liberal party fell from favor, and Conservatives once again occupied the chief imperial ministries. Three years after Carlota's flight from drought, the provinces of Pernambuco and Paraíba entered a period of serious political upheaval. In Recife, a newly formed party of the Praia (composed primarily of disgruntled Liberals) challenged the Conservative government for power. Armed rebellion ensued. Driven from Recife, Praieira leaders fled north, seeking adherents as they went, hoping to return with greater strength to Pernambuco. The movement did not gather much momentum in Paraíba, with the notable exception of the town of Areia. Politics there, as elsewhere, was closely tied to family interests. The Conservatives of Areia, led by Trajano Chacon, despised the Santos Leal Liberals. Their animosity in town and provincial government preceded the Praieira revolt and would survive the collapse of the Praieira movement. But the heightened tensions caused by the rebellion (the Santos Leal faction supported the Praieiros who were opposed by Trajano Chacon's Conservative allies) would bring sinister consequences to both families.

When loyal government troops quashed the revolt, members of the Santos Leal family suffered not only a defeat and prison terms but also the humiliation of losing to the Conservative faction. Liberals, potential traitors to the imperial government, were forced out of local public office. Even the family space of the defeated Liberals was violated. The home of doña Maria José dos Santos Leal (Joaquim José's mother) was requisitioned to serve as headquarters for the imperial troops that defeated the Praieira movement. The looting that accompanied the stay of government troops in the Santos Leal house was so thorough that even the diadems from images in doña Maria's home altar

were stolen. When, that same year, Joaquim José dos Santos Leal (from the safety of his family ranch in the interior of Paraíba) ran against Trajano Alipio de Holanda Chacon for a seat in the national Chamber of Deputies, few in Areia doubted that Trajano Chacon would win the election.

After Joaquim José's flight from Areia following the defeat of the Praia, Carlota took charge of his business in town. She also took the initiative in expanding her role as benefactress to loyal Liberals. Among her duties was that of serving as liaison between her lover's more humble clients and the church. Much of local life was tied to the Catholic church. All the important passages from birth through marriage to death were channeled through the local church. Parish priests oversaw the spiritual well-being of their flock while also providing the framework in which temporal duties could be performed. Besides baptizing children, marrying couples, and burying the dead, the priests explained government decrees and collaborated with political authorities to ensure an orderly society. Just as the family imparted to its members the values of deference, so also did the church, while confirming the importance of families, instill values that contributed to an orderly, hierarchical community. Carlota, herself only a marginal member of the society that the church promoted, became responsible for helping her lover's supporters assume the role of upstanding citizens. She arranged, among other things, church baptisms and marriages for those who could not afford the parish fees.

In 1849 the town priest, Father Francisco de Holanda Chacon, was also Trajano Chacon's brother. One afternoon, while Carlota conferred with the priest about an upcoming baptism, Trajano arrived to pay his brother a visit. Furious at finding a "prostitute" in Areia's vicarage, and in an apparent effort to drive home his political and moral superiority over his Liberal opponent, Trajano openly confronted Carlota: he attempted literally to kick her out of his brother's house. For a woman who possessed a measure of social prestige, the accusation of leading an irregular life, coupled with the humiliation of being expelled from the vicarage, proved unbearable. In her anger at this affront, Carlota saw the opportunity to avenge both her own and her outlaw lover's honor. She decided to contact old relations in the *sertão* and commissioned Trajano's murder.

While Joaquim José (still avoiding a prison term for his role in the Praieira revolt by remaining far from Areia) probably knew

little or nothing of Carlota's plan, his family in town supported her attempt to avenge his honor. Carlota charged Antonio Brabo, a cousin of Joaquim José's from the interior, with executing Trajano Chacon. Brabo, in turn, solicited the aid of one of the *agregados* (tenant farmers) of the Santos Leal family, a man named Antonio José das Virgens, locally known as Beiju, who lived by favor on Santos Leal land. Beiju refused Brabo, but, after Carlota herself intervened, he accepted his duty to his patron and, encouraged by her promises of reward and protection, agreed to cooperate. Carlota's extended family thus joined with the Santos Leal clan in the determination to execute Trajano Chacon.

After several unsuccessful ambush attempts, Brabo and Beiju finally succeeded in killing Trajano Chacon on September 5, 1849, the very day that Trajano defeated Joaquim José in the contest for a seat in the Chamber of Deputies. To many in Areia the murder seemed to be revenge for the electoral defeat; Joaquim José, of course, became the prime suspect for ordering the crime. With Conservatives firmly in power in Areia after the Praieira debacle, the quest for justice reflected party as well as family animosity. Conservatives determined to bring the Liberals to justice while the Chacon family sought to avenge the death of one of their own.

Carlota immediately sent messengers to her lover, who remained hidden in the backlands of the province, urging him to flee even farther from the justice to be dispensed by Areia Conservatives. Although Carlota had planned the crime, Joaquim José tacitly accepted responsibility, thus fulfilling his duty to protect his woman; he knew that if he stayed in Paraíba he would be held liable for Trajano Chacon's death. Carlota eventually joined him in his flight from the province. The Conservative thirst for vengeance, however, would not be satiated without bringing the criminals to justice in Areia. The deputy police chief of Areia, José Pereira Copque, relentlessly pursued leads concerning the Santos Leal group throughout the northeast. In March 1850 he finally tracked down Joaquim José, the latter's brother Manoel José, and Carlota in the interior of the province of Rio Grande do Norte, only to find them heavily armed and prepared to resist capture. Copque believed it imperative to seek reinforcements before engaging the fugitives in a gun battle, and in so doing allowed them to escape. The Santos Leal family had a wide network of friends throughout the northeast who gave the fugitives cover and provisions to help them in their flight.

For their part, the Chacones had influential ties to provincial authorities in the region and managed to circulate descriptions of the fleeing group to police chiefs in the surrounding provinces.

Early in 1851 those accused of the murder of Trajano Chacon were sentenced in absentia. By that time it had become clear that Carlota had planned the crime. She and Beijú were sentenced to death; Joaquim José to twenty years in prison, and Manoel José to twenty-three years and four months imprisonment (Antonio Brabo had been killed by a slave). The search for the accused continued; they were finally captured on May 16, 1851, in the province of Piauí and sent back to Areia.

Meanwhile, in May 1851 the emperor granted amnesty to those who had participated in the Praieira revolt, ordering that "an eternal silence enfold all the facts about which the amnestied group might be questioned regarding their complicity in the rebellion that recently took place in the province of Pernambuco." The Conservatives could no longer hope to punish the Praia group, but they could still make Joaquim José and his supporters pay for the murder of Trajano Chacon.

The outlaws were finally brought to Areia in early December 1851, only a few days before the yearly holiday honoring Our Lady of the Conception, the town's patron saint. What a contrast the criminal Carlota presented to the Holy Mother of God! The inhabitants of Areia took seriously their duties toward the town patroness; her feast day was always prepared with elaborate care. Devotion to saints in northeastern Brazil long had reinforced the importance of protection in a paternalistic society. As with human relations, there existed a large variety of degrees of power among the saints. In rural Brazilian society, personal relations of patronage and protection provided the surest guarantees of security and immediate improvement of living conditions. The same occurred in dealing with saints. A system of duties and obligations guaranteed supernatural action. Not all saints possessed the same power; some proved stronger by exerting more influence on their own patrons, and thus assured greater miracles for their devotees. Devotion to a certain saint indicated acceptance of that image as powerful to bargain effectively with the supreme patron, God.

Our Lady of the Conception, the patroness of Areia, was one of the representations of the Virgin Mary most closely associated with motherhood. Her devotees believed that as the mother of God, she would influence her son on their behalf and that as the town's chosen patroness, she dispensed special protection and

favor to its inhabitants. The Virgin ranked second only to Christ in most Brazilians' perceptions of supernatural power. Some even believed that Mary's role as mother made her more powerful than her divine son, for in the family hierarchy children must defer to their parents. Yet, overall, the Virgin's role appealed to the populace not so much for her authority as for her maternal compassion: the same attitude Mary had displayed toward her son at the foot of his cross would also be manifested toward her "children" in Areia. Carlota's image as "murderess" and "prostitute" sharply contrasted with the image of Mary's compassion and virginal motherhood, which Areia was preparing to celebrate.

The townspeople well knew that the powerful Santos Leal family would attempt to keep its two sons from paying the legal consequences of the crime they had committed. Family responsibilities included protecting its members from the law. But political rivalry between Conservatives and Liberals had reached such a point by 1851 that it was impossible to protect Joaquim José and Manoel José from justice. At one time important local political leaders, they were brought into town chained to their mounts, in a humiliating display of power eroded. The president of Paraíba instructed Areia's deputy police chief not to release the Santos Leal brothers under any circumstances; they were to be considered prisoners of the state. Carlota, not a part of the Santos Leal family, did not enjoy the same attempts at protection as did her lover. She, however, also counted on family support. Her relatives in Pajeú das Flores, province of Pernambuco, attempted to have her removed to their town's jurisdiction in order to stand trial for the murder of her husband. But Father Francisco Chacon petitioned the president of Paraíba to guarantee that Carlota would pay for the death of his brother and not be sent to Pernambuco to be tried for the death of a less important man and, possibly, be released or sentenced to a less rigorous penalty. Father Chacon's petition, sent all the way to the minister of justice of the Brazilian empire, succeeded in keeping Carlota from benefiting from her family's attempt to protect her. Once again, she alone would be responsible for her survival.

With the accused finally captured and in Areia, a jury was assembled to try them. Most of the earlier sentences were upheld, with the exception of Carlota's, now changed from death to life imprisonment. Only Beijú, a poor retainer who at one time had enjoyed the protection of the Santos Leal family, was sentenced to death for the murder of Trajano Chacon. Despite petitions

for imperial clemency, he was hanged in 1863. Carlota, Joaquim José, and Manoel José were sent to the island prison of Fernando de Noronha.

Escape from the island was practically impossible. The only recourse left the Santos Leal family was to request authorities to bring their boys back to the mainland. Once the brothers were on the mainland, the family could supply them with some amenities and even conspire to free them by force. In 1865, doña Maria, in a display of lofty maternal responsibility, petitioned the president of the province to transfer her sons to the prison of Paraíba, since they were blind and sick and suffering and she wanted to give them the aid she owed them as their mother. Her petition was not granted. Joaquim José died on Fernando de Noronha, and Manoel José eventually returned to Areia, blind and crazed from his prison experience.

Carlota, on the other hand, survived. She, who had accompanied Joaquim José in his flight through at least four northeastern provinces and stood trial with him in Areia, quickly abandoned him once they reached Fernando de Noronha. It was clear to her that her erstwhile lover needed protection far more than he was able to offer it and that she had to manage to protect herself. Once again, she sought the company of a powerful man, this time the director of the penal colony. For more than thirty years she lived as comfortably as possible on Fernando de Noronha. In 1889 the Brazilian emperor was deposed. The new republican government commuted life sentences to thirty years in prison. Carlota was free at last. In 1890 she left the island and settled in Recife where she spent her last days in charge of a boardinghouse for young men from influential families in the interior who came to Pernambuco's capital to study.

The Santos Leal family continued to play an important role in Areia politics. Carlota's crime did not relegate them to political obscurity or even political impotence, but it did exacerbate tensions at a particularly volatile time. Had Trajano Chacon not been murdered, Joaquim José dos Santos Leal probably would have continued to be a major political force in the town. Yet Carlota's story must be understood as more than simply the account of a woman who ruins one man's life. Carlota knew she would never be accepted as a full member of the community she entered when she moved to Areia in the drought of 1845. She had refused to confine herself to a role others sought to impose. She was not willing even to subject herself fully to the

man with whom she lived. The self-assertion and independence of this woman, who moved beyond the boundaries of family hierarchy perceived as so vital to social order, contributed, in the final analysis, to the community's outrage against the Santos Leal family. It was bad enough that Carlota lived openly in concubinage with Joaquim José, but a man who could not keep his woman in check should suffer for that crime as well as for any others that grew from that inability. Ultimately, even though Carlota ordered the murder, Joaquim José was responsible for it. Only in the context of patriarchy can the political and family revenge against the Santos Leal brothers be fully understood.

Carlota well knew the options available to women without influential husbands. Rather than conform to the place reserved for her in a stratified world, she determined to move upward. It was, after all, impossible to maintain the ideal hierarchical society when nature and politics conspired to disrupt order. Those who understood the fragility of hierarchy, who individually survived its disruption by disaster, would chip away at the standards of accepted authority. But they remained subject to a system still gasping for survival. Carlota, for all her strength and independent ways, was fully dependent on men until the end of her very long life.

#### SOURCES

The most complete account of Carlota's crime is in Horacio de Almeida, *Brejo de Areia*, 2d ed. (João Pessoa, Paraíba, 1980), pp. 61–75. My account here is based also on manuscript documents from the Arquivo Nacional and the Arquivo Histórico da Paraíba. This research was made possible through a National Endowment for the Humanities Travel to Collections Grant.