

La Vida en Pobreza: Oscar Lewis, Puerto Rico, and the Culture of Poverty

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La Vida en Pobreza: Oscar Lewis, Puerto Rico, and the Culture of Poverty

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Mark Pittenger

Oscar Lewis was a cultural anthropologist whose work documented the lives of the world's poor. He developed a hypothesis called the "culture of poverty" which held that the desperately poor in modern nations live within a distinct subculture that transcends national boundaries and separates the poor from the broader societies in which they live. Lewis also developed a novel ethnographic method that relied on a combination of tape-recorded interviews, material culture analysis and psychological examination. This dissertation traces the development of Lewis's theory and method through several of his works, focusing on *La Vida*, Lewis's final major work and most widely read book. *La Vida* examined an extended Puerto Rican family living in San Juan and New York City. The book was a landmark work in the War on Poverty debates, as well as the debate about the relationship of Puerto Rico to the United States. Lewis himself considered the book to be an anti-imperialist tract, though he did not make that clear publicly. The culture of poverty, in vogue in the late 1950s and most of the 1960s, was by 1968 under sustained attack. Scholars and the public retreated from it, and Lewis's star went into decline. Although the culture of poverty may be flawed, Lewis's work remains vital to understanding poverty in modern societies.

In memory of Bob and Sonny

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As I looked, horror struck, from one death's head to another, I was affected by a singular hallucination. Like a wavering translucent spirit face superimposed upon each of these brutish masks I saw the ideal, the possible face that would have been the actual if mind and soul had lived. It was not till I was aware of these ghostly faces, and of the reproach that could not be gainsaid which was in their eyes, that the full piteousness of the ruin that had been wrought was revealed to me. I was moved with contrition as with a strong agony, for I had been one of those who had endured that these things should be. I had been one of those who, well knowing that they were, had not desired to hear or be compelled to think much of them, but had gone on as if they were not, seeking my own pleasure and profit. Therefore, now I found upon my garments the blood of this great multitude of strangled souls of my brothers. The voice of their blood cried out against me from the ground. Every stone of the reeking pavements, every brick of the pestilential rookeries, found a tongue and called after me as I fled: What hast thou done with thy brother Abel?¹

Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward: 2000—1887

¹ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887, with an introduction by Sylvester Baxter* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1898c), 324-325.

Introduction

This dissertation examines the work of anthropologist Oscar Lewis, focusing especially on his controversial “culture of poverty” thesis and his most famous book: *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty, New York and San Juan*. Published in 1966, *La Vida* told the story of an impoverished Puerto Rican family living in San Juan, Puerto Rico and in New York City. *La Vida* provoked an intense debate amongst academics, policy makers and poverty activists, as well as Puerto Rican political leaders and intellectuals. Lewis won the National Book Award for *La Vida* and the book sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The book was part of a larger discourse about poverty in the 1960s and was Lewis’s most complete description of a mode of existence that he called the “culture of poverty.”¹

The anthropological study of poverty and the culture of the poor, led by Lewis, helped to shape poverty policy for decades. The notion that poverty is at least partially cultural and that the poor might have a distinct value system and lifestyle remains one of the most controversial ideas in the debate over poverty in the United States. Lewis was also an important member of the new radicals of the 1960s academy who used their scholarship to spur social change. Lewis was concerned not only with describing the culture of poverty; he sought to alleviate poverty in modern societies through changing the fundamental relationship between the poor and the larger world around them.

¹ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—New York and San Juan* (New York: Random House, 1966). Although some editions of the book list both a 1965 and 1966 copyright date, the book did not appear until 1966.

La Vida brought a massive reaction from Puerto Rican political and community leaders. The book's primary subjects were the poorest of the poor. They had unstable family lives, gambled, and used profanity profusely. Additionally, the majority of the primary female subjects of the book either had been prostitutes in the past or were still working as prostitutes. Puerto Rican activists feared that the book, with its graphic language and descriptions of poverty, sexuality, and criminality, would create and extend negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans.

Much of the existing scholarship on *La Vida* has dismissed the book, at best as an example of poor research methodology and scholarship, and at worst as a racist screed. Lewis's critics sometimes label him as a bigot and reactionary. The existing literature on the history of poverty thought and policy does not adequately address Lewis's importance as a thinker on poverty. My dissertation will show how Lewis moved cultural issues to the forefront of the academic study of poverty. I will also address the more controversial aspects of *La Vida*. Lewis's work shows the difficulties of an anthropologist working across ethnic and class lines, working within an imperial context, and working as a political advocate for his subjects while at the same time criticizing aspects of their lifestyle.

There are many themes in this dissertation, but I argue a few key points. First, Lewis developed a novel anthropological method that allowed him to write a new and insightful style of ethnography. This method was not without its problems, and it was not always scientific, but this does not necessarily delegitimize it. Second, I argue that Lewis's work was not a rejection of the dearly held ideals of cultural anthropology. It did not represent some dramatic moment when "culture became like race." His work was a further development, along the lines of social class, of the culture and personality school of anthropology. Third, while Lewis considered himself an anti-imperialist and a radical, who

saw his life's work as a critique of colonialism and imperialism, events beyond his control hampered him. Anti-Communism was the reigning political ideology of Lewis's day, and while he certainly was not a doctrinaire Marxist, he was nevertheless a radical who believed in social change along leftist lines. Yet the full extent of his beliefs did not appear in his published works. Lewis, for instance, never publicly expressed his belief that Puerto Rico should be independent. Most importantly, this dissertation is a defense of Oscar Lewis. While I cannot resolve the question of to what extent the culture of poverty concept is valid, I do argue that Lewis's books captured certain realities of life in poverty (*La Vida en Pobreza*) in a way that has seldom been matched. A vitriolic reaction developed in the 1960s and 1970s against Lewis's work; academics and other intellectuals vilified him, and the popular world has largely forgotten him. Lewis's books still matter, however. His ideas about poverty remain relevant and important.

Lewis's new anthropological method began with a criticism of the existing anthropological tradition of cultural analysis. Ethnographers knew how to study and describe a culture, but they rarely adequately conveyed to their readers the complex world of the individual members of a culture:

People have a way of getting lost in culture patterns, statuses, roles, and other abstract concepts...We have come to deal more and more with averages and stereotypes rather than with real people in all their individuality...How can the anthropologist gather and present scientific data on these people and their cultures without losing a sense of the wholeness and vividness of life?²

² "The Children of Sánchez, Pedro Martínez, and La Vida, by Oscar Lewis—A CA Book Review" *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 5 (1967): 480-500.

Lewis's method, beginning with his book *Five Families* and continuing to his death, was to study individual families intensely.³ Lewis and his assistants conducted hundreds of hours of interviews, which were then tape-recorded, transcribed, and translated. Ruth Maslow Lewis, Oscar Lewis's wife, edited and organized the prepared interviews into the narratives that comprised most of Lewis's books. Oscar Lewis wrote an analytical introduction to each volume, based upon extensive questionnaires, psychological tests, and interviews. The process grew over time; for the Puerto Rico Project that produced *La Vida*, Lewis and his research team compiled thousands of pages of transcribed interviews, analyses, and observations from dozens of people.

Building upon years of studies in Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba, along with a detour to India, Lewis developed a theory that some of the desperately poor around the world shared a common culture that transcended national boundaries and local traditions. He called this the culture (or sometimes the subculture) of poverty. Lewis described this culture in several lists of traits which were not always consistent.⁴ But there was more than the trait lists. At the core of Lewis's culture of poverty was the perception that the desperately poor sometimes internalize the politics of oppression. Mistreated by employers, ignored by politicians, living in dangerous neighborhoods in poverty without end, the characters in *La Vida* seem to have concluded that they deserve nothing better. This is the crucial point that most of Lewis's critics miss: the culture of poverty is **not** a way to argue that the poor deserve their fate. Rather, it is a way to argue that a society that "explains low economic status as the result of personal inadequacy or inferiority" will tend to create "feelings of hopelessness and despair" amongst those who persistently do not succeed in

³ Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

⁴ See Appendix One for a compendium of traits that Lewis proposed.

material terms. Over time, argued Lewis, the adaptations to these feelings of despair coalesce into a culture.⁵

Lewis's scholarship was different from earlier ideas about the so-called undeserving poor. The poor for Lewis were not poor because they were immoral. Rather, the habits and lifestyles that middle-class observers saw as immoral were adaptations, "without which the poor could hardly survive." Whether this rendering of the culture of poverty makes it true is not the point here. Rather, a proper interpretation of the culture of poverty is crucial to understand Lewis's true intent, and the ways that the idea was used and misused in the vast mid-century discourse on poverty.

Lewis's work and the controversy around it created a fascinating moment within the anthropological community. In the early twentieth century, a school of American anthropologists led by Franz Boas successfully challenged racialist social science. Cultural and environmental determinism took the place of racial determinism in explaining human behavior. Following this, Lewis argued against the notion that anyone was destined for poverty because of "race" or ethnicity. Lewis's mentor, Ruth Benedict, herself a student and later a colleague of Franz Boas, helped to found the "culture and personality school" of anthropology. Benedict and her followers argued that every culture has certain dominant traits that manifest in the personalities of its members, and that cultures are themselves larger manifestations of the individual personalities of the people within a culture. Benedict was also a believer in cultural relativism, the idea that cultures are all equally

⁵ Oscar Lewis, *A Study of Slum Cultures: Backgrounds for La Vida* (New York: Random House, 1968), 5.

valid.⁶ The concept of the culture of poverty moved the ideas of cultural determinism and the culture and personality school to the economic realm.

The culture of poverty was the subject of furious debate amongst academics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Dozens of articles and books came out, symposia were held, and scholars chose sides. Most were critical of Lewis. Anthropologists Charles Valentine and Eleanor Leacock led the charge against the culture of poverty, arguing that Lewis had mistaken temporary adaptations to poverty for an inter-generational culture, that he had missed the real community strengths of poor neighborhoods, and that he had understated the structural inequalities in society that perpetuate poverty.⁷ Lewis's critics largely carried the day, and within a few years, social scientists discarded the culture of poverty. Postmodern critiques of Lewis have been more damning still, accusing Lewis not only of inaccuracy but of being unethical or immoral. One anthropologist, Micaela di Leonardo, disagrees. She argues that the wholesale rejection of Lewis had more to do with "anthropological avoidance of politics and poverty as issues." In the American context, she argues, this "merely left the field open to conservative sociologists and yellow journalism."⁸

If there is something salvageable from the work of Lewis, it is that poverty hurts in a way that goes beyond not having enough cash to secure a decent living for oneself and one's family. There is also an accompanying feeling of powerlessness, of disconnectedness from a surrounding society that seems completely unresponsive to one's needs and deaf to one's protestations. A reappraisal of Lewis, beginning from the understanding that the

⁶ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934). On cultural determinism, 12-14; on cultures and dominant traits, 237-239.

⁷ Eleanor Burke Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 7-8. Charles Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁸ Micaela di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 117.

people he observed were real people with real problems, is a good starting point for the process of recovering an historical sense of the tragedy of poverty.

Lewis was an activist social scientist. He used the culture of poverty to criticize capitalist societies that produced inequality, but he did not propose an adequate solution for poverty in the American context. He preached revolution abroad and social work and welfare at home. His proposed social work and welfare solution to American poverty--discussed in *La Vida* and elsewhere--betrayed two precepts that underlay his work: the belief that the poor were not immoral, and the belief that the poor needed to be involved in their own movements for social justice. Lewis's public commentary on the political questions regarding poverty in the United States was hesitant. This perhaps was attributable to the McCarthyite scare that surrounded him; his radical politics and Marxist leanings showed up only half-heartedly in his published works. Lewis believed that an unjust economic structure worked dialectically with the culture of the poor to maintain poverty. Yet he failed to systematically connect the culture of poverty to any broad structural critique of the American or global economic system.⁹ By focusing so heavily on culture rather than structure, Lewis left his work open to uses he would never have condoned. Conservatives, for instance, took the behavioral traits of the poor that Lewis found in the culture of poverty and used them to call for an end to liberal state intervention on behalf of the poor. Lewis's professional career was marked by these sorts of inconsistencies: by his unwillingness to publicly say what he privately thought, by self-

⁹ Lewis emblemizes a larger turn in social science thought, described by Howard Brick as a shift away from economic analysis and towards a new model of social thought that studied "identity, community, and power in intimate relationships—and issues of race, gender, and sexuality that continue to dominate our own time." This "shift away from economics" is troublesome for Brick because it weakened the ability of the American Left to criticize economic inequality within a capitalist system. It also found leftists unprepared to deal with an ascendant laissez-faire ideology of the 1970s and 1980s. Howard Brick, "Talcott Parsons's 'Shift Away from Economics' 1937-1946," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 490-514.

contradictions in his assessments, and by an accompanying inability to follow the meanings of his work to their logical and radical conclusions. All of this tended to reinforce, rather than deflect, the charges from his critics that his work was an assault on the poor.

Even with all of the criticisms of his work, Lewis has cast a long shadow. Most famously, Michael Harrington used Lewis's phrase, "culture of poverty," extensively, albeit without attribution, in his landmark work, *The Other America*. Harrington's book also followed much of Lewis's thinking about a broad class of people in America who had been beaten down and led to believe that their failures were the mark of personal inadequacy; who had become fatalistic and pessimistic; whose families were breaking apart.¹⁰ The culture of poverty heavily influenced many of the thinkers about poverty in the 1960s, and also influenced the "underclass" theories of the 1980s. For modern ethnographers working amongst the poor, the culture of poverty remains an idea that must be addressed, even if only to disclaim it.

¹⁰ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

Chapter Outline

Chapter One offers a brief biography of Lewis and a retrospective of his career leading up to *La Vida*. This chapter introduces Lewis's early work as an anthropologist, his politics and philosophical grounding, and provides an introduction to his major works, including *Five Families* and *Children of Sanchez*, the books where Lewis first introduced the culture of poverty. Chapter Two deals with the text of *La Vida*, demonstrating how it represented a significant reworking of Lewis's thinking. The chapter includes a case study of Soledad, one of the main characters in *La Vida*. Soledad was a Puerto Rican who moved to New York City during the 1960s. Her story in *La Vida* revealed a grim childhood with episodes of monstrous physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. Her mother worked as a prostitute; Soledad spent some time working as a prostitute herself and was still a casual prostitute when *La Vida* was written. *La Vida* portrayed Soledad humanistically; the book told of her values as a parent, her working life, her politics, her loves, and her dreams. This chapter will show some of the tensions in Lewis's writing. In ways, Soledad embodied the culture of poverty. In other regards she flatly contradicted it.

Chapter Three shows Lewis's ethnographic method at work in the creation of *La Vida*. It shows how Lewis conducted his research, and analyzes original interviews, examinations, and translations to show how the narrative of *La Vida* was created. It also examines the ideas and scholarship that were shaping Lewis's thinking as he created the book. Following James Clifford, I argue that *La Vida* is best understood as a "serious fiction." *La Vida* was an ethnography that was grounded in research, fact, and serious method. It also was interpretive and marked by the process of editing and selection. The

subjects of ethnography inevitably have a hand in shaping the final product, through what they choose to share and emphasize and what they choose to hold back.¹¹

Chapter Four describes how Lewis worked with Puerto Rican *independentista* intellectuals (Puerto Rican intellectuals who argued for Puerto Rican liberation from the United States) in promoting *La Vida* and assessing its meaning. I argue that Lewis intended *La Vida* as an indictment of imperialism, though he did not make that as publicly clear as he might have, and that the *independentistas* pushed the meaning of the book further than Lewis did. While the book angered many on the island, Puerto Rican nationalists held up the book as proof of the debilitating effects of American imperialism upon the national culture of Puerto Ricans.

Chapter Five further traces the way that *La Vida* was received and interpreted in various quarters. *La Vida* won the National Book Award, became a bestseller, and provoked intense reactions from many groups of people. Intellectuals and others used the book in debates about the War on Poverty. Lewis's culture of poverty idea and body of scholarship made him one of the most widely-read intellectuals on the subject of poverty. Unlike most ethnographies, *La Vida* was marketed to and widely read by non-academics. Thus there were reactions to *La Vida* from people who normally did not participate in the academic discourse about anthropology and about the meaning of the Puerto Rican migration to the United States. *La Vida*, therefore, offers a rare chance to witness the reaction of academics, governments, political activists, and common folk to an important book.

¹¹ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 10.

Chapter Six analyzes the substantial debates that took place concerning the culture of poverty, primarily during the 1960s and 1970s, but continuing until today. Lewis came out mostly on the losing end of these debates. I also will show how Lewis's ideas keep resurfacing. After a period of flat rejection in the 1970s, ideas that owe a good deal of their heritage to Lewis began to surface again in the "underclass" debates of the 1980s, and in contemporary works in fields such as education. The Conclusion explores some of the new directions that Lewis was taking in his thought towards the end of his life. In his final years, Lewis began to reformulate the culture of poverty, claiming that the culture of poverty was an existential reaction to modernization. He also began to criticize middle class life more stridently. Finally, the Conclusion will analyze the meaning and continuing relevance of Lewis's work.

Chapter One

Oscar Lewis was born in New York City on December 25, 1914, the child of immigrant Polish Jews. His name at birth was Yehezkiel Lefkowitz, though he was also given the name Oscar. Lefkowitz, fearful of anti-Semitism, later would adopt the surname Lewis. Lewis's father, Chaim Leb Lefkowitz, studied for the rabbinate in Poland. His mother was the daughter of a family that ran a small milling operation, also in Poland. Chaim Lefkowitz moved to the United States in part because of fear from repeated pogroms occurring in Europe. His family moved to meet him a few years later.¹

Lewis's father initially tried to make a living as an Orthodox rabbi in the United States, but deteriorating health forced him to relocate his family to a small farm in upstate New York. The family refurbished the farm buildings, converted them into a hotel and boarding house, and idealistically named the place "the Balfour" after Lord Balfour, who had recently issued the Balfour Declaration, stating Britain's support for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The business barely supported the family. Lewis did not know poverty only as a scholar; he was raised in poverty as well.

Unlike the children of many Jewish immigrants to the United States, especially those in New York, Lewis did not grow up in an extended Jewish culture. His father was

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the biographical detail on Oscar Lewis in this chapter all comes from Susan Rigdon's *The Culture Façade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 1-26. Rigdon had access to personal family papers of Lewis and also had extended conversations with his widow, Ruth Maslow Lewis. Rigdon also collaborated with Ruth Maslow Lewis in writing a three volume oral history of Cuba that came out of Oscar Lewis's final project, his unfinished study of the Cuban Revolution, after Oscar Lewis's death. Oscar Lewis, Ruth Maslow Lewis, and Susan Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

deeply religious, and Lewis grew up studying Hebrew and speaking Yiddish. In small-town upstate New York, however, Lewis was the only Jewish child amongst his Gentile playmates. He spoke English, but with a discernable accent. He recalled being a lonely and isolated child. He was also a sickly one, suffering several severe illnesses, and was hospitalized for gastroenteritis.

Lewis resisted his father's wishes that he become a religious scholar, but the scholarly inclination stuck. Lewis enrolled at the City College of New York in 1930, at the age of fifteen. He studied labor and working class history, along with the history of slavery, under Philip Foner, a Marxist, and a pioneering figure in the study of radical inclinations amongst the American working class. Lewis graduated in 1936, and enrolled in the Columbia Teacher's College where he pursued certification as a high school history teacher. He became dissatisfied, however, and upon advice from his brother-in-law, the noted psychologist Abraham Maslow, he switched to anthropology.

Lewis began his graduate anthropological studies soon thereafter at Columbia University. There, his advisers were the influential anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton. Franz Boas, the dean of modern American anthropology, was leaving the department. A rift amongst the faculty developed around Lewis's two advisers. Boas had handpicked Benedict as his successor at his retirement, but the school hired Linton from the University of Wisconsin. Benedict disliked Linton intensely. She wrote to Margaret Mead: "It's perfectly possible that I may have to wallop Linton hard in public someday. He is a swine." Linton, meanwhile, claimed to colleagues after Benedict's death that he had killed her with witchcraft, showing Sidney Mintz a pouch that supposedly contained the

spell material.² But despite the troubles, Columbia remained one of the best schools for students of anthropology when Lewis entered graduate school there.

Although Lewis admired both of his advisers, Benedict appears to have been the more important influence upon him. Benedict was one of the scholars at the forefront of the “culture and personality” school of anthropology. This movement advocated the combination of psychological and anthropological techniques to understand the nature of a culture and the sort of individual personality that it produced. When Lewis came to Columbia, Benedict recently had published *Patterns of Culture*. The book became one of the most widely read anthropology books of all time, a success both amongst intellectuals and the broad public.³ Lewis also took courses from William Duncan Strong, one of the top archaeologists of the era. Lewis learned methods for material culture analysis from his archaeological training and incorporated them into his ethnographies. Lewis also associated with other notable anthropologists at Columbia, including Margaret Mead.⁴

Lewis’s dissertation was a secondary work, an analysis of earlier literature on the Blackfoot Indians of Canada. “The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture, with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade” explained the historical development of Blackfoot culture as European contact and trade changed the social and economic world of the tribe. The American Ethnological Society published the dissertation. It remains one of Lewis’s more respected, though lesser known, works.⁵

² Lois W. Banner, *Intertwined Lives: Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Their Circle* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 379.

³ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934).

⁴ Mead and Benedict also were lovers. Lois Banner’s *Intertwined Lives* details their relationship.

⁵ Oscar Lewis, *The Effects of White Contact upon Blackfoot Culture, with Special Reference to the Role of the Fur Trade*, *Monographs of the American Ethnological Society* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1942).

Lewis's time in graduate school in New York City coincided with a remarkable upsurge in leftist politics and movements. Lewis came of age in the radical milieu of the 1930s and early 1940s New York Left. He took part in fundraising for the Spanish Republic, advocated for an alliance with the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, and joined several groups that were probably Popular Front organizations. Susan Rigdon suggests that Lewis's politics of that era matched those of the rest of his life. He "remained a socialist by orientation and outlook," but "he had neither the intellectual makeup nor the particular kind of discipline (or subservience) that it takes to maintain dogma...He did not use socialism to chart his course, only to specify its general direction."⁶ Lewis's other political concern was trade unionism, for which he held a general sympathy, but in which he did not participate actively.

Whether Lewis formally joined the Communist Party is uncertain. He first came to the attention of American government agents in 1944 when his possessions were searched at a routine border stop as he crossed into Mexico from the United States at Laredo, Texas. Lewis was headed to Mexico for his wartime position with the American Indian Institute, initiating a study of the personality of Mexican Indians that would later grow into his first major book. Border agents searching his possessions found two Communist Party pamphlets. Lewis insisted that they had been placed there by mistake, became "nervous and excited," discussed canceling his trip to Mexico, and eventually left. He returned the next day without the pamphlets. Border agents searched him again and made special note of his birth certificate, with "parents' last name LEFKOWITZ, natives of Russia," in bold type. Other items found by the border agents included a *New York Times* advertisement reprinting an Earl Browder address, and correspondence to Lewis from a man named

⁶ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 16. Parentheses in original.

“Arthur” concerning Arthur’s first Communist Party meeting. The letters contained phrases like “Yours for the revolution!” and told Lewis, “I hope you will carry on in some things, the important matters, so that you can acquire some experience by the time you get down here for the real hard work.” The incident prompted Abe Fortas, then the acting Secretary of the Interior, to request that the FBI investigate Lewis, and to announce that he would recall Lewis from Mexico. Lewis was not recalled from Mexico, but he did endure a formal interview with FBI agents in Washington, where he denied involvement in the Communist Party.⁷

Regardless, FBI informers in the late 1940s accused Lewis of being a Party member. Fellow anthropologist George Murdock made the first claim against Lewis in a 1949 letter to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Murdock claimed that Communist Party members had hijacked the American Anthropological Association at its 1948 meeting in Toronto. He accused Lewis of taking part in the insurgency, and of being either a current or a former party member:

Oscar Lewis, University of Illinois, Urbana, Ill. All I am certain of about Lewis is that he has been a party member in the past. It may well be that he has retired from all participation, and no longer holds his former views. At least, I know of no recent activity. He is certainly not an under-cover leader, for he is essentially timid.⁸

Further accusation came from an anonymous member of the faculty at Washington University of St. Louis, who claimed that during a “heated argument,” both Lewis and his wife, Ruth, defended Soviet policy during World War II and rationalized Soviet postwar domination of Eastern Europe by arguing that the United States was similarly an

⁷ David H. Price, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI’s Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 239-242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

imperialist power in the Caribbean. The anonymous author of the letter described Lewis as making a “dirty hands” argument: the United States had dirty hands and therefore had no moral authority to judge the Soviet Union’s actions. Further, the Lewises “strongly defended” the Petkov show trial in Bulgaria, and Oscar Lewis offered that there was “some justification” for the censure and suppression of Soviet musicians who failed to follow the official party line.⁹

These letters led the FBI to monitor Lewis, possibly for the rest of his life. The FBI even recruited Lewis’s students at the University of Illinois to report on his activities and lectures. Anthropologist David H. Price describes a program running from the 1940s through the 1960s in which the FBI monitored and intimidated anthropologists who were active in seeking liberal social change. Along with Lewis, the program targeted Margaret Mead, Ashley Montagu, and Cora DuBois.¹⁰

The FBI monitored Lewis throughout his years of research in Mexico. Ironically, Mexican officials charged Lewis with being an FBI agent, as part of their campaign to discredit him following the publication of the Spanish translation of *Children of Sanchez*. On his return to Urbana, informants at the University of Illinois accused Lewis of being responsible for pro-Castro demonstrations on campus. The FBI then monitored Lewis in San Juan as research for *La Vida* was underway, and kept tabs on him as he worked in Cuba in 1968-1969 on his final, unpublished project. Price points out that by the late 1960s, the FBI no longer feared that Lewis was part of a Communist conspiracy to overthrow the United States government. Rather, the FBI believed that the culture of poverty concept was subversive because it contained a radical critique of capitalist societies

⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78, 185. Price erroneously claims that Lewis shared with the other targets of the investigation a liberal political outlook, along with an anthropological method that was not heavily influenced by Marxism.

in general and of the United States in particular. The pro-Castro nature of Lewis's Cuba work also concerned the agency.¹¹

Rigdon explains that Lewis's Jewish heritage reinforced his radical political outlook. The agitation for action against Nazi Germany during World War II melded easily with Lewis's ethnic identity and family life. Fifty-five members of his family died in the Holocaust. Upon entering Columbia, Oscar Lefkowitz began calling himself Oscar Lewis; in 1940, he legally changed his name. Lewis remained proud of his Jewish identity, however. For some years he attended and sang at temple services. He possessed a singing voice of near-professional quality, took lessons in opera over the course of his life, and sang Yiddish folksongs publicly. Yet Lewis was probably a non-believer. Like doctrinaire Marxism, Orthodox Judaism was too constricting and narrow for Lewis. According to Rigdon, "Lewis rebelled against orthodoxy, not because he rejected Judaism or his ethnic tradition, but because of a generalized distaste for anything he believed constricted his thought or movement."¹² In the mid 1960s, however, he traveled to Israel and corresponded with scholars there about issues of poverty and also about Jewish identity.

The Cold War further complicated Lewis's relationships with Israel, Zionism, and Judaism. In August 1967, in the immediate aftermath of the 1967 war, he wrote Israeli philosopher Jacqueline Kahanoff, "The position taken by the Soviet Union and its socialist allies in regard to Israel makes it difficult for a Jew to be a 'Socialist' nowadays. As for myself, there was never a question about my intense identification with, and support of, Israel in the recent crisis which led to war and, mind you, I have never been a Zionist!"¹³

¹¹ Ibid., 244-254, 260-262.

¹² Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 16.

¹³ Oscar Lewis to Jacqueline Kahanoff, August 30, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, 1944-1976. University of Illinois Archives, Urbana, IL, Box 57. Referred to hereafter as Oscar Lewis Papers.

Lewis's Judaism impacted his scholarship as well. Lewis would claim, for instance, that despite centuries of poverty, the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe never developed a culture of poverty.

Ruth Maslow came into Lewis's life during his New York City years. Ruth was a graduate of the Columbia University teaching school, holding a Master's degree in Special Education. She worked for a few years as a teacher. After their marriage, she became Lewis's partner in his research. If they were published today, several of Lewis's books probably would list Ruth Lewis as co-author. Lewis brought his wife and children with him on all of his extended research trips. Ruth introduced her husband to his principal informants among the Blackfoot Indians which allowed him to write his first article, "Manly-Hearted Women Amongst the North Piegan."¹⁴ Ruth Lewis served as an interviewer for several of his Mexico projects, and in Tepoztlán she was the primary interpreter of the psychological testing of Mexican Indians. During the Puerto Rico project, she worked as the effective assistant project manager, reading all of the material as it came in and suggesting interview questions for the field workers. In all of Lewis's major projects, she had a large hand in the editing and organization of the books' narrative portions.

Lewis's first position out of graduate school was at the Human Relations Area Files at Yale University, where he was affiliated with the Strategic Index for Latin America (SILA). Lewis began an intensive study of Spanish to overcome his language shortcomings. He monitored political developments and movements in Latin America, with a special attention to Falangist groups to see if they might pose a threat to American security. His work in the field and growing knowledge of Spanish landed him a job with the National

¹⁴ Oscar Lewis, "Manly-Hearted Women among the North Piegan," *American Anthropologist* 3, no.2 (1941); in Oscar Lewis, *Anthropological Essays* (New York: Random House, 1970).

Indian Institute, where his duties included interaction with the Mexican government regarding Indian affairs. John Collier, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, appointed him to the post. While there, Lewis began the research that would lead to his groundbreaking Tepoztlán work. He successfully lobbied for a research study into the personalities and political sentiments of Mexican Indians. This personality study, deeply influenced by the culture and personality school, began to lead him into psychoanalytical research among Mexican Indians, who would form the basis for his first major work.

As World War II continued, Lewis was transferred into the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, where he began a study of the effects of American agricultural policy. Traveling across the United States, with stops in Texas, Mississippi, Kansas, and Washington, Lewis interacted with farmers and observed different agricultural community lifestyles. This work led to Lewis's second publication, *On the Edge of the Black Waxy: A Cultural Survey of Bell County, Texas*.¹⁵ As servicemen returned to their peacetime federal jobs, Lewis's wartime employment with the federal government ended. Lewis secured his first academic post immediately thereafter, at Washington University in St. Louis. After two years, in 1948, Lewis moved to the University of Illinois, at Champaign-Urbana. He founded the anthropology department there, and remained on the faculty until his death, a little more than twenty years later.

Lewis made his first real mark on the field of anthropology with his book *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied*.¹⁶ While undertaking the Indian Personality Study with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Lewis conducted research in Tepoztlán. This earlier work, continued in the late 1940s, formed the basis for his book. Lewis aimed at a big

¹⁵ Oscar Lewis, *On the Edge of the Black Waxy: A Cultural Survey of Bell County, Texas* (St. Louis: Washington University Studies – New Series, Social and Philosophical Sciences, no.7, 1948).

¹⁶ Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951).

target with his Tepoztlán book. University of Chicago anthropologist Robert Redfield researched the village in the 1920s. Lewis's study directly challenged not only Redfield's conclusions about the village, but also significant parts of Redfield's body of work on the nature of rural societies.

In Redfield's book, *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village*, he first articulated his concept of the "folk" identity, contrasted with the "masses" identity of city dwellers. The folk peoples of Mexico were represented by the inhabitants of Tepoztlán, a Central Highlands village where the villagers still spoke Nahuatl, performed their own music and sang their own songs, learned through oral tradition rather than through reading, and grew and prepared their own food. They were a local people, and their understanding of the world came from their own proximate traditions:

What characteristics distinguish them? Such people enjoy a common stock of tradition; they are the carriers of a culture. This culture preserves its continuity from generation to generation without depending on the printed page. Moreover, such a culture is local; the folk has a habitat.¹⁷

Folk people were more homogenous than the masses:

Within the folk group there is a relatively small diversity of intellectual interest; attitudes and interests are much the same from individual to individual, although, presumably, there is the same range of inherent temperament...And finally, the folk peoples are country peoples. If folk lore is encountered in the cities it is never in a robust condition, but always diminishing, always a vestige.¹⁸

Redfield also recognized a growing belief in anthropology: that ethnographic studies should not portray a culture as frozen in time, that culture was a process occurring over time, and that cultural anthropologists writing ethnography remained "geographers and

¹⁷ Robert Redfield, *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2

historians.” The cultural shift that Redfield described was the modernization of Mexico, as mass culture came to replace folk culture, as popular literature replaced folk literature, and as the tractor displaced the worker with his hoe. Redfield pitched his study, not as an attempt to capture a pre-Colombian Indian tradition, but rather to witness a society as it became modern and urban. The book was, as Redfield wrote, “an example, within convenient limits, of the general type of change whereby primitive man becomes civilized man, the rustic becomes the urbanite.”¹⁹

Lewis introduced his book by recounting Redfield’s Tepoztlán book and discussing his pioneering work on the “folk-urban conceptualization of culture change,” which had formed the model for a generation of sociological and anthropological community studies. Redfield first had conceived of the theory in Tepoztlán and then expounded upon it in later works.²⁰ Lewis set out to examine some of the things in Tepoztlán that Redfield had not studied. Redfield had provided a portrait of a city that was relatively free of strife, social stratification, class anxieties and jealousy. Lewis focused his study on “demography, the land problem, systems of agriculture, the distribution of wealth, standards of living, politics and local government, the life cycle of the individual, and interpersonal relations.”²¹ Much of Lewis’s methodology in Tepoztlán prefigured the methods that he would use throughout his research in Mexico, and, eventually, in Puerto Rico. Researchers conducted surveys amongst the residents, and Lewis “employed quantitative data whenever possible.”²² Fifty children were given a battery of psychological tests, including “the Rorschach, the Grace-Arthur Performance Scale, the Goodenough Draw-a-Man, the Emotional Response Test, the

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951), ix.

²¹ Ibid., xi.

²² Ibid., xiv.

Moral Judgment Test,...Thematic Apperception, free drawings, and written themes.”²³

Lewis’s analysis of his data seemed at odds with Redfield’s earlier study of Tepoztlán.

Where Redfield had found happy, pre-modern folk people living in a community that was relatively peaceful, Lewis found strife, anxiety, and violence. Even the selection of informants from the village, with the corresponding rejection of other villagers, Lewis claimed, stoked anger and resentment: “Despite the fact that doors were opened to us and that we have formed many close friendships in the village, Tepoztecan are not always pleasant to each other.”²⁴

Lewis originally had not intended to have his Tepoztecan research form the basis for a critique of Redfield’s work. He initially intended to build upon Redfield’s work to see how a community undergoing rapid modernization had changed in seventeen years’ time. Yet there was too much difference to ignore. Lewis came to believe that anthropologists needed to restudy communities, with the purpose of verifying the data and conclusions of other researchers. As anthropology was a social science, it must endeavor, as did the natural sciences, to replicate results. When Lewis shifted his focus from continuation to examination of Redfield’s work, he found that they disagreed a great deal:

The impression of Redfield’s study of Tepoztlán is that of a relatively homogenous, isolated, smoothly functioning, and well-adjusted people. His picture of the village has a Rousseauan quality which glosses lightly over evidence of violence, disruption, cruelty, disease, suffering, and maladjustment. We are told little of poverty, economic problems, or political schisms. Throughout his study we find an emphasis upon the cooperative and unifying factors in Tepoztecan society.²⁵

In contrast to Redfield, Lewis argued:

²³ *Ibid.*, xix-xx.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 428.

Our findings, on the other hand, would emphasize the underlying individualism of Tepoztecan institutions and character, the lack of cooperation, the tensions between villages within the municipio, the schisms within the village, and the pervading quality of fear, envy, and distrust in interpersonal relations.²⁶

Lewis went on to criticize Redfield's methodology and conclusions, arguing that Redfield had misrepresented Tezpotecan patterns of land ownership, ignored the "high incidence of stealing, quarrels, and physical violence," and misunderstood the terms *tontos* and *correctos*, which Redfield used respectively to refer to folk-oriented and urban-oriented people. Lewis argued that *tontos* and *correctos* were used by townspeople to refer respectively to stupid and clever people. These terms could be applied to people who were either folk- or town-oriented.²⁷ The differences in the two studies were not due to the passage of time, argued Lewis. There were, for instance, documented episodes of severe violence that had occurred during Redfield's tenure that he had simply ignored.

In some respects, though, Lewis was building up a straw man when he argued that Redfield had glorified the folk-oriented culture and denigrated the modernizing world. It is true that Redfield had observed that the folk-oriented cultures in Mexico were probably disappearing, but he did not cling to them or glorify them excessively. Lewis, though, accused Redfield, in language he would use later to talk about glorifications of poverty, of portraying pre-modern people as good and urban people as evil:

Underlying the folk-urban dichotomy as used by Redfield, is a system of value judgments which contains the old Rousseauian notion of primitive peoples as noble savages and the corollary that with civilization has come the fall of man. Again and again in Redfield's writings there emerges the value judgment that folk societies are good and urban societies bad.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 429.

²⁷ Ibid., 428-431

²⁸ Ibid., 435.

The use of Rousseau in conjuring up an image of the poor as noble and simple people would recur in Lewis's writing. He later would criticize what he saw as simple-minded depictions of the nobility of poverty that he felt had a "Rousseauan" edge.

Margaret Mead claimed that the debate between Redfield and Lewis came down, at least in part, to differences not only in methodology and analytical process, but also to differences in personality:

Redfield was interested in harmony; he was interested in what made things go well. Oscar, as everybody knows, was interested in what made things go badly. As a result, those two studies which are very interesting and very informative, are excellent statements about the temperaments of those two men.

Beyond this, Mead suggested that Lewis was the sort of man who came to a community and immediately set about studying "how many murders had been committed." Mead's analysis disregarded, however, the real inaccuracies that Lewis had uncovered in Redfield's work.²⁹

Lewis turned away from Latin American for a few years to conduct a Ford Foundation study of rural life in India. Lewis published the results of his study as his fourth book, *Village Life in Northern India*.³⁰ It remains a solid study on the caste system and work life in India during the 1950s. There also were some important lessons for Lewis from his research there. He would later claim that even the poorest members of a society with a caste system had a defined role in their communities. Lewis later would argue that while India had a massive amount of material poverty, it did not have a culture of poverty.

But Mexico continued to be the focus of Lewis's research. Building upon his work in Tepoztlán, Lewis next wrote *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*.

²⁹ John Murra, ed., *American Anthropology: The Early Years. Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society*. (St. Paul: West Publishing Co., 1974), 144. As cited in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 41, 47.

³⁰ Oscar Lewis, *Village Life in Northern India* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958).

Here, Lewis introduced the culture of poverty idea for the first time. Lewis began with an important criticism of ethnography as it had been practiced heretofore. “Anthropologists have a new function in the modern world, to serve as students and reporters of the great mass of peasants and urban dwellers of the underdeveloped countries who constitute almost eighty percent of the world’s population.” While scholars had studied the politics, history, customs, and economies of these places, wrote Lewis, “we know little about the psychology of the people, particularly of the lower classes, their problems, how they think and feel, what they worry about, argue over, anticipate, or enjoy.” Anthropologists had been overly concerned, argued Lewis, with primitive peoples in far-away lands. “Many Americans, thanks to anthropologists, know more about the culture of some isolated tribe of New Guinea, with a total population of 500 souls, than about the way of life of millions of villagers in India or Mexico and other under-developed nations...”³¹

Lewis claimed that anthropologists had taken poverty for granted in their studies. Whereas there might be poverty throughout an entire small tribe in New Guinea, in a society with both wealth and poverty there were “class antagonism, social problems, and the need for change.” In an industrializing society, argued Lewis, “poverty becomes a dynamic factor which affects participation in the larger national culture and creates a subculture of its own.”³²

Lewis’s usage of the phrase “culture of poverty” did not yet denote a rigorously conceived or explicated statement of a way of life. He used the phrase in the title, but there was very little in analytical detail that unified these five families. What little analysis that was there focused on family structure and Mexican gender roles. The two unifying factors

³¹ Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 1.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

were a matrifocal system of household organization coupled with a machismo system of gender relations. Lewis already was using psychological profiling to study the Mexican poor, but he had not connected this fully to the culture of poverty. He only claimed that the poor had some commonalities of family structure and gender relations.

Lewis wrote: “To understand the culture of the poor it is necessary to live with them, to learn their language and customs, and to identify with their problems and aspirations.”³³ To do this, *Five Families* utilized an innovative experiment in ethnographical technique. Lewis proposed a new method of family study that would move ethnography from the impersonal study of culture to the personal world of the individual, and the basic human unit of social organization—the family. Lewis studied five families intensively; a stenographer typed interviews so that the words of the subjects could be taken verbatim (albeit translated and edited), and conveyed to the reader to give an inside look at the world of the poor Mexican family. Borrowing from the world of cinema, Lewis described a “Rashomon-like technique” whereby various family members would describe some significant event in their own divergent ways.³⁴ Further methods came into play: interviewers would follow an individual subject for a day, to give the reader a “day in the life” narration of the world of the poor. As in Tezpotlán, Lewis and his researchers administered psychological tests, including the Rorschach, and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) on the subjects. The anthropologist, armed with this technique, could uncover the cultural world of the poor.

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Ibid., 4. “Rashomon-like technique” refers to the classic 1950 Akira Kurosawa film, *Rashomon*, where several witnesses to a rape and murder offer irreconcilable versions of the events. *Rashomon*, Daiei Motion Picture Company, 1950.

The introduction described how progress in Mexico had left the poor behind. Lewis, though, made no real attempt to connect structural economic inequality to individual or familial poverty. Finally, Lewis introduced the five families: their origins, composition, material wealth and culture, and psychological makeup, all in very brief detail. The introduction of the book, the only part of the volume where the ethnographer's voice appeared, ran for just nineteen pages in a 350-page book. The rest was narrative of the lives of the poor.

What was the end product? Lewis admitted that it was a hybrid, an experiment in progress: "Indeed it is difficult to classify these portraits. They are neither fiction nor conventional anthropology. For want of a better term I would call them ethnographic realism, in contrast to literary realism." There were roots in the arts. Lewis proposed that the day-in-the-life method aimed at capturing "the immediacy and wholeness of life which is portrayed by the novelist."³⁵ The chapters in the book utilized literary devices as well. Each section represented a day in the life of a family, alongside biographical information and individual observations. The chapters read like miniature dramas. Indeed, each chapter opened with a "Cast of Characters" listing the family members, followed by a sketch of the neighborhood where they lived. For instance for the Sánchez family, who would be followed further in a sequel, *Children of Sanchez*, the cast listed Jesús Sánchez, his four wives in free union (two deceased), and children from all of the unions, for twenty-five characters in all. This was followed by a sketch of a home and alleyway, and of a staircase.³⁶ The book had no conclusion. It ended with the Castro family chapter; Isabel Castro was listening to the radio, reading a book, reflecting on her day, having skipped supper to keep her figure.

³⁵ Ibid., 5.

³⁶ Ibid., 211-213.

Lewis wrote a final book dealing with Tepoztlán, *Pedro Martinez*, which was written and published later. The book placed the life of Pedro Martínez, a peasant who fought in the Mexican Revolution, in a fictional town called Azteca, to protect the anonymity of Lewis's informant. It was obvious, though, from the description of the village and from Lewis's description of his research methodology, that the book was really about Tepoztlán. Lewis chronicled Martínez's experiences in the Revolution, and the changes in Tepoztlán during a dramatic period of Mexican history. Martínez was representative of substantial changes in the peasant Indian society of Mexico in the twentieth century. "Pedro has changed from an Indian to a *mestizo* way of life, from speaking Nahuatl to Spanish, from an illiterate to a 'half lawyer,' from a *peón* to a village politician, from a Catholic to a Seventh Day Adventist."³⁷ Returning to his criticism of Redfield's idyllic portrait of Tepoztlán before the revolution, Lewis charged that "There is a tendency among all of us, even anthropologists, to idealize the past and to think of Mexican Indian villages prior to the Mexican Revolution of 1910 as relatively stable, well-ordered, smoothly functioning and harmless communities." Lewis's research, however, found pre-revolutionary villages to be marked by "social disorganization, sharp class cleavages, widespread poverty, and...proletarianization of the landless segment of the population."³⁸

In a change from his earlier writing on Tepoztlán, Lewis invoked the culture of poverty to describe the Tezpotecan world. This predated the revolution. "It also shows the existence of many traits of the culture of poverty—consensual unions, the abandonment of

³⁷ Oscar Lewis, *Pedro Martínez: A Mexican Peasant and His Family* (New York, Random House: 1964), xxxii. Although the publication of *Pedro Martinez* followed the publication of *Children of Sanchez*, it emerged from Lewis's Tepoztlán work, and is more of a piece with that body of work.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxii-xxxiii.

women and children, child labor, adultery, and a feeling of alienation.” Further, this culture imprinted itself upon the individual, shaping the psyche of the impoverished.

Pedro’s story illustrates clearly the effects of severe deprivation upon the development of his personality. Pedro’s earliest memories are quite explicit about his sense of abandonment, his mistreatment, hunger, beatings, and his resentment of his mother’s love affairs...To all of this he reacted with anger, an anger which has never left him and which has colored his reaction to his family, to his fellow villagers, to ideological causes and to the Catholic Church.

As he had in *Five Families*, Lewis linked the culture of poverty here to gender relations. Pedro viewed his mother as a victim of predatory men and an uncaring culture, but also as a persevering figure who had survived decades of poverty. Pedro never knew his father, who died when Pedro was an infant. Thus, argued Lewis, “Pedro had no adequate male figure with whom to identify. He pictures his stepfather and his uncles as weak, selfish, cruel, poor, or good-for nothing.”³⁹ The Mexican Revolution had significantly improved things, argued Lewis. A return of communal landownership had slowed the proletarianization of the peasantry and mitigated the psychological damage of poverty.

Martínez may have witnessed extraordinary changes in his country, his village, and in his own life, but his outlook, argued Lewis, was still that of a peasant. Lewis here introduced the idea that the culture of poverty could be representative, in part, of the pre-industrial outlook of the peasant world. “Like most peasants, he is also authoritarian, fatalistic, suspicious, concrete-minded and ambivalent in his attitudes towards city people.”⁴⁰ Authoritarianism, fatalism, concrete-mindedness, and suspicion of the larger culture would become key psychological traits of the culture of poverty. Ironically, this

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

echoed Redfield's portrait of the "folk culture" in tatters in a modern world. The men had some commonality in their thinking that Lewis never explored.

Lewis's next work, *Children of Sanchez*, studied the Sánchez family, one of the families that Lewis interviewed for *Five Families*. He returned to them because they seemed to him to be a compelling example of a family that was truest to the culture of poverty dynamic. Lewis pushed psychology to the forefront of his analysis in *Children of Sanchez*. He wrote, "There are very few studies in depth of the psychology of the poor in the less well-developed countries or even in our own country...Nor have the novelists given us an adequate portrayal of the inner lives of the poor in the contemporary world."⁴¹ The culture of poverty, as Lewis began to express it in *Children of Sanchez*, moved the culture and personality school's methodology of national and ethnic studies to the economic realm. Prior research projects had used psychological evaluation, and indeed, it had formed a major part of the analysis of the culture of Tezpotlán. Here, Lewis moved firmly towards using psychology as a basis for presenting a typology of an entire class of people.

Lewis also brought a new method to *Children of Sanchez*. The stenographic transcriptions that formed the basis of *Five Families* were replaced by tape recorded conversations with each family member. Lewis claimed that the tape recorder augured a new kind of ethnography:

The tape recorder, used in taking down the life stories in this book, has made possible the beginning of a new kind of literature of social realism. With the aid of the tape recorder, unskilled, uneducated, and even illiterate persons can talk

⁴¹ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), xii. In proper Spanish, the family name Sánchez includes an accented á. Lewis had used the spelling Sánchez in *Five Families*. Lewis dropped this in the later book and used an anglicized version without the accent: Sanchez.

about themselves and relate their observations and experiences in an uninhibited, spontaneous, and natural manner.⁴²

This “literature of social realism” was the heart of what Lewis hoped to get out of his new research. He wrote that as he prepared for publication, he eliminated his questions from the recordings, selected interesting materials, translated them, and rearranged for coherency. Lewis saw his project as mixture of art and life, but also as fundamentally scientific. “If one agrees with Henry James that life is all inclusion and confusion while art is all discrimination and selection, then these life histories have something of both art and life. I believe this in no way reduces their usefulness for science.”⁴³

Lewis also hoped that as the poor spoke in their own words, through transcribed tape-recorded interviews, that the average educated middle-class American would get a glimpse of what the life of an impoverished Mexican was like. To that end, he showed the positive qualities of the Sanchez family even as he described their lives as painful, and evidence of the power of the culture of poverty:

Certainly the lives of the poor are not dull. The stories in this volume reveal a world of violence and depth, of suffering and deprivation, of infidelity and broken homes, of delinquency, corruption, and police brutality, and of the cruelty of the poor to the poor. These stories also reveal an intensity of feeling and human warmth, a strong sense of individuality, a capacity for gaiety, a hope for a better life, a desire for understanding and love, a readiness to share the little they possess, and the courage to carry on in the face of many unresolved problems.⁴⁴

Lewis’s work in this direction was inspired not by professional anthropologists, but by other chroniclers of the poor. As he prepared *Children of Sanchez* for publication, he wrote to his editor: “I have been reading Henry Mayhew on London Labour and the London Poor and

⁴² Ibid., xii.

⁴³ Ibid., xxi.

⁴⁴ Ibid., xii.

am impressed by the solid quality of his work as well as the similarity in our objectives...Am also reading James Aggee (sic) and again feel a sense of communion with him and [Walker] Evans.”⁴⁵

In *Children of Sanchez*, Lewis worked to establish his credentials as an authentic observer. He described his first encounters with the Sanchez family: “I explained that I was a North American professor and anthropologist and had spent a number of years living in a Mexican village studying its customs. I was now comparing the life of city *vecinidad* families with that of the village and was looking for people in the Casa Grande who would be willing to help me.”⁴⁶ He stressed that he was not merely an observer of the family; he had gained their confidence and become a participant in their lives and in their world:

The Sanchez family learned to trust and confide in me. They would call upon me and my wife in times of need or crisis, and we helped them through illness, drunkenness, trouble with the police, unemployment and family quarrels. I did not follow the common anthropological practice of paying them as informants (not informers!), and was struck by the absence of monetary motivation in their relationship with me.⁴⁷

He also wrote of their enthusiasm for the project:

Their positive image of the United States as a “superior” country undoubtedly enhanced my status with them and placed me in the role of a benevolent authority figure rather than the punishing one they were so accustomed to in their own father. Their identification with my work and their sense of participation in a scientific research project...gave them a sense of satisfaction and of importance which carried them beyond the more limited horizons of their daily lives.”⁴⁸

Why did Lewis spend so much space on legitimating the project and his role? It seems likely that he anticipated the uproar that likely was to follow the book. While he had

⁴⁵ Oscar Lewis to Jason Epstein, November 11, 1960. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 2.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Children of Sanchez*, xviii-xix

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xx-xxi.

written about the culture of poverty in *Five Families*, he had not fully explicated the concept. In *Five Families*, Lewis had made some judgments about this lifestyle and its effects, but there had been no trait list, no psychoanalytical portraits. There had been some sex, violence, and profanity, but these were minimal compared to what appeared in *Children of Sanchez*. With the Sanchez family, Lewis turned towards a different kind of analysis. This was the culture of poverty concept that would come to define his career.

The culture of poverty, argued Lewis, was many things. For some, it was “a contradiction in terms,” because many thought that the poor had no culture. Yet it was a culture in the classic anthropological sense in that it was learned and transmitted—a way of life that was “passed down from generation to generation” and provided those who shared its values with a “design for living.” Poverty in modern nations meant material deprivation, the absence of many things, argued Lewis, but the culture of poverty meant also that there was a presence of other things; the culture of poverty “is...something positive in the sense that it has a structure, a rationale, and defense mechanisms without which the poor could hardly carry on.” The culture of poverty, argued Lewis, did not describe the “working class, the proletariat, or the peasantry.” Rather, it applied “only to those people who are at the very bottom of the socio-economic scale, the poorest workers, the poorest peasants, plantation laborers, and that large heterogeneous mass of small artisans and tradesmen usually referred to as the lumpen proletariat.”⁴⁹

The culture of poverty only came into being in certain “historical contexts.” Lewis mentioned the most common context: “It develops when a stratified social and economic system is breaking down or is being replaced by another, as in the case of the transition from feudalism to capitalism or during the industrial revolution.” Other cases included

⁴⁹ Ibid., xxiv-xxv.

imperial conquest and the subsequent maintenance of the subjected population in “servile status which may continue for several generations.” This notion that imperial conquest created a servile population would come to guide his Puerto Rico research. But Lewis also claimed that the culture of poverty, once created, could perpetuate itself: “The culture of poverty is often a persisting condition even in stable social systems.”⁵⁰

What followed was Lewis’s first list of traits of the culture of poverty. He did not number them, or organize them in any particular fashion. He made no attempt to explain how he had compiled them. The trait list ran for several pages in the text as a general description of a style of life that Lewis claimed to have found. Some of the traits were particular to Mexico; others were more general. The traits were:

A relatively higher death rate

A lower life expectancy

A higher proportion of individuals in the younger age groups

A higher proportion of gainfully employed individuals (because of working women and child labor)

Provincially and locally oriented culture

Members only partially integrated into national institutions

Low levels of education and literacy

Do not belong to labor unions

Do not belong to political parties

Do not participate in Mexican welfare programs, such as health care, old-age pensions, maternal care

Constant struggle for survival

Unemployment and underemployment

Low wages

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xxv.

Miscellany of unskilled occupations

Child labor

Absence of savings

Chronic shortage of cash

Absence of food reserves in the home

Frequent purchase of small quantities of food, many times during the day

Pawning of personal goods

Borrowing from local moneylenders at usurious rates of interest

Spontaneous informal credit devices organized by neighbors

Use of second-hand clothing and furniture

Living in crowded quarters

Lack of privacy

Gregariousness

High incidence of alcoholism

Frequent resort to violence in the settlement of quarrels

Frequent use of physical violence in the training of children

Wife beating

Early initiation into sex

Free unions or consensual marriages

Relatively high incidence of the abandonment of mothers and children

Trend towards mother-centered families and a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives

Predominance of the nuclear family

Strong predisposition to authoritarianism

Great emphasis on family solidarity—an ideal only rarely achieved

Strong present time orientation

Relatively little ability to defer gratification and plan for the future

Sense of resignation or fatalism based upon the realities of their difficult life situation

Belief in male superiority

Machismo, or cult of masculinity

Corresponding martyr complex among women

High tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts

Use of informal healers (herbalists, etc.) because of mistrust and unaffordability of doctors

Critical of priests, rely on home worship and pilgrimage

Critical attitude towards some of the values and institutions of the dominant classes

Hatred of the police

Mistrust of government and those in high position

Cynicism that extends even to the church⁵¹

These traits were presented matter-of-factly, even haphazardly. There was no mention of how exactly the traits had been identified, whether they were universal in someone raised in the culture of poverty, or whether some had certain traits and not others. Immediately after listing the traits, Lewis launched into a discussion of the failure of the Mexican government to distribute the fruits of economic growth to the Mexican people, especially to the poor. “Judging from the Sanchez family, their friends, neighbors, and relatives, the essential promise of the Revolution has yet to be fulfilled.” However, despite copious detail about the failure of the Mexican government and economy to provide for the poor, Lewis did not specify how government policies were implicated in the lives of his informants. Was the culture of poverty created or worsened by neglect from the broader economy and society? Which of the traits were only inherent descriptions of poverty? How was this culture transferred generationally? Lewis did not give a satisfactory answer to any of these questions, all of them critical. Those who picked up on the culture of poverty

⁵¹ Ibid., xxv-xxvii.

after it had been largely abandoned by the academic and political Left would argue, in essence, that attempts by governments to deal with poverty were futile because poverty was cultural, or further, that helping the poor fueled the culture of poverty. Or, to put it in the context of Mexico, that the Revolution was doomed to fail because the Mexican poor were beyond help. Lewis himself already was providing plenty of ammunition for this point of view: “Even the best-intentioned governments of the underdeveloped countries face difficult obstacles because of what poverty has done to the poor. Certainly most of the characters in this volume are badly damaged human beings.”⁵²

Even as Lewis minimized the potential of the Mexican poor for advancement and self-help, he positioned them as noble:

Yet with all of their inglorious defects and weaknesses, it is the poor who emerge as the true heroes of contemporary Mexico, for they are paying the cost of the industrial progress of the nation. Indeed, the political stability of Mexico is grim testimony to the great capacity for misery and suffering of the ordinary Mexican.⁵³

This was a strange statement. The poor were damaged by the world, as evidenced by the existence of the culture of poverty, but at the same time, their suffering at the hands of the rest of the nation was somehow ennobling, a testament to the redemptive power of suffering, although he did allow that even the Mexican poor had their limits. Political stability—hardly something that Lewis seemed to hold dear—was the fruit that Mexico reaped from the willingness of the poor to suffer.

As with *Five Families*, *Children of Sanchez* had a brief introduction where Lewis provided an interpretative framework for the book. There were roughly thirty pages of introduction and 500 pages of narrative. The work itself contained more graphic sexual

⁵² *Ibid.*, xxx.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, xxx-xxxii.

content, profanity, and violence than had *Five Families*, although it had far less than *La Vida* would. This contributed to the controversy in Mexico when the Spanish translation of the book appeared. Jesús Sánchez, for example, boasted of his multiple wives and girlfriends, and he reflected in the Prologue on the philosophy that had guided his life and led him to romantic success: “The doctor once said to me, ‘To be content, a woman needs a husband who keeps her well-dressed, well-fed, and well-screwed.’”⁵⁴

Children of Sanchez turned Lewis into something of a celebrity. Studs Terkel wrote to Lewis asking him to appear on his radio program, “The Wax Museum”:

I’m terribly excited about this one. If you say yes—and God, I hope you do—give me a couple of weeks to get it in shape. In any event, congratulations on a most important literary and human work. And the National Book Award people are out of their stupid minds in not giving the big prize to this one.⁵⁵

Margaret Mead wrote Lewis’s editor a long ecstatic letter for use in promotion of the book.

An excerpt reads:

I think CHILDREN OF SANCHEZ is one of the outstanding contributions of anthropology—of all time...Oscar Lewis has produced a work which uniquely combines the requirements of science and humanism...[he] succeeded...in achieving the type of pity for man’s estate in a harsh world which chimes beautifully with Mexican aspirations for themselves, and the aspirations of the privileged for the underprivileged wherever they may be.⁵⁶

Lewis’s new method of family studies of the poor made him one of the most influential intellectuals studying poverty in the United States, just as the national discourse was

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁵ Studs Terkel to Oscar Lewis, March 14 (year unspecified—probably 1962). Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61.

⁵⁶ Margaret Mead to Jason Epstein, February 28, 1962. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 2. Assuring him that her blurb was not merely hyperbole, Mead wrote Lewis under separate cover: “I mean this, all of it. It occurs to me how absolutely delighted Ruth Benedict would have been.” Margaret Mead to Oscar Lewis, February 28, 1962. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 2. Lewis wrote Margaret Mead back: “I was deeply moved by your note on how absolutely delighted Ruth Benedict would have been. You couldn’t have said anything sweeter.” Oscar Lewis to Margaret Mead, March 5, 1962. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 2.

turning in earnest to poverty. There was a sense that Lewis was unique in his ability to relate the lives of the poor, without the barrier of interpreter, and that the culture of poverty provided a new interpretive framework that was more scientific, that allowed researchers to study why and how poverty persisted, both in the world at large and within individual families.⁵⁷

It was in the midst of this newfound celebrity that Lewis began his study of New York City and San Juan, Puerto Rico. The *La Vida* project that resulted would be Lewis's most ambitious. It would also become his most controversial and problematic. *La Vida* catapulted Oscar Lewis to the bestseller lists and won him the National Book Award. It also became a large reason for his intellectual downfall. Scholars questioned Lewis's methods, conclusions, and motives. Some Puerto Ricans defended the book and interpreted it as an indictment of the Puerto Rican condition under colonial rule. Most derided it, however, and *La Vida* came to represent for many Puerto Ricans the worst sort of scholarship perpetrated by unsympathetic outsiders. This ambivalent legacy will be the subject of the rest of this dissertation.

⁵⁷ *Children of Sanchez* eventually was made into a film. Lewis always had an interest in seeing his books made into films. Director Luis Buñuel had reportedly held an interest in doing a film version of *Five Families*. Buñuel made a famed Mexican film *Los Olvidados*, about a group of children living in a poor *barrio*. The film feels like an Oscar Lewis book, although it predated all of Lewis's published Mexico City work. There were talks as well concerning a Buñuel production of *Pedro Martinez*. Lewis tried to interest him in *Children of Sanchez*, but the project never came to fruition. Eventually, an American, Hall Bartlett, acquired the rights and made the film. Buñuel's hesitations about filming one of Lewis's books had always centered around the impossibility of making an honest film in the Mexican political climate; Bartlett's film abandoned accuracy completely. Family patriarch Jesús Sanchez, a religious skeptic, was shown taking part in pilgrimages. Consuelo, the daughter most committed to upward mobility and self-uplift, was portrayed as a prostitute. Manuel was depicted as a *marijuanero* (pothead). The entire family was portrayed with a substantially greater measure of material wealth than they actually had, probably so as not to arouse the ire of governmental officials, who hated to see Mexican poverty at its most desperate portrayed in mass culture. The film was released after Lewis's death; Ruth Lewis objected to much of it in vain. The film was uninspired in addition to being inaccurate. It never saw wide circulation, although it occasioned a lawsuit by Consuelo Sánchez, which she lost, and contributed to substantial estrangement between the Lewis family and the Sánchez family. Lewis was also interested in film depictions of *La Vida*; he sold the rights to Elia Kazan shortly after publication. Kazan commissioned a screenplay, but the project never came to fruition. See Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 145-147. *Los Olvidados*, Ultramar Films, 1950. *Children of Sanchez*, Bartlett, 1978.

Chapter Two

In January, 1962, Oscar Lewis began planning his study of poor Puerto Ricans in San Juan and New York City, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. Published in 1966, *La Vida* was Lewis's most widely read book and also his final major work. Lewis wrote: "A number of my Mexican and other Latin American friends have sometimes delicately suggested that I turn to a study of poverty in my own country, the United States. My study of Puerto Ricans is a first step in that direction."¹ In a funding request, he wrote that "Such a project would yield important comparative data on the culture of poverty in the U.S. It might also have the advantage of convincing Latin Americans that we are willing to take a good look at poverty in our own country and have no special axe to grind in our studies of poverty in Latin America."² Lewis hoped that by turning his sights to American society, he would silence critics who claimed that his work on Latin American countries highlighted their problems while ignoring poverty in the United States.

While working in Mexico, Lewis began to theorize that the cultural world of the Mexican poor was dramatically similar to the descriptions of poverty he had read about in novels and autobiographies set in London, Glasgow, Copenhagen, and Philadelphia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His culture of poverty idea came from this:

¹ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty, San Juan and New York* (New York, New York: Random House, 1966), xi-xii.

² Oscar Lewis to James F. Tierney of the Ford Foundation, January 3, 1962. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

All of this suggested that what I found in Mexico City was a cross-cultural phenomenon which developed during the earlier period of industrialization, and in the case of Europe, in the context of a free-enterprise capitalist system. It was on the basis of this experience that I conceived of the idea of a subculture of poverty which cut across national differences.³

La Vida would test Lewis's idea that the culture of poverty was international and present in many different national cultures. He selected Puerto Rico in part because of the Puerto Rican migration to New York City, which allowed him to study Puerto Ricans in two national settings. Puerto Rico also was attractive to Lewis because:

Although both Puerto Ricans and Mexicans speak Spanish and were subject to Spanish influence...the differences between Mexico and Puerto Rico in size, in climate, in natural resources, the racial composition of the population, and the political system provides a pretty good testing ground for the culture of poverty hypothesis.⁴

Lewis did not realize his vision with the publication of *La Vida*, though the introduction to the book pushed his explanation of the culture of poverty further than his earlier works had. He discussed in greater detail the ways that family structure, gender roles, sexuality, psychology, and other factors came into play for the poor. Far from affirming the culture of poverty, however, *La Vida* opened it up to escalating criticism.

Like Lewis's earlier books, *La Vida* had a brief introduction by Lewis, followed by a long narrative of edited and transcribed interviews from the subjects of his research. The introduction was roughly forty-five pages; the narrative ran to over 650. The story focused on Fernanda Ríos (the pseudonym given to her in *La Vida*), the family matriarch; her four

³ Oscar Lewis to Elizabeth Herzog, March 29, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*

children, Soledad, Felícita, Simplicio, and Cruz (all pseudonyms); and various husbands and wives, children, lovers, and extended family members.⁵

In writing a book that intended to break down barriers between Puerto Ricans and mainland Americans, Lewis was not very tactful. The first paragraph of the book described Puerto Ricans living in both New York City and Puerto Rico as disproportionately diseased, insane, and impoverished. Lewis gave several statistics that documented the depth of poverty among Puerto Ricans. Fourteen percent were unemployed. Eighty percent of families earned less than \$3000 per year. 160,000 school-aged Puerto Ricans were not in school. Fifteen percent of families were on relief and twenty percent got food assistance. Lewis also claimed that Puerto Ricans persisted in a “Puerto Rican way of life” upon arrival in the mainland United States. He did not explain what this meant, though he did explain that it was made possible by cheap airfare between San Juan and New York City.⁶

As Lewis turned his attention to impoverished people living within the United States, he articulated a new purpose for his work:

I have tried to give a voice to people who are rarely heard, and to provide the reader with an inside view of a style of life which is common in many of the deprived and marginal groups in our society but which is largely unknown, ignored, or inaccessible to most middle-class readers. Indeed, one of the major objectives of this volume is to bridge the gap in communication between the very poor and the middle-class personnel—teachers, social workers, doctors, priests, and others—who bear the major responsibility for carrying out the anti-poverty programs. It is my hope that a better understanding of the nature of the culture of poverty will eventually lead to a more

⁵ Lewis’s papers contain the real identities of the members of the Ríos family. Although the papers are open to researchers, I have chosen not to use the real names of the family. Many of them are almost certainly still alive and I see no reason to expose them, even 45 years after the publication of *La Vida*. For this reason, I use the pseudonyms that Lewis assigned to the family members in the text.

⁶ Lewis, *La Vida*, xi-xii.

sympathetic view of the poor and their problems and will provide a more rational basis for constructive social action.⁷

Unlike his earlier books, Lewis wrote *La Vida* to serve as a guide for middle-class Americans dealing with the poor in their own country. He positioned the book within the context of the War on Poverty. The culture of poverty, argued Lewis, would help middle class professionals carry out the Johnson administration's programs through a better understanding of the poor, their way of thinking, and their lifestyles.

Lewis was aware that the book probably was going to cause controversy:

I am aware that an intensive study of poverty and its multiple facets and problems, particularly one which reveals its effects upon character, runs the risk of offending some Puerto Ricans who have dedicated themselves to the elimination of poverty and who are trying to build a positive public image of an often maligned minority group.

Lewis also acknowledged that the book ran the risk of being "misinterpreted or used to justify prejudices and negative stereotypes about Puerto Ricans." Nevertheless, argued Lewis, "*No se puede tapar el cielo con la mano.*"⁸

Economic and social progress had come to Puerto Rico, acknowledged Lewis. The illiteracy rate had dropped from thirty-two to eleven percent between 1940 and 1965. Annual income in the same time span had increased from \$120 to \$740, a figure that was double the average in Latin America. Life expectancy showed amazing increases, with Puerto Ricans living nearly twenty-five years longer and the number of doctors tripling. Operation Bootstrap, a joint program of the Puerto Rican and United States governments to industrialize Puerto Rico, had increased manufacturing output vastly and had diversified

⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xiii. This Puerto Rican saying appeared in the text of *La Vida* and was repeated over and over by Lewis's critics and defenders after the book was published. It translates as "you can't cover up the sky with your hand."

the economy. As in Mexico, however, economic progress had not been distributed evenly. Over 90,000 people still lived in the slums and shanty-towns of San Juan.

The story of the Ríos family presented in this volume shows in painful and dramatic form the terrible conditions of poverty and social pathology which existed on a mass scale in Puerto Rico prior to the 1940's and which still persist today in the slums...So long as there are families like the Ríos family in Puerto Rico and in New York, a great deal remains to be done.⁹

In *La Vida*, Lewis began to observe the distinct character of the poor within a broader national group. The lower class could serve the function of revealing the larger character of society. Lewis claimed that his method of studying families offered a way to move anthropological analysis from the abstract world of culture and history to the world of the individual. In Mexico, Lewis had resisted using his experience with a limited number of families to make broad judgments about national character. As he moved to Puerto Rico, however, he claimed: "When I compare my findings on the Ríos family and the other families that I have studied in Puerto Rico with my findings on my Mexican families, a number of differences emerge, differences which are undoubtedly related to the different histories of Mexico and Puerto Rico." Lewis argued that colonialism had broken Puerto Rico more totally, and Puerto Ricans never had developed a widespread national anti-colonial or anti-imperial movement. Puerto Ricans had an insufficient knowledge of their national heroes and traditions, and were hybridized culturally by the experience of American imperial rule. This compromised national identity made the culture of poverty especially severe amongst Puerto Ricans.¹⁰ This thinking was forged through Lewis's contacts with Puerto Rican *independentista* intellectuals, and will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xiii-xv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xv-xviii.

Lewis depicted the Puerto Rican poor as more pathological in comparison with the Mexican poor. Psychological profiling played a greater role in *La Vida* than in Lewis's earlier works. The Ríos family, as Lewis portrayed them in the Introduction to *La Vida*, was earthy, sexual, violent, and disorganized. This emerged in the language of Puerto Ricans, which Lewis remarked:

...never reached the poetic levels of the language of the Mexicans I have studied. Most of the linguistic creativity in the San Juan slums seems inspired by bodily functions, primarily anal and genital. The description of the most intimate sexual scenes is so matter-of-fact that it soon loses the quality of obscenity and one comes to accept it as an intrinsic part of their everyday life.¹¹

The Ríos family relied on sex for more than pleasure or procreation. “Sex is used to satisfy a great variety of needs—for children, for pleasure, for money, for revenge, for love, to express machismo (manliness), and to compensate for all the emptiness in their lives.” Their sexuality was not entirely negative, however. “There is a remarkable frankness and openness about sex, and little effort is made to hide the facts of life from children. Although the children in the Ríos family have many problems, they do not suffer from parental secrecy and dishonesty about sex.”¹² Parents did not punish their children for masturbating; they even supposedly masturbated their children, and accepted their early sexual experimentation as inevitable.

Heightened sexuality was one of many primal desires that distinguished the Ríos family from the Mexican families that Lewis had studied. “The Ríos family is closer to the expression of an unbridled id than any other people I have studied.” The Ríos family's psychology resembled a primitive consciousness, defined by an id that had been untamed by

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

¹² *Ibid.*, xxvi.

the modern superego, with its guilt complexes and inhibitions. Lewis claimed that the Ríos family was uncontentious: “They have an almost complete absence of internal conflict and of a sense of guilt. They tend to accept themselves as they are and do not indulge in soul-searching or introspection.” This made the Sanchez family “seem mild, repressed and almost middle-class by comparison.” The Ríos family, meanwhile, was marked by a tendency towards “uncontrolled rage, aggression, violence, and even bloodshed...”¹³

The Ríos family displayed a “tenacious cultural pattern” as evidenced by its survival through several generations. Lewis related the marital histories of the ancestors of the Ríos family. One great grandfather had sired children with six different women: one legal wife, three casual wives, and two “concubines.” Amparo, Fernanda’s aunt, had thirteen children with four common-law husbands, and two more husbands with whom she did not have children. Fernanda and her family continued this pattern. Fernanda’s resident children all came from her first husband, though she had five other common-law husbands, and may have had children with at least one of them (both the narrative of the story and Lewis were vague on this point). Soledad had six common-law husbands. Felícita had five children by three husbands, and Cruz had been married three times before her seventeenth birthday. When all of the major and minor characters of the book were considered, there had been amongst twenty-six adults eighty-nine marriages, only thirteen of which were formal and legal. Lewis noted that the pattern of frequent, brief, and informal marriages was shared by the very wealthy: “this illustrates a general proposition which has impressed me in Puerto Rico and elsewhere, namely, the remarkable similarities between some aspects of the lives of the very poor and of the very rich.”¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxvii-xxviii.

A digression here is necessary to contextualize Lewis in the history of American anthropology. One of the tensions in Lewis's work lies in the origins of culture and its role in explaining human behavior. Lewis believed that culture was transmitted through socialization and the development of the psyche. It was not inherent in a person. Culture, however, became strongly deterministic in Lewis's model. By the time that he wrote *La Vida*, Lewis argued that the culture of poverty completely explained a set of human behaviors. He wrote: "It seems to me that their behavior is clearly patterned and reasonably predictable. Indeed one is often struck by the inexorable repetitiousness and the iron entrenchment of their behavior patterns."¹⁵ Other scholars criticized Lewis's cultural determinism. The culture concept, which had seemed a promising way to describe human culture without resorting to racialism, had become, according to Lewis's critics, almost racial in the way that it strait-jacketed a culture's members into a certain mode of being. Eleanor Leacock wrote that the culture of poverty became "almost as pernicious in its application as biological determinist and racist views have been in the past."¹⁶ Lewis became a whipping-boy for the sin of cultural determinism.

Lewis's cultural determinism was not a break with the past, and the judgment of the "culture of poverty" as a backdoor racialization of the culture concept was misguided. Lewis's cultural determinism was no stronger, for example, than Ruth Benedict's. His thinking was grounded in the culture and personality school's understanding of the formation of personality. Benedict gave culture a profoundly deterministic role in shaping the personalities of individuals:

The life-history of the individual is first and foremost an accommodation to the patterns and standards traditionally

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xxviii.

¹⁶ Eleanor Burke Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 16.

handed down in his community. From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experiences and behavior. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into one on the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve its thousandth part.¹⁷

In Lewis's analysis, class performed a similar function. The individual poor person was shaped by the cultural world of the poor, and the cultural world of the poor was a collective expression of the personality of the poor. The culture of poverty concept can be understood as a Marxist interpretation of the culture and personality school. As a society industrialized and created what Karl Marx called a lumpenproletariat, and what Lewis called the members of a culture of poverty, a culture came into being that had strong formative influences on the consciousness and personality of its members.

The study of the relationship between economics and culture was not new either. Consider a passage from Franz Boas's classic work, *The Mind of Primitive Man*:

Economic conditions always act on a preexisting culture and are themselves dependent upon other aspects of culture. It is no more justifiable to say that social structure is determined by economic forms than to claim the reverse, for a preexisting social structure will influence economic conditions and *vice versa*, and no people has ever been observed that has no social structure and that is not subject to economic conditions. The claim that economic stresses preceded every other manifestation of cultural life and exerted their influences on a group without any cultural traits cannot be maintained. Cultural life is always economically conditioned and economics are always culturally conditioned.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 2-3.

¹⁸ Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man, Revised Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), 193. To put the passage into the debates over Oscar Lewis's work, it is perhaps most useful to focus on the last sentence: it was, for Boas, incorrect to claim that culture created economics or that economics created culture. The two were caught up in a mutually reinforcing relationship. Did the culture of poverty facilitate economic poverty, or did economic poverty create a cultural form that Oscar Lewis called the culture of poverty? Boas might have said: both.

Benedict also wrote about the interplay of economics and culture and discussed the existence of economically-delineated subcultures:

Primitive society is integrated in geographical units. Western civilization, however, is stratified, and different social groups of the same time and place live by quite different standards and are actuated by different motivations...In our civilization there is, in the anthropological sense, a uniform cosmopolitan culture that can be found in any part of the globe, but there is likewise unprecedented divergence between the laboring class and the Four Hundred, between those groups whose life centres in the church and those whose life centres on the race-track. The nature of the cultural processes is not changed with these modern conditions, but the unit in which they can be studied is no longer the local group.¹⁹

For Benedict, the Western world presented a large and relatively unified culture, but one that also had significant divergence, especially along economic lines.

So where was Lewis's sin, if he was a cultural determinist who never strayed into biological determinism or racism? His abandonment of cultural relativism was what got him into trouble. Benedict claimed she was a cultural relativist in *Patterns of Culture*, despite numerous examples in the book where her judgments about the unified Western world tended to invalidate that claim. Earlier American anthropologists, especially Boas, however, even as they had decried racism, had considered cultures in a hierarchy.

Boas claimed that it was history, not biology, that shaped the destiny of a culture. According to historian Carl Degler: "The traditional view of social evolution held that human groups, or races, passed through a series of stages: from savagery to barbarism and culminating in civilization. The primitive peoples of the world, the traditional view maintained, were still in the earlier stages because they lacked the necessary biological

¹⁹ Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 230.

wherewithal to reach the highest stage.”²⁰ Boas’s work criticized of this biologically essentialist viewpoint, but Boas did not dispute the idea of the rise from savagery to civilization. In Degler’s words: “Boas never abandoned the idea that behind all cultures stood a common system of values, especially apparent in the culture of Europeans. Indeed his basic defense of primitive peoples implied a hierarchy since his invariable point in comparing cultures was that each could potentially achieve the highest culture, which always was Europe’s.”²¹ Lewis’s Marxist outlook could be adapted to this as well. Thus Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans arguing along the lines of the culture and personality school, held dominant cultural traits, and also peculiar histories and geographies, that helped them to either reach or to fail to reach a revolutionary ideal. The class dimensions of Lewis’s thought were similarly hierarchical: the culture of poverty, while not created by people who were biologically inferior, was less fulfilling than middle-class life, and could be impelled towards a higher form of existence. The “poverty of culture,” which Lewis argued was one of the characteristics that defined the culture of poverty, could be repaired.

Returning to *La Vida*, Lewis argued there that the culture of poverty was not a uniformly negative consciousness. Lewis frequently butted heads with other scholars and even with his own research team over the meaning of the culture of the poor. Lewis was less convinced of the pathology of his subjects than were his research assistants: “Over the years, it has been my experience that clinical psychologists and psychiatrists who see the Rorschach and T.A.T. protocols of the people that I write about always come up with a much more severe pathological picture than I am willing to grant.”²² Lewis thought of the Ríos family, and of people in the culture of poverty generally, as having a sort of primitive

²⁰ Carl Degler *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 62, 59-83, *passim*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²² Oscar Lewis to Lloyd Ohlin, March 22, 1969. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 59.

consciousness: strong but shallow, joyful yet sad. When *La Vida* appeared, Lewis was mostly accepting of the Ríos family:

In spite of the presence of considerable pathology, I am impressed by the strengths in this family. I am impressed by their fortitude, vitality, resilience, and ability to cope with problems which would paralyze many middle-class individuals. It takes a great deal of staying power to live in their harsh and brutalizing environment. They are a tough people, but they have their own sense of dignity and morality and they are capable of kindness, generosity and compassion. They share food and clothing, help each other in misfortune, take in the homeless and cure the ill. Money and material possessions, although important, do not motivate their major decisions.²³

To Lewis, the problem was not that the poor were inferior. They weren't. But Lewis believed that the poor had come to believe in their own inferiority: "Because of their negative self-image, the Ríos family do not always present themselves in the best light...their particular style of communication and the crudeness of their language make them appear less attractive than they really are." Lewis argued that many people, because of their own middle-class biases, would be tempted to find within the obscenity, violence, and sexuality a degraded and debased people. But Lewis viewed some of this obscenity as hyperbole: "When Cruz screams at her three-year old daughter, 'I'll pull out your lungs through your mouth' and the child continues to disobey without apparent fear, it suggests that perhaps the child is quite secure in her mother's love." Likewise, when Felícita sang dirty little ditties to her children, the reader might focus on the sexuality being displayed before young children and forget "the healthier aspects of the scene, children dancing and clapping happily to their mother's music."²⁴

²³ Lewis, *La Vida*, xxx.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xxx.

Most middle-class people had a hard time comprehending the lifestyle of people in the culture of poverty, argued Lewis. When they did observe it or read about it, they only could see the negative, and never perceived the humanity of people living in poverty. Following their own class biases, they tended to “associate negative valences to such traits as present-time orientation and concrete versus abstract orientation.” The culture of poverty also provided benefits for people:

Living in the present may develop a capacity for spontaneity and adventure, for the enjoyment of the sensual, the indulgence of impulse, which is often blunted in the middle-class, future-oriented man. Perhaps it is this reality of the moment which the existentialist writers are so desperately trying to recapture but which the culture of poverty experiences as natural, everyday phenomena.²⁵

Lewis did not believe, however, that the culture of poverty was a satisfying culture. Lewis maintained: “It is easier to praise poverty than to live in it.” Falling back on the anthropological formulation of culture, Lewis wrote that the culture of poverty “provides human beings with a design for living, with a ready-made set of solutions for human problems so that individuals don’t have to begin all over again each generation.” Lewis did not believe, however, that all cultures provided equally valid designs for living. The culture of poverty was a “relatively thin culture.” Its members experienced “pathos, suffering and emptiness.” Its members tended to be dissatisfied, untrusting, isolated, and marked by feelings of helplessness. The culture of poverty also produced a “poverty of culture.”²⁶

Prostitution was a primary theme of *La Vida*, and Lewis wrote extensively about its significance. He claimed that he was not aware of the Ríos family’s history of prostitution

²⁵ Ibid., li.

²⁶ Ibid., li-lii.

when he began the study. Fernanda's daughter Cruz had been Lewis's initial contact, and Cruz was the only one of the family's adult women who had never worked as a prostitute. Fernanda and Soledad no longer regularly worked as prostitutes, though Soledad still engaged occasionally in casual prostitution. Only Felícita was working actively as a prostitute. Lewis turned to the differing mores of social classes to contextualize the meaning of prostitution:

Prostitution has a different meaning in a slum community like La Esmeralda, where about a third of the households have had a history of prostitution...For unskilled, often illiterate women, whose lives are a struggle for survival, prostitution is a tempting economic alternative which does not necessarily ostracize them from their neighbors or social group, and which does not represent as sharp a break from ordinary life as it does for middle-class women.²⁷

Although it was not an honored occupation, prostitutes were not at the bottom of the "status ladder" in La Esmeralda. Residents had far greater scorn for thieves, drug and alcohol addicts, and for homosexuals. Prostitution, argued Lewis, was not the determinative factor in the lives of the Ríos family. All of the women had begun their families before becoming prostitutes, and turned to prostitution to help them support their children. They had divorced their children's fathers already, and been through a good deal of domestic strife. Prostitution gave the Ríos women a higher, though variable, income than most of their neighbors. But above all, claimed Lewis, the Ríos family proved that the roles of mother and prostitute were not in contradiction; the women in the family moved fairly easily between the two roles.²⁸

La Esmeralda (The Emerald), a poor neighborhood near the sea in San Juan, was the setting for *La Vida*. The real name of the neighborhood was *La Perla* (The Pearl).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, xxx.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xxx-xxxii.

Lewis changed the name to protect the anonymity of the residents. Lewis described the neighborhood as “old and colorful...built on a steep embankment between the city’s ancient fort walls and the sea.” About 3,600 people lived there in a densely packed neighborhood. There were a few grassy patches, used for activities such as cockfights, baseball, and gambling. The neighborhood was located near the heart of San Juan, but Lewis described it as “physically and socially marginal to the city.” Residents in the rest of San Juan looked askance at *La Esmeralda*, viewing it as a haven for criminals, prostitutes, and addicts, but the people of *La Esmeralda* were not all miserable. “In spite of the deprivation, poverty, violence and occasional murders, the general mood of the people of *La Esmeralda* is one of gaiety and exuberance.” The residents also liked the scenic beauty of their neighborhood with its view of the sea and beach.²⁹

While it could be a cheerful and scenic locale, the residents of *La Esmeralda* suffered from high rates of illiteracy, poverty, poor education, and substandard housing. In 1960, twenty-two percent of the families earned less than \$500 per year; only four percent of the families earned more than \$4000 per year. Most of the men in the neighborhood who were employed worked at the city docks. The women were engaged primarily in service industries. On average, a resident of *La Esmeralda* had completed 3.6 years of schooling. Only two in ten adults had completed the sixth grade. Seventy percent of the homes were substandard. Of thirty-two families sampled, the heads of households had resided in *La Esmeralda* for an average of twenty-seven years. Only about fifteen percent of the families in *La Esmeralda* owned their own home. These general statistics were reflected in the Ríos family. Neither Fernanda nor any of her children had completed significant schooling.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxii-xxxiii.

Fernanda left school after the fourth grade. Soledad had gone only to second grade, Simplicio to fourth grade, while Felícita and Cruz had sixth grade educations.³⁰

Puerto Ricans living in New York City were doing better financially. Ninety-four percent of households were earning more than \$2000 per year, with \$3678 as the average, a figure that tripled the average income of the residents of *La Esmeralda*. A few were doing quite well; Simplicio and Flora had a household income of over \$5000, Soledad and Benedicto had a combined income of over \$8000. Soledad and Benedicto's income actually placed them outside of any reasonable economic definition of poverty, though in the narrative it became apparent that Benedicto, a merchant marine, made the bulk of the income and spent much of it away from home.

Most Puerto Ricans in the broader sample in New York worked in low-paid and unskilled industrial jobs. Some were on social security disability, unemployment benefits, or welfare, but a majority were not. Many were union members. Their experience with unions was not generally positive, however; they felt exploited and marginalized. They generally had a larger amount of material possessions than the Puerto Ricans in San Juan did. The sampling of families found that most migrants enjoyed the greater economic security but still felt marginalized within the city. Most expressed a desire to return to live in Puerto Rico. Most members of the Ríos family living in New York City had made return trips to the island.³¹

Lewis described his subjects as socially withdrawn, especially the women: "Our survey indicated that there was little important change in customs and language among lower-income Puerto Ricans in New York. They formed small islands in the city and

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiii-xxxvii.

³¹ *Ibid.*, xxxix-xli.

perpetuated their culture.” Amparo, for example, had lived in New York City for twenty-eight years and spoke no English. The women of the Ríos family generally did not learn English and were critical of most North Americans and their institutions. The men, on the other hand, generally spoke English reasonably well and were positive about New York City, though extremely critical of racial prejudice, which they perceived and resented.³²

Lewis then turned to a discussion of the culture of poverty. The concept was fairly new, argued Lewis, tracing it back to his own work in *Five Families* and *Children of Sánchez*. The phrase had already become popular in the discourse about poverty, in part because of Lewis’s work, but more so from the publication of Michael Harrington’s *The Other America*.³³ In some respects, Harrington made an argument similar to Lewis’s, but Lewis argued that “[Harrington] used it in a somewhat broader and less technical sense than I had intended.”³⁴

Two opposing characterizations of the poor had emerged in a long historical evaluation of the poor, claimed Lewis. “Some characterize the poor as blessed, virtuous, upright, serene, independent, honest, kind, and happy. Others characterize them as evil, mean, violent, sordid, and criminal.” These competing generalizations were “also reflected in the in-fighting that is going on in the current war against poverty.” Some saw the poor as an untapped resource, full of potential for “self-help, leadership and community organization.” Others argued that poverty had “sometimes irreversible, destructive effects...on individual character” and held out for the middle class, “which presumably has better mental health,” to maintain control of the war on poverty. This disagreement, wrote Lewis, stemmed from “the failure to distinguish between poverty *per se* and the culture of

³² *Ibid.*, xl-xli.

³³ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

³⁴ Lewis, *La Vida*, xlii.

poverty.” Further, both sides in the debate were focusing “upon the individual personality rather than upon the group—that is, the family and the slum community.” This final piece was an odd statement, given that Lewis’s stated goal of his family studies was to capture the individual within the larger culture.

The key to understanding the generationally poor lay in understanding their culture. “As an anthropologist I have tried to understand poverty and its associated traits as a culture, or, more accurately, as a subculture with its own structure and rationale, as a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation along family lines.” This culture had both negative and positive attributes: “poverty in modern nations is not only a matter of economic deprivation, of disorganization or of the absence of something. It is also something positive and provides some rewards without which the poor could hardly carry on.”³⁵ This presented a significant departure from Lewis’s thought as expressed in earlier works; the culture of poverty as it had been described in *Children of Sánchez*, for instance, had been almost uniformly negative.

Lewis laid out six conditions in a society which enabled the culture of poverty to “grow and flourish:”

- 1) A cash economy, wage labor and production for profit
- 2) A persistently high rate of unemployment and underemployment for unskilled labor
- 3) Low wages
- 4) The failure to provide social, political and economic organization, either on a voluntary basis or by government imposition for the low-income population

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xliii.

- 5) The existence of a bilateral kinship system rather than a unilateral one
- 6) The existence of a set of values in the dominant class which stresses the accumulation of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility and thrift, and explains low economic status as the result of personal inadequacy or inferiority³⁶

Lewis laid out some specific political and societal conditions where the culture of poverty would arise. This took place when an older social system was breaking down or in transition, such as the “transition from feudalism to capitalism,” or during periods of rapid technological change. Imperialism was also a prime factor, as the “native social and economic structure is smashed and the natives are maintained in a servile colonial status, sometimes for generations.” Detribalization also could create a culture of poverty, as people lost their old ties of clan and kinship and were thrust into an impersonal capitalist world.³⁷

While Lewis established a more specific set of preconditions, the actual description of what comprised the culture of poverty became less clear. As he had in *The Children of Sanchez*, Lewis referred to the “seventy interrelated social, economic, and psychological traits,” but qualified this by claiming that “the number of traits and the relationships between them may vary from society to society and from family to family.”³⁸

Lewis also turned to a greater examination of the larger society’s role, as evidenced by his statement that the existence of the culture of poverty required a mindset in the dominant classes that poverty was the fault of the poor. Lewis argued that “The culture of

³⁶ Ibid., xliii-vliv.

³⁷ Ibid., xlv.

³⁸ Ibid., xlv.

poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individualized, capitalistic society.” Faced with the “improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society,” the poor turned to the culture of poverty to cope with the feelings of “hopelessness and despair.” But it was more than a temporary adaptation to their low status in an unfair society. It was a real culture that the poor transmitted to their children through acculturation. Lewis claimed that by the time they were six or seven, children had “absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime.”³⁹

Isolation from the larger society was one of the critical factors of the culture of poverty. “[A] lack of economic resources, segregation and discrimination, fear, suspicion [and] apathy,” all contributed to separate the poor from everyone else. When the people of the culture of poverty came in contact with the dominant institutions of society, it was in institutions such as prison, the armed forces, and welfare agencies that tended to further their marginalization. Under a welfare system that provided just enough to keep people alive, “both the basic poverty and the sense of hopelessness are perpetuated rather than eliminated.” The poor were less likely than others to be involved in unions and in political parties. They rarely visited civic institutions such as museums and art galleries. They were less likely to utilize the services of banks and department stores. The poor generally were cynical about the powerful institutions of the broader society, and hated the police and government officials. Although this isolated the poor, it also gave them a “high potential for protest and for being used in political movements against the existing social order.”⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xlv.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xlv-xlvi.

At the community level, argued Lewis, the culture of poverty was defined by substandard and crowded housing, gregariousness, and minimal organization beyond the extended family, although there might be gangs, and a neighborhood might have a certain “esprit de corps.” This minimal amount of organization was what gave “the culture of poverty its marginal and anachronistic quality in our highly complex, specialized, organized society.” The culture of poverty was so totalizing in its isolating and flattening tendencies that “most primitive people have achieved a higher level of socio-cultural organization than our modern urban slum dwellers.”⁴¹

In *La Vida*, Lewis divided the psychological traits into family and individual traits.

The principal provisions of the culture of poverty in the family were:

The absence of childhood as a specially prolonged and protected state in the life cycle, early initiation into sex, free unions or consensual marriages, a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of wives and children, a trend towards female- or mother-centered families and consequently a much greater knowledge of maternal relatives, a strong disposition to authoritarianism, lack of privacy, verbal emphasis upon family solidarity which is only rarely achieved because of sibling rivalry, and competition for limited goods and maternal affection.⁴²

Individuals within the culture were marked by:

a high incidence of maternal deprivation, of orality, of weak ego structure, confusion of sexual identification, a lack of impulse control, a strong present time orientation with relatively little ability to defer gratification, and to plan for the future, a sense of resignation and fatalism, widespread belief in male superiority, and a high tolerance for psychological pathology of all sorts.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid., xlv-xlvi.

⁴² Ibid., xlvii.

⁴³ Lewis, *La Vida*, xlviii.

Individuals within the culture of poverty also bore a “strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependence, and of inferiority.” This occurred in the absence of ethnic or racial discrimination. Lewis claimed that these feelings existed in New York City, where Puerto Ricans suffered racial discrimination. They also predominated amongst his subjects both in Mexico and in San Juan, where they were not members of a minority group and therefore not subject to any widespread discrimination due to race or ethnicity. Class discrimination, Lewis suggested, could be just as profound as racial or ethnic discrimination in its effect upon the individual psyche.

Racial discrimination combined with class discrimination could be especially intense, but this combination also brought the potential for revolutionary change, because of feelings of solidarity that a segregated population could carry. “[T]he culture of poverty of the Negroes has the additional disadvantage of racial discrimination, but...this additional disadvantage contains a great potential for revolutionary unrest and organization which seems to be absent in the slums of Mexico City or among the poor whites in the South.”⁴⁴ Regarding a culture of poverty amongst African-Americans, Lewis made the distinction that he was not arguing, as did Daniel Patrick Moynihan, that there was anything particular to the history or culture of African-Americans that had led them into poverty. In fact, one of the benefits of the culture of poverty as a way of thinking about poverty was that it was not racially or ethnically specific, and did not connect the consciousness of a people mechanistically to their historical experience:

The concept of the culture of poverty provides a high level of generalization which, hopefully, will unify and explain a number of phenomena viewed as distinctive characteristics of racial, national or regional groups. For example, matrifocality, a high incidence of consensual unions and a high percentage of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xlvi-xlviii.

households headed by women, which have been thought to be distinctive of Caribbean family organization or of Negro family life in the U.S.A., turn out to be traits of the culture of poverty and are found among diverse peoples in many parts of the world and among peoples who have had no history of slavery.⁴⁵

Without mentioning it by name, this passage repudiated Moynihan's 1965 government report, "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action," (commonly known as the Moynihan Report), at least insofar as Moynihan placed the blame for black poverty and family problems upon the historical consciousness deriving from slavery.⁴⁶

People within the culture of poverty, argued Lewis, possessed a limited worldview:

[They] are provincial and locally oriented and have very little sense of history. They know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life. Usually they do not have the knowledge, the vision or the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of their counterparts elsewhere in the world. They are not class-conscious, although they are very sensitive indeed to status distinctions.⁴⁷

This was the closest that Lewis came to making a false consciousness argument for the lumpenproletariat, and the moment where his thinking seemed almost Leninist. To his credit, Lewis did not try to assume the role of the Bolshevik, imparting a revolutionary consciousness to the downtrodden of the world. People within the culture of poverty, though, did need to develop a broader consciousness to break the culture of poverty. This did not have to be class consciousness; anything that brought a broader sense of collective identity to disenfranchised and impoverished peoples could break the culture of poverty:

⁴⁵ Ibid., lii.

⁴⁶ United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965).

⁴⁷ Ibid., xlvi.

When the poor become class-conscious or active members of trade organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world, they are no longer part of the culture of poverty, although they may still be desperately poor. Any movement, be it religious, pacifist or revolutionary which organizes and gives hope to the poor and effectively promotes solidarity and a sense of identification with larger groups, destroys the psychological and social core of the culture of poverty.⁴⁸

Social movements were more important than government programs or economic improvement: “The civil rights movement among the Negroes in the United States has done more to improve their self-image and self-respect than have their economic advances...”⁴⁹

Some people never developed a culture of poverty. Amongst “primitive or preliterate peoples,” poverty was almost universal. Yet because their society was not stratified, there was no class conflict. These people had a “relatively integrated, satisfying and self-sufficient culture.” They also had a “considerable amount of organization” consisting of “bands and band chiefs, tribal councils and local self-government.” In a caste society such as India, even those who were impoverished held caste identities that extended beyond the village level and gave them a certain identity and power. Further, in a society like India that was organized along clan lines, this unilateral system of kinship gave its members a “sense of belonging to a corporate body with a history and a life of its own...” Ashkenazi Jews, argued Lewis, never succumbed to the culture of poverty either, despite persistent material poverty. Jews had a tradition of literacy, strongly emphasized learning in their culture, organized their communities around a rabbi, formed voluntary associations, and

⁴⁸ Ibid., xlviii.

⁴⁹ Ibid., xlviii.

held a religious belief that they were God's chosen people. All of this had prevented Jews from falling into feelings of fatalism or defeat.⁵⁰

Finally, Lewis speculated that residents in socialist nations were immune from the culture of poverty. Lewis described a trip to Cuba in 1947 when he studied a slum in Havana and a sugar plantation in Melena del Sur. A trip after the Cuban Revolution convinced Lewis that Castro had succeeded in eradicating the culture of poverty. The people there remained "desperately poor," but they had "much less of the despair, apathy, and hopelessness which are so diagnostic of urban slums in the culture of poverty." People there expressed confidence in the revolution's leadership and were optimistic about their future. Residents were organized into local committees for education, neighborhood improvement, and party involvement. They were armed and told that they were the "hope of humanity." Lewis recalled a comment from a Cuban official that "they had practically eliminated delinquency by giving arms to the delinquents!"⁵¹

Lewis claimed that the culture of poverty did not come into being in "primitive" societies, nor in "caste" societies. In "socialist, fascist and highly developed capitalist societies with a welfare state," the culture of poverty was contained and tended to decline. The culture of poverty was at its strongest in "the early free-enterprise stage of capitalism" and was "endemic in colonialism."⁵² This Marxist analysis in *La Vida* marked a substantial departure from his writing in earlier books, where the culture of poverty was analyzed within a single nation, Mexico, and was only loosely connected to an advancing economic system that had left many behind.

⁵⁰ Ibid., xlviii-xlix.

⁵¹ Ibid., xlix.

⁵² Ibid., l.

Lewis's Marxism was not an idle one. There was an inherent supposition in the description of the culture of poverty arising in the "early free-enterprise stage of capitalism" that this historical epoch would give way to a later development of capitalism, or to a socialist state. But Lewis was not content to wait for this to unfold on its own. If the poor were not going to engage in revolution, then others in those societies should step in and act on their behalf. This could take different forms in various places. In the United States, Lewis wrote, "the major solution proposed by planners and social workers in dealing with multiple-problem families and the so-called hard core of poverty has been to attempt slowly to raise their level of living and to incorporate them into the middle class." The United States and other nations also relied on psychiatric treatment.⁵³

But in the "underdeveloped countries," the culture of poverty was too widespread to be cured by a "social-work solution." Psychiatry was out of the question: "because of the magnitude of the problem, psychiatrists can hardly begin to cope with it." Here, the poor themselves might take center stage:

In these countries the people with a culture of poverty may seek a more revolutionary solution. By creating basic structural changes in society, by redistributing wealth, by organizing the poor and giving them a sense of belonging, of power and of leadership, revolutions frequently succeed in abolishing some of the basic characteristics of the culture of poverty even when they do not succeed in abolishing poverty itself.⁵⁴

In the final paragraph of the introduction to his book, and two pages after stating that the poor were not generally revolutionary in places where independence had already been achieved, Lewis predicted that the poor might become revolutionaries all the same,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, lii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, lii.

but failed to state what kind of political development or social movement might bring about this revolutionary consciousness. Lewis also did not suggest where Puerto Rico fit in this analysis. Was it a part of the United States, and therefore part of a planned social-work solution? Or was it a product of colonialism, with a revolutionary solution at hand once the poor had been convinced of the need for their independence?⁵⁵

The introduction to *La Vida* raised other questions as well. For Lewis to note approvingly that the developed world was moving towards a social-work solution for the culture of poverty betrayed his long-standing insistence that the poor were not immoral, lazy, or deficient.⁵⁶ The welfare solution was not much better, and Lewis himself was inconsistent on this matter: on the one hand he claimed that it perpetuated rather than alleviated misery; and on the other hand, he noted approvingly the developed world's attempts to slowly move the poor into the middle class through a welfare solution. The focus on the problems of the Puerto Rican poor, despite the stated goal of building common understanding, seemed to marginalize them even further. Lewis may have been comfortable discussing sexuality, accepting that things like incest, adultery, rape, and prostitution—which, while tragic, were perhaps inherent to the human condition. He was not a prude, and Lewis did not view the Ríos family or the poor as sexually deviant. But he

⁵⁵ Lewis did not disclose how his beliefs about the potential of revolutionary change in Cuba may have been changed by his own research there; he died before the project was completed. But after state security agents infiltrated the project, Lewis was accused of being an FBI agent and ordered off the island. One of his informants was jailed as a political prisoner for criticizing the Castro regime. Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Façade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 167-170.

⁵⁶ In later correspondence with Herbert Gans, Lewis claimed that his position on social work in *La Vida* had been misconstrued. "I can't understand how both you and Michael Harrington so misunderstood my sentences and my intention regarding the possibilities of a social work and psychiatric solution to the culture of poverty. Actually I was trying to be a little cynical, but apparently it was missed. I think we need much more than a social work approach. At the very minimum, active community development programs are needed, but even that isn't enough to provide the mystic and the impact that is necessary to really make a difference..." Oscar Lewis to Herbert Gans, November 23, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

failed to anticipate how the depiction of activities like prostitution would play to his audiences in the United States and in Puerto Rico.

It is impossible to convey the content of a 650-page narrative in a brief and manageable format. Instead, the remainder of this chapter contains a biographical narrative of Soledad, one of the main characters in *La Vida*, to present a single character from the book in some detail. An analysis of the meaning of her life and its relevance to the culture of poverty follows. There is also more detail from some of the other family members in the following chapter, which examines the research process that created *La Vida*. This portrait of Soledad demonstrates that Lewis did not make his subjects into unsympathetic characters as he wrote their life stories in his books. In many ways, Soledad seems to conform to Lewis's culture of poverty type; in some ways she does not. There is, however, perhaps something objectifying about the culture of poverty, as it reads a deterministic set of characteristics onto people who are far more complex than a theory can ever explain. Soledad gives a human face to an abstract concept.

On her fifteenth birthday, Fernanda Ríos gave birth to her daughter Soledad. She said that she did not love Cristobal, the man who fathered all four of her children. "I never loved him, not even when my first daughter, Soledad, was born. I always say that I had those four children with him just *because* I didn't love him."⁵⁷ Soledad's father, Cristobal, was a hard worker, a gambler, and also cheated on his wife Fernanda with several other women. Fernanda remembered Soledad as a "roly-poly baby, a regular little barrel." She

⁵⁷ Lewis, *La Vida*, 37.

supposedly walked at eight months. Fernanda breastfed her for about two years.

Fernanda described her as an active, playful, and mischievous girl, and accused Soledad's grandmother of spoiling her.

Soledad remembered horrific acts of violence against her and ceaseless neglect in her childhood. One story had her walking across San Juan to pick up some support money from her father, Cristobal, for Fernanda. "On the way back it rained, so I changed one of the bills to take a taxi from Santurce to San Juan. And because of that she hit me with a can full of nails and broke a bottle over my head."⁵⁸ Fernanda acknowledged the violence: "I always used to beat my children. I whipped their feet with a belt, or anything that was handy, so they wouldn't go out."⁵⁹ Soledad witnessed Fernanda with her clients and knew from a young age that her mother was a prostitute. Soledad remembered Erasmo, her stepfather, as a *chulo* (pimp), a description at odds with the accounts of both Fernanda and Erasmo. She also recalled waking up in the night to find Erasmo fondling her; reporting the abuse to her mother led to her being called a liar and beaten, although Fernanda would later claim that Erasmo's attraction to Soledad precipitated their breakup. Erasmo for his part denied that he had ever abused Soledad, and also made strong claims about her, claiming that he had witnessed her fellating her younger brother, Simplicio, as well as several neighborhood dogs. Soledad recalled Erasmo beating her and her younger brother with an inner tube until they were black and blue, and Fernanda telling her that if she reported Erasmo to the police, Fernanda would tell the police Erasmo was beating Soledad

⁵⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 109.

because she had become a prostitute. Much of her childhood was spent homeless, or drifting from home to home with various relatives and lovers of her mother.⁶⁰

Relatives tried to intervene. Amparo, Soledad's maternal aunt, claimed:

That child has always worked to help her mother but Nanda never took care of her. Nanda would hit her and throw her out of the house. When I would ask for Soledad, Nanda would say, 'No, she doesn't live here. That good-for-nothing has turned out to be a real tramp.' I'd say, 'Nanda, I think you are to blame. Children have to be treated with love, not blows and bad words.'⁶¹

But by adulthood, Amparo had soured on Soledad: "She has changed very much and I haven't had much to do with her. She is not sincere and she talks too much. She likes to make *trouble*, setting one relative against the other."⁶²

Soledad was sent out to work at a young age. Before her twelfth birthday, she took a full-time job as a domestic: "I only worked for some fucking Arabs. They were well off and they treated me like a servant." She added, "They wanted a little girl to help them with the housework. I went to school in the morning, and at noon I went to clean their house...I never got through before nine or ten at night. Then I went home to wash dishes and fetch water to fill the barrel."⁶³ Soledad dropped out of school after the second grade and began working two jobs to help the family.

Her romantic life was plagued with difficulty as well. She had a few boyfriends as a young adolescent. When Fernanda met Soledad's most serious boyfriend, Soledad claimed that Fernanda told the boy that Soledad was "ignorant and a dirty pig. She said I left

⁶⁰ Ibid., 70, 75

⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

⁶² Ibid., 49.

⁶³ Ibid., 148, 156.

blood-stained panties strewn all over and she called me a whore even though I was still a virgin...She shamed me so much that I never went out with that boy again.”⁶⁴ When Soledad was thirteen, she took up with her stepfather Erasmo’s brother, Arturo, who was thirty years old. She left her childhood home with Arturo after a severe beating from Fernanda. On the night that they left, Arturo raped her. Soledad described the experience:

After his papá left, Arturo wanted to take off my clothes. I didn’t want to, so he tore them off by force. By then I was frightened, and already sorry I’d gone with him. Then Arturo took off his own clothes. I was surprised to see how big his thing was. I’d never seen a naked man before. He tried to talk to me and explain what it was all about, but I burst out crying. Then he grabbed me hard and held me down on the bed. That’s when it happened. I let out a holy yell that shook the house. It hurt me terribly. I thought to myself, ‘I’m a woman now.’⁶⁵

Despite the pain, there was also joy in Soledad’s life, however. At times she showed an overwhelming kindness. When she was sixteen years old, Soledad was still living with Arturo, although she had no children. They moved back to San Juan, where Soledad witnessed her neighbor abandon her baby near the public water supply. Soledad took the baby as her own and raised her, even as she became pregnant one month after adopting the child. When she was pregnant for a second time, she split up with Arturo. She lived in *La Perla* through welfare and begging. After her child was born, her financial situation became dire. She had a toddler son, an adopted toddler girl, and a newborn baby girl. The adopted girl suffered from a hip injury and required medical care. The newborn girl frequently was ill and required several trips to the hospital. Soledad remembered: “That was a bad time for me. I owed rent for eight months. I really suffered.”⁶⁶ She became so desperate that she nearly gave up her newborn daughter to an American couple. Soledad

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

had a sudden thought: “What? Give away my daughter?” She resolved: “Even if I have to eat dirt I won’t give my daughter to anybody.”⁶⁷

Shortly thereafter, one of Soledad’s friends took her to a brothel to find work as a prostitute. Her first client was an Italian man who listened to her story, did not sleep with her, and gave her twenty dollars. “He asked me why I had decided to become a whore. I said that I had three small children and no husband and I couldn’t find a job. I had to earn a living somehow, didn’t I?” Her second encounter, though, was traumatic:

When we got to the room I sat down on the bed. I didn’t understand English but I knew the American was telling me to take off my clothes...I was awfully nervous and I wanted to get out. He grabbed my arm to stop me and I yelled for the houseboy. The boy told me that if the man had already paid then I had to stay...After it was over I went to the bathroom to take a bath. I said to myself that I’d never go with another man again.⁶⁸

Soledad considered quitting, but her friends counseled her to stay, telling her she would never get work in the brothel again if she quit. She stayed on.

When Fernanda found out that Soledad was working as a prostitute, she accosted her: “Now you’ve got what you wanted, haven’t you? To go around being laid! You dirty hunk of a whore! You good for nothing scum!” Soledad replied to her, “That’s what you taught me to be. It’s your fault, yours and my papá’s that I’ve been driven to this.”⁶⁹

Although the other prostitutes at the brothel told Soledad that she would grow to like the work; she said that she did not. “You suffer a lot in the life. Can you imagine how ashamed you are to take off all your clothes in front of men who are strangers, for a miserable five-dollar bill?” She drank to make the work tolerable. “After I’d had two or three drinks I was

⁶⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 184.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 184.

able to forget. Then I'd dance and be gay and have a good time. Liquor makes me sick but after a few drinks you forget about morality and about being shy. Morality is the shame you feel. If you feel ashamed you can't do a thing."⁷⁰

Soledad never worked with a pimp. In her words: "No man ever made a living out of my skirts."⁷¹ The concept of pimping amongst the subjects of *La Vida* differed somewhat from a contemporary American understanding of the word. For Soledad and her sister, Felícita, a pimp was any man who was married to or lived with a prostitute and did not work. He did not necessarily need to take an active role in the business of prostitution to be considered a chulo—or pimp. Soledad believed in a code of conduct that made prostitution acceptable. Working as a prostitute to support children was forgivable. She opposed working for a pimp. Soledad claimed that she did not wear revealing dresses or tight pants, and looked down on prostitutes who did.

Soledad's mother, Fernanda, despite having spent years as a prostitute, looked down on other prostitutes:

I think that prostitutes should go to work instead of earning their living by whoring. Nobody is forced to be a whore. A woman who has children to support may have to be a whore in order to earn money for them, but most whores go into the profession because they enjoy it. To my mind it's plain laziness to get under a man for two or three dollars instead of taking a job.

Fernanda also saw prostitution as inevitable. "I think they'll never be able to put an end to whoring. Suppose they tried to end it here in San Juan by arresting two or three whores. Why, by tomorrow, there would be fifty more all over the place!"⁷² Although Fernanda

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 59, 185.

spoke of Mary Magdalene as the original prostitute, her understanding of the biblical origins of prostitution did not lessen her judgment of her daughters.

After she split with Arturo, Soledad began seeing a man named Octavio, or “Tavio.” Octavio was a gangster and robber by trade. Soledad got involved in his robberies, the only serious crimes that she ever committed. She served as lookout for a major robbery of a department store that netted several thousand dollars of loot, then went with Tavio to his fence to sell it. She showed little remorse for her involvement, nor for living with a man who stole for a living. To her, Tavio was an honest thief, because he did not steal from the poor, only from businesses and the wealthy:

When Tavio robbed a rich person I felt nothing but pleasure. The rich are sons of a great whore and they take plenty away from us...And what he stole from the rich he shared with the poor. He...brought things for me, for doña Minerva, doña Lucelia, my mamá, Felícita, and everybody in the neighborhood.⁷³

Soledad’s brief criminal career ended when Tavio was shot and killed during a break-in. Soledad saw this as the great tragedy of her life. Octavio, she said, was the only man she had ever truly loved. Soledad was on her own again, with three children, and five months pregnant with a fourth. She returned to prostitution briefly, but soon found an older patron, sixty-year-old don Camacho, who put her up in a room and gave her money for food.

Soledad and her newborn child were diagnosed with syphilis. Shortly after the delivery, she had a tubal ligation. She left don Camacho and went to New York. She and her children moved into a small one-story house with her sister Felícita, Felícita’s children, their younger brother Simplicio, and boarders. Thirteen people lived in the small house. Soledad lived with a man for a while, moved to New Jersey for several months, and held

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 191.

jobs picking vegetables and working in a cannery. But eight months after going to New York, Soledad returned to Puerto Rico. She was soon working as a prostitute again. She decided to return to New York once again a short time later, although she said that she did not like it there.

Soledad had difficulty establishing herself in New York, and her family, she said, was of little help. She turned to prostitution again, to provide for her children. Her cousin, Virginia, also a prostitute and married to a chulo, introduced her to an American clientele, mostly old men. It was here that Soledad first found sexual pleasure in her work. She claimed that American men had a predilection for cunnilingus, which she enjoyed: “when they put their tongue way in there, *ay*, it’s wonderful. Mostly Americans do it. I don’t know how they got to like it so much.”⁷⁴ She met her new husband, Benedicto, in New York. As with many of the men who were romantically involved with the women in *La Vida*, Benedicto first met Soledad while she was working as a prostitute in a bar, though he did not have sex with her as a client. Like her mother’s one-time husband, Erasmo, Benedicto fell in love with Soledad and tried to get her out of the life. “I knew that other women of the life get married and have children and live in such a way that no one could point a finger at them... Who knows, maybe if I make a home with her everything will change. Maybe we can be happy together.”⁷⁵

Benedicto’s and Soledad’s marriage (a casual marriage, not a legal one) was not a happy one, however. Soledad said of him: “Benedicto is one of those men who begin to behave badly as soon as he’s caught a woman.” He cheated on Soledad and beat her. A merchant mariner, Benedicto only occasionally sent money to support Soledad and her

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 219.

children. Soledad worked intermittently at factory jobs and, when she was out of work, by casual prostitution, visiting a select group of clients who had known her for some time, rather than picking up men in bars. For example, a repeat client of Soledad's, a man she identified as *El Polaco*, was a sixty-eight-year-old Pole who liked to cook for her and buy her gifts. She would go to see him at his house, and he would give her about twenty dollars for sex. He did not know she was married, and he pleaded with her to come and live with him. Benedicto, according to Soledad, did not know that she still worked as a prostitute.

Soledad also made money by hosting parties for gay and lesbian Puerto Ricans. Soledad sold liquor at the parties, and perhaps acted as a madam or matchmaker (the story was unclear). The subject of homosexuality was conflicted in the story of *La Vida*. Soledad's mother, Fernanda, made strong comments against homosexuality, both male and female. "I'd a thousand times rather see my son dead, with his legs stretched out stiff and candles lit around him, than have him become a queer. As to my girls, I've always told them, 'better be a whore than a lesbian.'"⁷⁶ One of Fernanda's husbands was bisexual, however, and he brought men into their home and had sex with them. Fernanda justified it by claiming that Héctor was "not a queer. But he was a *bubarrón*. A *bubarrón* is a man who gives it to a faggot in the ass."⁷⁷ Soledad claimed that lesbianism was a vice to be pitied, but she also claimed that it was acceptable to receive sexual acts from women, although not to give them. She related a story: "Once in La Esmeralda I was bathing with a girl friend and she kissed my cunt. I let her do it. Why not, if she liked it? And do you

⁷⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 104.

know, you feel just the same when a woman does it. But I have never once been tempted by them.”⁷⁸

Soledad worked in a series of industrial jobs, mostly in garment factories. Work was intermittent and hard to find. Soledad endured many of the same snares and cheats that endless immigrant workers have experienced. She once went to a job agency and paid a ten-dollar fee for a job making baby clothes. Two weeks later, she was fired and the agency sold the job to someone else. She was something of a shop-floor militant. After an altercation with a coworker and her boss, the boss apologized to her at the end of the day. “I forgive the dead, not the living,” was her response.⁷⁹ She was also a union member, and relied on the union to back her up on the job. She claimed to speak up much more than her co-workers. Once she recalled an episode with her foreman: “I know you’re the *foreman* and I’m an employee here. But I’m not your personal slave. I’m a Puerto Rican and you’re an American, but that doesn’t mean you can come screwing around. Give me *lay off* and I’ll go to the union and tell them.”⁸⁰

Soledad and Benedicto were both black Puerto Ricans. Lewis described Soledad as “an attractive, full-bodied mulatto woman, about five feet four inches in height. She had a broad face with high cheekbones, deep-set dark eyes and a short, slightly flat nose. Her hair, normally brown and kinky, had been straightened and tinted a coppery hue.”⁸¹ But Soledad had no great measure of racial tolerance when it came to the mainland. “I don’t like the black people around here because they’re all sons of a great whore...The women are whores and the men are so foul-mouthed they’ll yell dirty words at you even if you’re with

⁷⁸ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 213, 214.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 236.

⁸¹ Ibid., 128.

your husband...I'm a Negro myself, but I'm a Puerto Rican Negro. I'm not one of the same race as they are.”⁸² Soledad also went on a strange rant claiming that John Wilkes Booth was black.

Soledad claimed that other ethnic groups resented Puerto Ricans. “As soon as [Italians] see a Puerto Rican they begin to insult him and they don't want us in their neighborhood.”⁸³ Soledad felt that Puerto Ricans faced employment discrimination as well: “If you're a Puerto Rican you can apply in twenty thousand places without getting a job. You can't get a job in a hospital or in the big department stores. But go to the factories, the cheap, ratty ones, and there you find Puerto Ricans, earning miserable wages.”⁸⁴ Soledad gave her children strict instruction not to speak English, and looked down on English-speaking Puerto Ricans and their children. “Everyone speaks his own language and has his place...if a Puerto Rican child learns only English it's because his mother wants to show off...I wouldn't want my children to forget their Spanish...My children learned Spanish from me and speak Spanish, and they'd better not start speaking English to me because I'd kill them.”⁸⁵

Soledad was not without sentiment for the American nation, however. She described her sadness upon hearing of the assassination of John F. Kennedy: “I didn't cry, but it would have been better if I had, because I couldn't eat. I was very upset...If [former governor of Puerto Rico] Muñoz Marín had died, frankly, I wouldn't have felt anything compared to what I felt about Kennedy.” She traveled with her children and a friend to Washington DC and witnessed the funeral procession. She spoke warmly of Kennedy: “I

⁸² Ibid., 211.

⁸³ Ibid., 211.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 211.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 212.

still feel it. You know, a president like that...I had a lot of faith in him because he did many things to end racial prejudice...He helped Puerto Rico get ahead...”⁸⁶

Adult relationships within the Ríos family were strained. Soledad, the eldest Ríos daughter, had the worst relationship with her mother, Fernanda, though it was supposedly improving, and Fernanda proclaimed Soledad to be the best of her daughters. Prostitution was not the only reason for the tension; Felícita worked as a prostitute too but Fernanda did not treat her so brutally. Soledad felt cheated by her family: “I love Fela as a sister and I’m sorry for her. I wish I could do something for her in spite of the fact that no one in my family has ever done anything for me.”⁸⁷ There was sibling rivalry as well: Soledad believed that Felícita had slept with at least two of Soledad’s men, one a man Soledad had met while he was in prison for murdering his ex-wife, whom he had discovered with another man.

Soledad was raising her children with less physical violence than she had experienced in her own childhood, though there were strange sexual revelations. Her “day in the life” interviewer described a trip to the park where Soledad pushed all of her children on the swings, and all laughed and had a good time. Soledad insisted that one daughter give her a full-mouthed kiss, and then disrobed her youngest toddler at the park, kissed her buttocks and fondled her vagina.⁸⁸ Soledad was, however, proud of her role as a parent. In what might be the most touching line of her story, she described her adoption of Catín: “The greatest deed I ever did in my life, the only good thing I have done, was to adopt my

⁸⁶ Ibid., 237.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 240.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 132.

daughter Catín. I've done so many bad things, I don't know which is the worst, but I'm proud of what I've done for her."⁸⁹

Soledad's children viewed her fondly. Catín, Soledad's adopted daughter and the eldest of her children, was nine years old at the time that the *La Vida* interviews were conducted. She was clearly affectionate towards her mother: "I love my *mama* and will never leave her alone. And neither will she leave me."⁹⁰ Catín described her mother as a nervous person, prone to *ataques*. These sometimes left Soledad hospitalized and Catín in charge of her younger siblings. Catín witnessed severe violence between Soledad and several male acquaintances. She recalled Benedicto slamming Soledad against walls, and Arturo and other men beating Soledad in the face. Some of the men and a few of the women hit Catín as well. Soledad fought back; she even threatened the men with weapons at times. Catín was aware that her mother was a prostitute, and other children made fun of her for this. Soledad was not particularly violent towards her children, though there were episodes of beatings, and one of the *Rashomon*-like plot devices of the book revolved around the source of Catín's disabled hip. Catín herself implied that Soledad had abused her when Catín was a young child and had left her crippled.

Lewis's own appraisal of Soledad as a mother was positive:

Soledad may seem like a harsh, cruel, inconsistent mother by middle-class standards, but one should also note how much time, energy and attention she gives to her children and how hard she tries to live up to her own ideal of a good mother. With much effort she has managed to provide them with a home, food and clothing, even with toys. She has not abandoned them, nor permitted anyone to abuse them, and she is devoted to them when they are ill.⁹¹

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xxx.

Although Soledad was not deeply religious, she told of an encounter with a spiritualist:

Benedicto asked her to work a spell for him, so we went into another room. They made me preside that day, God forgive me. I sat in the middle, with Benedicto and doña Neticia on either side. Doña Neticia talked and Benedicto prayed until a spirit took possession of her. I don't know what she said because the last thing I remember was that I jumped up and threw myself down at the altar. I don't know what happened afterward.⁹²

Soledad recollected several talismans she owned, along with some theories about spirit protectors. One of Lewis's assistants, who did a "day in the life" interview with Soledad, described her room as containing several Catholic statuettes and rosaries, along with a book on spiritism. But Soledad claimed that she preferred not to get too involved in spiritism, "because as the saying goes, the more you stir up shit, the worse it stinks."⁹³

Soledad's section of *La Vida* ended with her proclaiming that Puerto Rico was her real homeland. "I want to be buried in Puerto Rico because that's my country. Even if I do live in New York, I never forget my country...Shit! I don't care what happens here. I'm only interested in what goes on in my own country, in what happens to Puerto Ricans who belong to my race. Nobody else matters to me."⁹⁴

This is Soledad's story, in brief. But the short recounting here raises one important question: did Soledad represent a "culture of poverty" type? Her story revealed characteristics that matched Lewis's list of traits. The family traits were there: a

⁹² Ibid., 242-243

⁹³ Ibid., 133, 242-243.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 267.

matrifocal household organization, a pattern of casual marriages with several men, the use of physical discipline on children, and a failure of family solidarity. Several of the psychological traits appeared: early initiation into sexuality, alienation from the larger society, and alcohol abuse. Fatalism appeared frequently in the lives of Soledad and her relatives, as did depression and feelings of hopelessness and marginality. The economic traits were certainly there: chronic unemployment and underemployment, irregular employment, absence of food reserves, and a chronic shortage of cash.

But Soledad's union activity was a form of class consciousness, which members of the culture of poverty were not supposed to have. Soledad's justification of Tavió's robberies as offenses against the wealthy also showed class consciousness. Soledad traveled to Washington for Kennedy's funeral and offered opinions about politics and the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico. These were not the hallmarks of a person who came from a narrow and provincial culture, disconnected from the larger world and caring only about very local problems. It was not political involvement in the electoral sense, but it was political consciousness. It is possible that Lewis, without saying so, viewed this as false consciousness of disorganized and non-revolutionary sentiments.

Soledad's siblings, especially Felícita, did fit most of the culture of poverty model. It is still problematic that Soledad deviated so far from it. The key to the culture of poverty, after all, is culture, and a culture must be transmitted. It must arrive through socialization, and pervade through generations. If even one of the children of a family that supposedly held this culture did not hold true to its values, this weakens the entire concept.

The culture of poverty, when it comes down to the level of an individual, can feel mean-spirited. Soledad revealed her hard life in *La Vida*, but she did not come across as a

despicable person. With the exception of her thievery alongside Tavio, she was not dangerous. Her only other crime was prostitution, which she used to support her children because it was the only way that she could earn enough money to care for them and still remain their primary caregiver. Insofar as it was a crime at all, she was certainly the victim and not the perpetrator. Her relationships with her friends, neighbors, and family were mercurial and troublesome, but she was hardly alone in that. Lewis claimed that the culture of poverty did not constitute a mark of inferiority or immorality, and that people misused it when they gave it those meanings. There is still a question of whether or not categorizing people inevitably dehumanizes them. The enumeration is especially problematic: how many traits must one person have in order to be classified as a member of the culture of poverty? Lewis eventually conceded that it was a “clustering” of these traits in an individual that defined a culture of poverty existence.

But perhaps there is something there, after all the objections. The early initiation into sexuality; teenage motherhood; children with many different fathers, none of whom are involved with the family for long—these things all happen. The violence, alcohol abuse, and depression that marked the Ríos family frequently occur as well. The existence of these factors may not, in itself, constitute a culture. These factors may come about as an adaptation to harsh circumstances.

There is also the inherent problem of the authoritative voice of the anthropologist. Who, after all, gave Lewis the right to declare middle-class culture as normative and the culture of the poor as damaged, artificial, thin, and even self-oppressing? How would Soledad have felt about having this designation of “culture of poverty” placed upon her? Lewis did not answer these questions. Lewis’s critics were suspicious of both his judgments and of his methods. His introduction explained the culture of poverty idea, but provided

little insight into the science behind it, particularly the selection and grouping of traits. Lewis did not describe the relationship between the Ríos family and the researchers. Critics wondered how Lewis located the Ríos family, how he conducted the psychological testing, how Lewis had arrived at his list of traits, and how the narratives were created. This paper now turns to critically examining the creation of *La Vida*.

Chapter Three

Oscar Lewis altered his methodology and role dramatically in researching *La Vida*. He received a grant well in excess of \$100,000 from the Social Security Administration to research the book. In his earlier work, he had scraped together several small grants to cover the costs of travel, interviewing, supplies, translation, and publication. Oscar and Ruth Lewis carried out the bulk of the research for his first books, with minor aid from assistants, graduate students, and psychologists. Now hired assistants carried out most of the primary research. Lewis still did some primary work for the Puerto Rico project. He met his informants, conducted some of the psychological tests, and did a few interviews. His role had shifted, however, from participant-observer into project administrator.¹

The primary research team in San Juan and New York City consisted of Oscar and Ruth Lewis; three of Lewis's graduate students from Illinois: Douglas Butterworth, Vera Green, and Judy Hallawell; two of the children from the Sánchez family: Consuelo and Manuel; and Lourdes Marín, Anadel Lynton, Aida Torres de Estepan, and Francisca (Tata) Muriente, the last of whom had been referred to Lewis by a Puerto Rican professor of social work. Butterworth and Muriente became the chief assistants on the project. In all, over fifty people worked at one time or another on the Puerto Rico project.²

Lewis set out on an ambitious program of sampling one hundred families, using his team of interviewers, translators, social scientists, social workers, and psychiatrists. He

¹ Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 72-73, 84.

² *Ibid.*, 73-75.

visited social workers in San Juan and identified a set of families that he thought would be representative of the culture of poverty. Although his initial research focused on several extremely poor neighborhoods around San Juan, the old San Juan beach community of *La Perla* became the focus of the study. He settled on the Ríos family as the basis for what would be the first book in the Puerto Rico study.

Lewis's work in Mexico led to several books and journal articles,³ and Lewis originally intended the Puerto Rico study to produce a comparable amount of scholarship. In addition to the Ríos family, Lewis's team followed several other families beyond the initial screening phase. They conducted interviews, psychological tests and profiles, and produced thousands of pages of raw text for *Six Women*, a book that never appeared. A few articles appeared as follow-ups, either further documenting the Ríos family, or as teasers for *Six Women*.⁴ But outside of *La Vida*, the bulk of the Puerto Rican research never saw the light of day.

The team selected the Ríos family as the primary subject for *La Vida* based in part on the recommendations of social workers. Lewis preserved copies of a few social workers' reports on the family of the woman known in *La Vida* as Cruz. Cruz was Fernanda's youngest child. Unlike her two older sisters, she had never worked as a prostitute. This does perhaps lend some credence to Lewis's claims that he did not set out to write a book

³ Oscar Lewis, "Social and Economic Changes in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán 1926-1944," *América Indígena* 4, no. 4 (October 1944): 281-331; Oscar Lewis, "Urbanization without Breakdown: A Case Study," *The Scientific Monthly* 75, no.1 (1952): 31-41; Oscar Lewis, *Life in a Mexican Village: Tepoztlán Restudied* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1951); Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961); Oscar Lewis, *A Death in the Sanchez Family* (New York: Random House, 1969). This is only a brief sampling; there were many other journal articles.

⁴ A sampling of articles from the Puerto Rico project includes: Oscar Lewis, "In New York You Get Swallowed by a Horse," *Commentary* 38, no. 5 (November 1964): 69-73; Oscar Lewis, "Portrait of Gabriel: A Puerto Rican Family in San Juan and New York," *Harper's* 232, no. 1388 (January 1966): 54-59; Oscar Lewis, "Even the Saints Cry," *Trans-Action* 4, no. 1 (November 1966): 18-23.

about prostitution; his initial meeting with the Ríos family was with the one woman in the family who had never engaged in it. Cruz was also the poorest member of the Ríos family. Cruz walked with a noticeable limp, and the book described her as a hunchback. Cruz made her living selling lottery tickets, begging, doing odd jobs, and borrowing or accepting charity from her family and friends.

Social workers visited Cruz several times in 1963 and 1964. Probably because she was the poorest of the family, and because of her disability, she was the only one who had social workers intervene. Born in 1945, she turned nineteen as the research for *La Vida* was taking place. The social workers observed her relationship with her children and made an attempt in 1964 to reunite Cruz with her estranged common-law husband. They formed an intervention strategy aimed at both her nuclear and her extended families. This focused on getting to know the members of her extended family, improving the physical health of Cruz, getting medical aid for Fernanda's suspected heart condition, seeing Cruz through either divorce or reconciliation with her husband, interceding with her landlord to improve her home, and helping her in her *brega* (struggle) with her children.⁵ Although Cruz was the first contact in the Ríos family, Lewis and his team focused more on her mother and older sisters in their research.

Lewis and his researchers created *La Vida* through a multi-stage process of interviewing, translation, and editing. The first research step consisted of a series of standard questionnaires and a material culture analysis. Next came psychological tests. Researchers administered Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Tests on the family

⁵ "Intentos para facilitar una vista de conciliación entre [Cruz and her husband]," "Caso CIO [Cruz Ríos], 23 de mayo de 1964 (possibly transposed, actual date May 24, 1963)," Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 35. It could be that Lewis, when giving this woman the pseudonym Cruz, was making an analogy between Cruz and Jesus; *cruz* is Spanish for cross, so her injury, leaving her hunched over and in pain, was her cross to bear.

members, which were analyzed by psychologists. At the heart of the process was a series of interviews. These were tape-recorded and transcribed, and formed the basis for the body of the book.

Once Lewis and his team had met Cruz, they located and interviewed her extended family. The first step was to conduct material culture analyses on each member. An interviewer went into each household and meticulously cataloged all of the possessions, tracing where each one came from, who had purchased it, and for how much. These sessions were tape-recorded. The beginning of the household inventory of Felícita, conducted by Douglas Butterworth, follows. This method may seem tedious, but Butterworth was getting important information. His questioning led to information about neighbors, family members, informal exchange networks, child care arrangements, travel, and residence patterns. Here, we learn the history of Felícita's couch in staggering detail:

DB: O.K. I'm entering Felícita's room, to the right there is a couch. Can you tell me the history of this couch?

F: This couch was sold to a girl that they call "the black one," for [some amount of money, unclear]. Then one day I needed a couch and she came and I told her that I wanted to buy a couch from her and she told me yes. Then she came and sold it to me for four pesos.

DB: For four?

F: yes.

DB: And she paid two?

F: Yes.

DB: Aha. And who is "The black one?"

F: The daughter of Sofía.

DB: uh-huh.

F: They lived here before.

DB: Aha, and when was that?

F: I don't remember...I'd been living here about four months.

DB: Aha. And how long have you been in this house?

F: I've been here nine months.

DB: Nine months. And then what condition was the couch in?

F: With a worse mattress than the one I have, all wet.

DB: Uh-huh.

F: And I threw the other mattress out.

DB: Aha. And where did you get the mattress that you have now?
 F: I asked Cruz for it.
 DB: Aha. And Cruz had a mattress?
 F: Yes.
 DB: Do you know where she got the mattress?
 F: This mattress was from a couch where I left my daughters when I went to New York for the first time.
 DB: You left your daughters with Fernanda?
 F: With Fernanda.
 DB: Aha. ⁶

The material inventory went on for a full thirty-eight pages, until everything that Felícita owned had been identified, priced, and narrated.

Lewis and team also presented the family members with sets of questionnaires. These served as the baseline measure of the values, economics, and family structure of the Ríos family. The questionnaires collected information on income and expenses, leisure activities, friends, housing and home life, and life and values. Douglas Butterworth interviewed Felícita about her house in *La Perla* in October 1963. She had lived there for seven months and paid \$12 per month in rent. The house was painted. It had one bedroom with two beds; two of her children slept with her, two others shared the second bed. She had her own kitchen, running water, indoor toilet, shower, and living room. Her house did not have electric lighting. There was a sewage system, but she dumped her trash on the

⁶ Douglas Butterworth inventory interview of [Felícita], Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 34. Spanish original: **DB:** Bueno, entrando en la sala de Felícita, a la derecha hay un caucho. Usted puede decirme la historia del caucho ése? **F:** Ese caucho se lo vendieron a una muchacha que le dicen La Negra en cuatro, en dos pesos. Entonce un día yo necesitaba un caucho y ella vino y me dijo que si yo quería comprarle un caucho y yo le dije que sí. Entonce vino y me lo vendió en cuatro pesos. **DB:** En cuatro? **F:** Sí. **DB:** Y ella pagó dos. **F:** Sí. **DB:** Ajá. Y quién es La Negra? **F:** La hija de Sofía. **DB:** Mju. **F:** Viven por ahí alante. **DB:** Ajá, y cuando fué eso? **F:** No me acuerdo...a los cuatro meses de yo habel venido aquí. **DB:** Ajá. Y usted tiene cuánto tiempo aquí en la casa? **F:** Yo llevo aquí nueve meses. **DB:** Nueve meses. Y entonces en qué condiciones fué el caucho? **F:** Con un mattress más malo que el que tiene yo to mojoso. **DB:** Mjú **F:** Y el otro mattress yo lo boté. **DB:** Ajá. Y dónde consiguió el mattress que tiene ahora? **F:** Se lo pedí a Cruz. **DB:** Ajá. Y Cruz tenía mattress? **F:** Sí. **DB:** Usted sabe dónde consiguió ella el mattress? **F:** Ese mattress era de un caucho que yo le dejé a los nenes cuando me fuí por primera vez a Nueva Yol. **DB:** Usted dejó los nenes con Fernanda? **F:** Con Fernanda. **DB:** Ajá.

beach. Felícita would have liked to live in a country house. It would be better for the health of the children, she said.

Felícita held mixed feelings about her neighborhood and her neighbors. She did not share with her neighbors, though she did speak with them. In response to specific questions about homicides and slashing incidents, she remembered that a man had been stabbed to death nearby, and that a woman had slashed another woman's face after a homosexual advance was rebuffed. *La Perla* was not a good place to raise children, she offered. There were too many drugs, and older people treated children badly. She hoped that her children would marry out of the neighborhood. She knew the head police officer in the neighborhood, but never turned to him for help. In contrast to Lewis's theories about the minimal level of organization in a culture of poverty, when asked whether *La Perla* was merely an agglomeration of houses and families or if it had a more significant unity, Felícita said that there was unity. People helped each other. If someone died without money, money appeared. When asked to define a slum (arrabal), Felícita said that a slum was a place where there was trash and lots of poorly constructed houses. She said that *La Perla* was, in fact, a slum.

In all, Butterworth asked sixty-eight questions about Felícita's house and neighborhood. There were many more surveys. One asked about income and expenses. Felícita earned about \$76 in a month. She was not on government assistance. She had no savings, but she claimed that it was important to save money. She considered herself poor, but she was not the poorest person she knew—that was her sister Cruz. If she won the lottery, her first purchase would be a house. She sent her children out daily to do the grocery shopping. Butterworth prepared a chart showing Felícita's monthly expenses, which ranged from about \$125 to \$170. This was broken down into categories. Felícita

spent between \$60 and \$90 per month on food, \$15-20 on furniture, \$5 on cosmetics, jewelry, etc., about \$15 at the horse track, \$6 on the lottery, and \$5 on health care. Her expenses were double her stated income. Felícita possibly did not admit all of her income—perhaps because much or most of it came illegally through prostitution.⁷

The material inventories formed part of the framework for the subsequent interviews that Lewis's team conducted on the Ríos family. The connections between the family as revealed by Felícita's couch, for instance, might serve as the basis for questions to ask the family members. These next interviews were the heart of *La Vida*. Lewis and his team set out to capture the real life and words of the Ríos family through a series of tape-recorded interviews and observations. One of the crucial questions in examining *La Vida* is to ascertain whether or not the narrative was an honest and accurate portrayal of the interviews. This is a simple question with a complicated answer. What follows is an analysis of the story of Gabi, as an illustrative case.

Gabi was the most prominent child character in *La Vida*. He was the seven-year-old son of Felícita, Fernanda's middle daughter. Francisca Muriente, or Tata, interviewed him in Spanish several times, both in San Juan and in New York City. Ruth Lewis provided follow-up questions based on the responses from the first interviews. These interviews formed the basis for a narrative, written by Tata in Spanish. Maria Muñoz Lee translated the narrative into English. Ruth Lewis made comments and corrections on the draft. Oscar Lewis then added an interpretative introduction. *Harper's* featured the story as

⁷ “[Cruz] and [Felícita Ríos], comparisons based on questionnaires, by D.B. (Douglas Butterworth).” Lewis Papers, Box 34.

“Portrait of Gabriel: A Puerto Rican Family in San Juan and New York” as a teaser for the full book.⁸ The story appeared as Chapter 31, “Gabriel: I Walk Alone,” in *La Vida*.

Consider these paragraphs as they appeared in the final version of the article. Gabi described his mother working as a prostitute and said that he witnessed her having sex with her clients:

One bad thing Felícita does it to bring men to the house. She’s always going out with Cuco. And she often asks me, “Have you seen Cuco?” I always answer, “No.” Because you know, when Cuco goes to the house he gets into bed with Fela and they do bad things. I say to him, “If you can sleep in my *mama’s* bed, I can too.” Then they pull the sheet up over my face. I can’t breathe like that, so I soon pull it off and catch them screwing. So I cover my eyes with my hand and move to the couch.

There’s an American she also takes home to screw. I cover my face when they are at it but I peek at them through my fingers. They begin to play in the bed and after a while they start jumping. Then I know what’s coming—oops! they throw me down on the floor. I pick myself up and go to sleep on the couch. Then they have the bed all to themselves. Sometimes it comes over me all of a sudden. “How terrible—Felícita doing bad things.” But nobody dares tell me anything like that about her. Besides I’m always alone.⁹

Now let us examine the section, going backward from the finished product to the raw data. Ruth Lewis made very few corrections to the English translation. She added the “besides” to the final sentence. Otherwise, the passage above is more or less the section that Maria Muñoz Lee prepared as an English translation of the Spanish narrative. Translation, however, is a difficult matter. Slang and profanity are especially difficult to translate while preserving their exact meaning and spirit. Lee created a narrative that

⁸ Oscar Lewis, “Portrait of Gabriel: A Puerto Rican Family in San Juan and New York,” *Harper’s* 232, no. 1388 (January 1966): 54-59. Preserved in Oscar Lewis papers, Box 1.

⁹ Lewis, “Portrait of Gabriel,” 55-56.

read more smoothly in English than a literal translation would have done. Tata's original Spanish (with the original family names converted to the names used in *La Vida*):

Lo malo es que Felícita trae machos a la casa. Siempre anda con Cuco y cada vez me dice: "Tu has visto a Cuco." Yo le digo "No," porque sabe lo que pasa, que Cuco va a casa, entonces se acuestan a hacer cosas malas. Yo le digo si tú duermes aquí, yo también. Entonces me arropan la cara. Yo me asfixio, me quito la sábana y los veo chichando. Entonces me tapo la cara y me voy pal caucho a dormir.

También lleva a un Americano. Se pone a chichar allí. Yo lo sé porque me tapo la cara con la mano pero con los deos entreabiertos y lo veo. Empiezan a jugar, a brincar en la cama y cuando están brincando ya yo sé fua fua. Me tiran en el piso y yo me voy pal caucho a dormir y se quedan ellos en la cama. A vece yo me quedo así y digo, que barbaridad. Felícita está haciendo cosas malas. Ahora, nadie se atreve a decirme na de ella a mi. Yo siempre anda solo.¹⁰

This was mainly a faithful translation. There are some difficult points. How, for instance, does a word like *machos* get translated? There is no simple English translation. How to translate a word like *chichar*? This is Puerto Rican slang for engaging in sexual intercourse, similar to the Mexican-Spanish word *chingar*. Muñoz Lee translated *chichando* as "screwing." "Fucking" might be a truer translation, but it probably would not have passed muster in *Harper's*. Where Muñoz Lee wrote: "Sometimes it comes over me all of a sudden. 'How terrible—Felícita doing bad things,'" a more literal translation might have read: "Sometimes I'm sitting there and I say 'what barbarism. Felícita is doing bad things.'" There are other points where Muñoz Lee used some small license to produce a translation that reads well. Nevertheless, a reasonable person would probably conclude that Muñoz Lee produced a faithful translation. Literal translation, after all, does not

¹⁰ "[Gabi]," draft manuscript by Francisca Muriente (Tata), Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33.

usually produce a good narrative. The story, certainly, was faithful to the original, and outside of some minor questions about word choice, the language was faithful as well.

Taking the creation of the narrative one step further back, however, produces more troubling issues. The original interview contained Tata's questioning, which she removed to write the narrative. More importantly, however, Gabi's responses, which seem so detailed and long, were in fact compiled from shorter and scattered statements. Here follows the transcript, translated by this author from the original Spanish:

T: Listen, Gabi, Felícita sometimes has brought men to your house?

G: Yes: sometimes she says, "you've seen Cuco." And I tell her, "No." She always goes with Cuco.

T: And what does Cuco do in the house?

G: Well, they go to bed there and every time I tell her, "if he sleeps here, so do I.

T: But they go to bed. And what do they do?

G: Well, I don't know. Bad things.

T: They do bad things? What bad things do they do?

G: Well. Bad things that they don't know. Sometimes they cover my face. It smothers me. I pull off the sheet.

T: And what do you see when you pull off the sheet?

G: I go to the couch.

T: Ah?

G: I go to the couch to sleep.

T: Yes, to the couch. But you see—when you pull the sheet off of your face, what do you see?

G: Well, bad things that...

T: But—what are those bad things? I shit on nothing.

["Nothing you say will offend me" would be a figurative translation for "me cago en ná"]

G: Well, that, screwing and many things.

T: Yes, and you know how that is done, right?

G: Yes.

T: Go to Hell [figurative translation], tell me. I don't know.

G: Sometimes I tell her, "Felícita, sometimes at nighttime the things you do," and she goes...sometimes she covers my face, when she sees my face then I fall on the floor boom. And I go to the couch to sleep, and there I stay. That is all that I say.

T: And who else have you seen there? What other man have you seen there...

G: An American, man, sometimes American, sometimes she brings an American over, he's over there, he lives in a boat and [what follows here doesn't make a lot of sense] he showed me which boat it is. I'll show you which boat it is. I'll take you to it.

T: Listen you know how it is, how to screw? You know how it is?

G: Yes.

T: You know? Why do you know?

G: Because sometimes I do this and cover my eyes.

T: Yes, but watching. You cover your eyes watching.

G: Yes. I do that, I do that.

T: How clever, huh?

G: I do that and sometimes I cover my own face.

T: Yes, and what is Felícita doing?

G: Sometimes she plays, sometimes I can't sleep, sometimes she plays. They're jumping in the bed, I know it. Fuá fuá, pun pun onto the floor.

T: The two of them?

G: The same.

T: Ahh

G: And then I go to the couch to sleep.

T: What is it that you were telling me?

G: That sometimes I stay like that.

T: That, what, barbarity of what?

G: The bad thing that Felícita does.

T: And who told you that it was bad?

G: Well, I saw it, and they told me, I learned that it was bad.

T: Who told you that it was bad?

G: They told me that when I was little, they taught me.

T: Who taught you?

G: My mother and father.¹¹

¹¹ "[Gabi] interview," Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish original: T: Oya Gabi, Felícita alguna vez ha traído hombres a la casa? G: Sí. A veces ella dice: "Tu has visto a Cuco" y yo le digo: "no." Ella siempre anda con Cuco. T: Y qué hace Cuco en la casa? G: Bueno allí se acuestan y ca vez yo le digo: "que si el duerme aquí, yo también." T: Pero se acuestan, y que hacen? G: Bueno yo no se, cosas malas. T: Hacen cosas malas? Que cosas malas hacen? G: Bueno cosas malas que no se saben. A veces me arropan la cara, yo me afisio (sic: asfixio), me quito la sábana. T: Y que tu ves, cuando te quites la sábana. G: Me voy pal caucho. T: Ah? G: Me voy pal caucho a dormir. T: Pal caucho, si pero tu ves, cuanto te quitas la sábana de la cara, que tu ves? G: Bueno, cosas malas que... T: Pero cuales son esas cosas malas? Me cago en ná... G: Que, este, chichando y muchas cosas. T: Si, y tu sabes como se hace eso ya? G: Sí. T: Andale el Diablo, dime que yo no se. G: A veces yo le digo "Felícita, a veces por la noches que tu hace" y ella se va...a veces me tapa la cara, cuando le veo de cara, caigo pal piso plum...y me boy pal caucho a dormir, y allí me quedo. Eso es todo lo que yo digo. T: Y a quien más tu has visto en tu casa, de Felícita, a quien has visto? A quien más tu has visto allá? A que otro hombre tu has visto allá... G: Americano, hombre, a vece Americano, y a veces trae al Americano adentro, está por allá, el vive en el barco y él pegó a enseñar el barco cual es. Yo te voy a enseñar el barco cual es, yo te lo voy a traer. T: Si. Oye tu sabe como es eso, como se chichi? Tu sabe como es eso? G: Sí T: Tu sabe? Por qué tu

Reading the original dialogue complicates things. The matter-of-fact way in which Gabi described seeing his mother having sexual intercourse with clients in the published narrative seems dubious. It turns out that Tata had to pry the admission out of him with repeated questions, as he tried to beg off, repeating only that he saw her doing bad things, or that he went to sleep on the couch. Gabi's line that Felícita was engaged in barbarity is also problematic. Tata introduced that word, and unless there was some silent usage that did not appear in the tape or in the transcript, Gabi never said it. Further, Tata excised material to write the transcript. For instance, Gabi's detail that it was his mother and his birth father who taught him that sexual intercourse was bad never appeared in the finished narrative. He also went on in the original interview to describe how his parents masturbated him as a child. Although this would have supported Lewis's claims that one of the critical factors in the culture of poverty was early initiation into sexuality, this detail did not make the final narrative. Also, recalling the published narrative, we find the line: "But nobody dares tell me anything like that about her. Besides I'm always alone." This did not appear at all in this segment of the interview, though it did appear elsewhere. The interview was rearranged to give the impression of a flowing monologue that did not exist.

Other problematic issues include Tata's use of profanity in interviewing a young child. *Me cago en ná[da]* (I shit on nothing) is not especially profane amongst many

sabe? **G:** Porque a veces lo hacen y yo me tapo los ojos. **T:** Si, pero mirando. Te tapas los ojos mirando? **G:** Si, hago así, hago así...**T:** Que listo ah? **G:** Hago así y hay veces que yo me tapo la cara. **T:** Ah, si, y cómo es que hace Felícita? **G:** A vece juega, a veces yo no puedo dormir, a vece juega. Brincan en la cama, yo lo sé, fuá, fuá, pun, pun pal piso. **T:** Los dos? **G:** Lo mismo. **T:** ah... **G:** Y entonces me voy pal caucho a dormir. **T:** Como era que tu me estabas diciendo? **G:** A vece que yo me quedo así. **T:** Que qué barbaridad de qué? **G:** Cosa que Felícita hace mala. **T:** Y quien te dijo que eran mala? **G:** Bueno que ya lo veo y me lo dicen a mi, yo aprendí que eso es malo. **T:** Quien te dijo que eso era mala? **G:** Eso me dicen a mi, cuando yo soy chiquito me enseñan. **T:** Quien te enseñó? **G:** Mi mai y mi pai.

Spanish speakers, yet it seems unusual to use in an interview with a young boy. At another point in the transcript, Tata twice used *coño*, which translates literally as “cunt,” but more accurately in this context as “fuck.” Right after Tata said *Me cago en ná*, Gabi used the word *chichar* for the first time, perhaps as though his free use of profanity was enabled by hers. It also could be that Tata was merely using the language that Gabi and his family spoke, to try to establish rapport with him.

On the other hand, the details of the story were accurate. Gabi did claim to have been in the bed while his mother was having sex with clients, and to have witnessed her repeatedly in the act of sexual intercourse. Lewis did not produce a sensationalistic story for shock value. Gabi’s story was in his own words, but the removal of the interviewer’s voice from the narrative makes it difficult to perceive Gabi’s mood. The published version also removed the hesitations and uncertainties from the original interview. The interview reads much more like a seven year-old boy speaking than does the published narrative.

There is also evidence that Lewis actually made Gabi’s story in *La Vida* less profane and sexual than he could have. One recorded observation titled *Chistes* (Jokes) consisted of Felícita, Fernanda, a male acquaintance, and Gabi telling jokes and singing bawdy songs. The male acquaintance sang a song that went roughly, “Whore, your mother’s a whore, your daughters are whores, your grandmother’s a whore, how will you not be a whore when you are in a whore factory?”¹² This was meant as a funny song, but it described Gabi’s world with some accuracy. Gabi was, after all, the child, nephew, and grandchild of prostitutes. The adults followed with some racy jokes and then begged Gabi to sing and tell some jokes

¹² Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 36. “Chistes” (Jokes) Spanish Original: “Putá, puuuu, putá tu madreéééé, putá tus hijas y tu abuela como no vas a ser putááá, como no vas a ser putá si estas en la puteríaááá, como no vas a ser putá, como no vas a ser putá si estas en la puteríaááá.”

of his own.¹³ The adults all laughed as Gabi sang a bawdy song that didn't make sense. It went, roughly: "pussy licks pussy, pussy licks the pussy that the dick licks, the pussy says, 'oh love' what did the pussy tell the dick?"¹⁴

Any suggestion that Lewis exaggerated the sexuality of the Ríos family is further dispelled by a collection of Felícita's erotic and humorous poems that Lewis had in his research files but did not include in *La Vida*. The collection is entitled, "Mi Nombre es [Felícita], la Chingona," *trans*: My name is Felícita, the Great Fuckstress (this word *chingona* is difficult to translate. Something like "badass" might be a better term). She described her poetry: "This booklet is from the wicked one of La Perla, who fucks and fucks some more and is forever fucking." One of the poems read:

Handsome little daddy, little daddy
Tell me what this is that drops
from my curls. Pretty little Mama little Mama.
It's the milk from my balls
that I shot in that ass of yours.¹⁵

¹³ Felicitia, for instance, told a joke that went roughly, "Once upon a time, a pussy was out looking for firewood. The pussy started to gather wood, and made a big pile. It was so big that when it tried to open up and put it inside, it couldn't. Then the dick and the balls came down out of the pussy. The pussy said, 'oh ball, help me with this big pile of wood.' The ball said, 'I'm sorry, but I don't have the strength.' Then the dick came along and told the pussy 'Well, I'm stronger, so I'll help you move your pile of wood—where do you want me to take it?' And the pussy said, 'to my house.' And the dick took the wood to her house, but time passed and it started to rain—a downpour. The dick came to the pussy's door in the rain and knocked on the door, and the pussy asked, 'who is it?' and the dick said, 'it's me.' So the pussy came out and said to the dick, 'come on in, but leave the balls behind.' So the dick put the wood in the pussy and the balls stayed behind. And that's why the balls have to stay out and never get to go in." Ibid., Spanish original: "Había una vez, estaba la chocha buscando leña. Entonce la chocha como es tan afrentá pues le gusta lo mucho y empezó a cogel este mucha leña y recoge leña y cuando hizo un maso bien grande, bien grande trató de hecharselo encima y no pudo. Entonce bajaba el bicho y los dos guevos. Entonce sale la chocha y le dice: 'ay guevo, ayudame a cogel ese maso de leña.' Entonce los guevos le dice: 'Lo siemto, pero yo no puede hacer fuerza.' Entonce vino el bicho y le dijo: 'Bueno yo como tengo más fuerza te voy a lleval la leña. A donde quiere que se lleve?' Y le dijo: 'Bueno a mi casa.' Y se la llevaron a la casa, pero pasó el tiempo y el tiempo y entonce una vez estaba lloviendo mucho, un temporal. Entonce de la casulaida que cuando empieza...que cuando ve empezado el temporal va pasando pol frente de la chocha. Entonce tocan a la puelta de la chocha, tum, tum tum. La chocha le dice : 'quien es?' Y dice: 'Soy yo.' Entonce sale la chocha y dice: 'que entre el bicho y se queden los guevo atras.' Entonce se pudieron ahí. Pol eso es que los guevos se quedan fuera y nunca entran. (risas)"

¹⁴ Ibid., Spanish original: "Chocha la lambeee chichaaa, chocha la lambe chocho, chocha la lambee chichaaa, chocha la lambee chocho, la que lambe el bicho. La chocha le dice ay querido, Que le dijo la chocha al bicho?"

None of this appeared in the book. This lends credence to Lewis's claims in defense of the book that he had not picked his most salacious material to make a story that was more sexual or profane than it should have been. To the contrary, some of the more profane parts had been excluded.

Gabi claimed to be the victim of repeated violence from his mother. One dramatic section in Gabi's story in *Harper's* read: "Sometimes, when I'm alone, Felícita comes to me and says, 'Listen, you, don't you dare go saying I have a man or I'll slap your mouth hard enough to make the blood come.'" Gabi continued: "When she says that, I always answer, 'And why do you spend all your time with men instead of taking care of your children? You better pay some attention to us because if you don't I'm going to go live with Fernanda.'"¹⁶ Gabi's statement that Felícita told him not to reveal that she had a man read closely to the original. But the statement about slapping Gabi's mouth was reversed. In the original, Gabi threatened to hit his mother in the mouth.¹⁷

Further, there was a gap between these statements and Gabi's statement that Felícita spent all of her time with men instead of her children, and his threat to go live with Fernanda. These statements, however, were taken almost verbatim from the transcript (translated by this author):

¹⁵ "Mi Nombre es [Felícita], La Chingona," in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish original of description: Esta libreta es de la bellaca de La Perla, que chicha y mas chicha y siempre chichando. Trans: Spanish original: Papito, papito lindo

Dime que es eso que me baja
Por los tejido. Mamita, Mamita
Linda es leche de mis cojones
Qué te lansé en ese culo.

¹⁶ Lewis, "Portrait of Gabriel," 55.

¹⁷ "[Gabi] interview," Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish original: "Y yo también la quiero y ella viene a decir, a veces yo me quedo sólo y me dice: "Oye no te ponga a decir que yo tengo un hombre." Entonce yo le digo: "No te ponga a decir eso, que te voy a romper la boca." English translation: I also love her, and she comes to say, sometimes I find myself alone and she tells me "listen: don't go saying that I've got a man." Then I tell her: "Don't tell me that, I'm going to smack your mouth."

T: Yes, but tell me like you said it to me.
 G: Take care of your children and later the men.
 T: And what is it that happens-who does she take care of?
 G: The men, instead of taking care of her children. And I am going to tell her not to do that...[This went on along similar thoughts for several lines.]
 T: But tell me what you were saying just now.
 G: That she doesn't take care of her children. And I tell her, "look, take care of your kids, because if you don't, I'm going to [Fernanda's] house. For that reason, I went there."¹⁸

Again, here was a story that kept the spirit of the original. It is impactful to read about a seven-year-old threatening to run away to live with his grandmother because his mother put her clients before her children. It was an error, though, to reverse the violence in the statement "te voy a romper la boca" from son to mother, although it doesn't delegitimize the narrative or the interpretations that Lewis made of it.

There were other statements of violence in the original transcript. An example:

T: Does Felícita hit you a lot?
 G: Yes.
 T: Tell me about a day.
 G: One time she gave it to me here, here in the head, here in the face, here...
 T: How was that?
 G: Fernanda was fighting with me, Fernanda bit me right here, and Felícita hit me with a plank and I poured blood out right here.¹⁹

Gabi was important because he was evidence, according to Lewis, that the culture of poverty was internalized by children as young as seven. Gabi was proof that the culture of

¹⁸ "[Gabi] interview," Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish original: T: Si, pero cuéntame, como tu me dijiste a mí? G: Que atender a los hijos y después a los hombres. T: Y que es lo que pasa que ella atiende a quién? G: A los hombres, en vez de atender a los hijos. Yo le voy a decir que no haga eso...(this goes on along similar lines for several lines) T: Pero dime come me estabas diciendo ahorita... G: Que ella no cuidaba a los hijos. Y yo le digo, mira, atiende a tus hijos que si no me voy pa en casa de Fernanda. Pore so yo me metí allá.

¹⁹ "[Gabi] interview," Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish original: "T: Felícita te pega a ti mucho? G: Sí. T: Cuéntanos un día? G: Una ve me dió por aquí, por aquí por la cabeza, por aquí...en la cara, asi. T: Como fué eso? G: Que Fernanda estaba peliando conmigo, Fernanda me pegó una mordía aquí, y Felícita me metió un tablazo y boté sangre por aquí."

poverty was passed on from generation to generation, and that it caused damage to the children that would linger on into adulthood. Lewis wrote:

Gabi is an attractive, bright child with a ready smile. His experiences are typical of children who grow up in the culture of poverty. They really have no childhood as we know it. Prematurely burdened by heavy responsibilities, exposed to violence, promiscuity, drunkenness, and vice at a tender age, and subject to unstable and immature adults, these children develop an incredible precocity and a superficial maturity which is damaging to their personality.²⁰

Lewis claimed that the absence of childhood was a critical marker of the culture of poverty; the assertion that promiscuity, drunkenness, and vice were also components was new. He had hinted at promiscuity by including in the trait list “early initiation into sex,” but there had not been a connection to a multiplicity of partners. The connection to vice was interesting, because Lewis had avoided connecting criminality to the culture of poverty. Nevertheless, these things seem to have been a part of Gabi’s world.

Lewis’s claim that Gabi was damaged came, in part, from his dreams of his future:

I wish I were a grown man too. I dreamed that I was twenty years old. I bought myself *un apartment*, I bought *furniture* with a mirror. The bathroom was next to the bed. I lived with Carmen Rosa and got up early to go to work. I gave money to Fela’s kids so they could get themselves some clothes. And I bought Fela a stove and furniture and a dining-room set and a record player.

So far, this sounds positive; Gabi was dreaming of upward mobility and generosity. He was going to help out his mother and siblings. But he also showed a mean streak:

...when my wife was sick I did the cooking. I was always good to her. I’m telling you, though, if she does anything to me, I’ll have a fight with her. You know what women are when a man is all screwed up and doesn’t have a house and lots of things.

²⁰ Lewis, “Portrait of Gabriel,” 54.

That is when they walk out on him. Yes that's what makes wives leave their husbands. Well, if my wife does that to me, then I'll really beat her.²¹

This sounds shocking. A seven year-old boy had just announced the conditions upon which he would beat his future bride. But what of other statements that Gabi might have made about his future life? Here is a piece from his interview that is more tame (translated by this author):

T: And you, when you're big, do you think you'll get married?
 G: Yes.
 T: Why?
 G: To have children.
 T: Ah, you want to have children?
 G: Yes.
 T: And what will the woman you marry be like? Who are you going to marry?
 G: With the one I find?
 T: With whomever you find?
 G: Uh-huh.
 T: What would you like the woman to be like?
 G: We'll see if I find her.
 T: Will you find her, or won't you?
 G: Yes, I will find her.
 T: You will find her. And what will the woman you find be like? What would you like her to be like?
 G: Big.
 T: And why do you want her to be big?
 G: To have children...
 T: Ah, because the little ones, can't have children?
 G: Of course. I want her to be able to have children, and have children...
 T: And what will the woman do when you marry her? What will she have to do?
 G: Nothing.
 T: She won't work or anything?
 G: Of course. I will find work and I'll be working so she can cook, I'll buy...
 T: Ah, she will, you're going to bring her money so she can cook for you?
 G: Yes.

²¹ Lewis, "Portrait of Gabriel," 59.

T: And for more, nothing?
 G: No.
 T: Ah?
 G: No
 T: So you're going to marry a woman so she can cook for you?
 G: Yes.
 T: And you're not going to touch her?
 G: No.
 T: You're not going to touch her, you're not going to kiss her?
 G: Yessss.

This passage reads like an average young boy dreaming about adulthood. There was a serious error of omission here, as nothing like this found its way into the published work. At times, Gabi sounded like a very calm, idealistic young boy. The interviewer started leading him into more serious territory (translated by this author):

T: Then tell me what you're going to do to this woman. Don't play.
 G: Well, when I come from work, I'll give her money and then sometimes I'll go look for work, if she's sick I'll send for the doctor, or if she doesn't go away to have a child, or if she doesn't have anything...
 T: And if you are angry with her, are you going to hit her?
 G: No.
 T: When you fight...
 G: I'm not going to fight.
 T: With your woman, what are you going to do?
 G: I'm not going to fight her.
 T: No, and if one day you argue?
 G: Nothing.
 T: You will hit your woman?
 G: Yes.
 T: You're going to hit her?
 G: Yes, if she does something to me.
 T: If she does what?
 G: Something to me.
 T: Like what, what thing can a woman do to a man?
 G: Well, fight, and I don't know, several things.
 T: Like what?
 G: Several things.
 T: Like what, what things should a woman not do to a man?
 G: Sometimes women leave their men, and sometimes...sometimes they leave because there's no house,

sometimes there's no money, sometimes they're fucked, and many things.²²

Gabi said he was going to hit his woman, but first, he denied it four times. It was only after repeated questioning that Gabi finally claimed he was going to hit her. Did Tata pierce Gabi's defenses and get to his true malevolent intentions? Or did Gabi eventually claim that he would hit his woman because he believed that was what Tata wanted him to say?

The description of causes for which a man could hit a woman was a direct translation, but the passage read in its entirety makes Gabi seem less ominous. He imagined meeting a woman so that he could have children. They would get married, he would work, and she would stay home and cook. He was not going to touch her—but kiss her? YES. He wouldn't fight with her or hit her—until he was asked repeated leading questions. Then he said that he would hit her if she left him. This is hardly the stuff of a boy who seems to be bound inexorably for a life of machismo and wife-beating.

²² “[Gabi] interview,” Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish original: T: Y tu cuando seas grande peinsas (sic) casarte? G: Sí. T: Para qué? G: Pa tener hijos. T: Ah, te gusta tener hijos? G: Sí. T: Y como va a ser la muchacha que tu te vas a casar. Con quien tu te vas a casar? G: Con la que yo consiga? T: Con qualqueira que tu consiga? G: Uju. T: Como quieres que sea la muchacha? G: A ver si yo consigo. T: Conseguirés, o no conseguirás? G: Si, yo consigo. T: La consigues. Y como va a ser la muchacha que to consuigas? Como tu quieres que sea la muchacha? G: Grande... T: Y pa que tu quieres que sea grande? G: Pa que tener hijos. T: Ah, porque las chiquitas no tienen hijos? G: Seguro. Yo quiero ser como tener hijos, y tener hijos. T: Y que va a hacer la mujer cuando se case contigo, que tiene que hacerte? G: Na. T: No va a trabajar ni ná? G: Seguro. Consigue trabajo y yo trabajando pa que cocine, yo le compro... T: Ah, ella, tu le vas a traer chavos pa que te cocine? G: Sí. T: Y pá más ná? G: No. T: Ah? G: No. T: Así es que tu vas a casar con una mujer mas que pa que te cocine? G: Sí. T: Y tu ni la vas a tocar? G: No. T: No la vas a tocar, no la vas a besar? G: Siii. T: Entonce dime que tu le vas a hacer a esa muchacha...No juegue... G: Bueno que cuando yo venga de trabajar le doy chavos y entonce a vece yo voy consigo trabajo, si está enferma la mando pal medico, o si no iba a tener hijo, o si no tiene ná. T: Y si tu estás enojado con ella, la vas a pegar? G: No. T: Cuando ustedes peleen... G: Yo no voy a peliar (sic). T: Con la mujer, que tu le vas a hacer? G: Yo no le voy a peliar. T: No, y si algún día discuten. G: Na. T: Tu le pegas a la mujer? G: Sí. T: Le vas a pegar? G: Sí, si me hace algo a mi. T: Si te hace qué? G: Algo a mi. T: Como que cosa, puede hacerle una mujer a un hombre? G: Que pelee, y yo no sé, unas cuantas cosas. T: Cómo? G: Unas cuantas cosas. T: Como cuales, que cosas no le debe hacer una mujer a un hombre? G: A veces las mujeres se dejan con los maridos y a veces que se dejan, que no hay casa, a veces que no tienen chavos, a veces están jodios, y muchas cosas.

Different people might read the original sources for *La Vida*, compare them to the narrative that appeared in the final book, and come to different conclusions as to whether or not the narrative was a fair and accurate portrayal of the lifestyle and words of the Ríos family. Lewis did not, however, make the Ríos family profane. He did not invent the violence. He did not insert sexual content that did not exist in the interviews. Were the poor portrayed “in their own words?” Yes and no. The words were translated. They were edited and rearranged. There were errors of omission. There were also stretches of text that were taken verbatim from the interviews, albeit with the interviewer’s voice removed.

By the mid 1960s scholars were connecting the culture of poverty to mental illness. Lewis himself began to emphasize the psychological factors in creating a culture of poverty. In 1965, Lewis presented a report on Gabi at a University of Kentucky conference, “Culture Change, Mental Health, and Poverty,” for feedback from psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and other anthropologists. Joseph Finney, an educational psychologist at the University of Kentucky, argued that the very poor were alienated from the larger culture around them, and were marked by feelings of “alienation, of cynicism, or purposelessness, of rootlessness, of anomie (Durkheim), of not-belonging.” Finney conjectured that this caused mental illness:

A member of the culture of poverty feels neglected, deprived, unloved, unwanted. He feels useless: that nothing he does is important to anyone, is appreciated, or is needed. He cannot but feel worthless: his self esteem is as low as it can be...At the same time he feels bitter and resentful toward the world: angry at people because they have treated him badly...And he feels justified in cheating the world in return...So he alternates between blaming himself and blaming other people, and settles into an apathetic, cynical, unproductive passive hostility...It is

small wonder that this way of life results in crime, delinquency, psychosis, hospitalized schizophrenia, and mental illness.”²³

Lewis read from Gabi’s psychological profile at the conference. The authorship of the profile is unclear, as the original is not preserved in Lewis’s papers. It was probably written by Carolina Luján, who took a lead role in the psychological profiling of the participants in the Puerto Rico project.²⁴ The profile described Gabi’s development in psychoanalytical terms. It reads, in part:

Gabi is a boy who has not been able to make the most of his rich intellectual and emotional resources. Despite great environmental poverty and lack of cultural stimulation, his good natural endowment is reflected in his productivity and in his exuberance in the use of color and human movement. His apparent precocity is, however, but a symptom of his uneven development and of the methods he’s employing to deal with destructive impulses, and to handle overwhelming tensions...There is gross acceleration in the thinking process, which finds expression in deviant ways. His reality testing is poor and often leads to grandiose generalizations...His lack of a self-satisfying self-concept and his ensuing need to find himself by way of multiple identifications is reflected in the large number of human movement responses...It does not represent the healthy internalization of consistent love-objects, but a ceaseless role-playing, a taking on of the roles of adults because of a lack of consistent love objects in his environment.”²⁵

Commenting on the profile, George DeVos, an anthropologist at Berkeley who also had psychological training, remarked that:

²³ Joseph Finney, ed., *Culture Change, Mental Health, and Poverty* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), xiv. August Hollingshead and Frederick Redlich had just published an influential book, *Social Class, Mental Illness, and American Psychiatry*. It argued that the very poor (classified by a complicated scheme into Class V on a socio-economic hierarchy of I-V) suffered mental illness at dramatically higher rates than others. The authors also found that class biases led mental health professionals to dislike the poor, that the poor were more likely to be forced into mental health services by the police and court system, and that quality, voluntary, and affordable psychiatric care for the poor was virtually nonexistent. Finney theorized that the Hollingshead “Class V” designation was another way of describing people within the culture of poverty. See August Hollingshead and Fredrick Redlich, *Social Class, Mental Illness, and American Psychiatry* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1958), 194-250.

²⁴ Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 64-68.

²⁵ Finney, *Culture Change*, 159-160.

This kid is trying to internalize the material that life is giving him... but he is only an eight-year-old; it stretches his development capacity to cope with such material. The prognosis is likely to be poor, because the child is just not up to coping with this material. Here is a child without the usual self-control, without the usual inhibitions, showing a superior mentality, but on an eight-year-old level....²⁶

Lewis had his own interpretation of Gabi's profile: "He's so bright that without much thought about detail, without stopping to reason, very bright ideas and observations come to him. This has been rewarded by adults, and he's been encouraged to talk a great deal, to move a great deal, to dance, to act, to the point where it has become a part of his habit system."²⁷ Both Lewis and DeVos saw Gabi as an intellectually gifted child, but a child who had a worldliness about him that was only skin-deep. He spoke matter-of-factly about adult things, but this was not really a mark of maturity. This was evidence of the "absence of childhood." Gabi had been thrust into an adult world before he was prepared for it, and the confusion, tension, and angst that this inspired were part of what helped the culture of poverty to perpetuate itself. He received attention but was not truly or consistently loved.

Marvin Opler, psychiatrist and anthropologist, was asked whether or not Gabi sounded like a well-adjusted child. Opler responded that Gabi did not sound "mentally ill," but that he "sound[ed] terribly, terribly old." Lewis answered that this was for him, the defining mark of the culture of poverty in children, that "There is no childhood. The children must cope with adult problems. They develop an apparent precociousness that is not true maturity." Gabi, Lewis added, "copes very well with what I call a pathological family situation. His mother is a prostitute. Not only that, but she mixes her business

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 163-165.

with her home life...she is still hoping to find a man who will fall in love with her and accept her and her five children.”²⁸

The psychological analysis of Gabi that Lewis read at the Kentucky conference came, in part, from psychological analysis based upon Rorschach and TAT tests. Some of Lewis’s contemporaries worried about bias in the tests. Barbara Havassy, a psychologist with the City of Denver, wrote, “My field work...has led me to believe that such instruments as the TAT...are so culturally biased (middle class culture, that is) as to make them meaningless in use with other (non-middle class) groups.” She asked how Lewis tried to bridge the gap between himself as a middle-class interviewer and his poor subjects. “Do the subjects initially balk at the test taking task and procedure...does the task appear irrelevant or foolish to them? And do you find the quality of the data comparable to that obtained from middle class subjects?” Lewis wrote back, “On the whole I tend to share your skepticism about the value of projective techniques, specifically, TAT and Rorschach tests when applied in other cultures.” Lewis did believe they held some use in conjunction with case studies. Lewis had a special set of TAT pictures, drawn by a Mexican artist, that he believed minimized cultural biases. Lewis also insisted that his subjects never balked at the test, as he gave it only after he had known his subjects for years, and that his tests were “administered by Puerto Rican psychiatrists and scored by a Mexican clinician.”²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 166-169.

²⁹ Barbara Havassy to Oscar Lewis, May 6, 1968. Oscar Lewis to Barbara Havassy, May 24, 1968. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 57. The images drawn by the Mexican artist, unfortunately, have been lost by the archive at the University of Illinois.

For the Puerto Rico project Lewis hired Latin American mental health professionals to administer the TAT and analyze the results.³⁰ Alberto Tristani, chief psychologist at the Drug Addiction Research Center at the Psychiatric Hospital of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, administered the TAT on Fernanda Ríos. He noted that she took the test “somewhat lightly,” being distracted by other affairs, and that she intimated to him that she could have “said more regarding sexual matters, but that her husband, and children were present.”³¹ In the TAT, an interviewer asks a subject questions about a series of striking images that get progressively more dramatic. Like the Rorschach, it is a projective psychological test; that is, it calls upon the subject to “project” his or her own interpretations onto ambiguous images. The interviewer then makes a series of judgments about the intelligence, personality, desires, conflicts, and troubles of the subject.

³⁰ Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 11-13, 27-28.

³¹ Psychological examination of [Fernanda Rios] by Albert Tristani, Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 27.

The following interview between Fernanda and Tristani took place about image 1, a version of which is shown below:



Fernanda: What I see here is a child, very pensive, watching a violin. The violin is on top of a table, with a tablecloth. I don't know if the boy has anything in his mouth, because I can't see it very well. A violin is what I see, that's all, the table, a cloth, the pensive child. I don't see anything else.

Tristani: "What happened before the child got there?"

Fernanda: "It could be that the father was a musician or something like that."

Tristani: "The father was a musician?"

Fernanda: "Or something like that. And he played the violin, because there are two ways to play the violin."

³² Image is from <http://web.utk.edu/~wmorgan/tat/tattx1a.htm> accessed on November 19, 2010. The original citation: E.B. Block, Yehudi Menuhin, *The Parents Magazine* 5, No. 1 (1930), 17- 50. Thanks to Wes Morgan at University of Tennessee at Knoxville for his website on historical TAT images. This is a photograph upon which card one was based in the Murray system of cards of the Thematic Apperception Test used between 1943 and 1971. The image in the set does not contain the text in the upper right hand corner. As with this image and subsequent ones, Lewis had a special set of cards drawn by a Mexican artist, which presumably modeled these closely, albeit with Latino figures and cultural references.

Tristani: “There are two? How so?”

Fernanda: “There are two ways to play the violin. As they say, he who robs, is playing the violin, and he also looks like when he is big he will do the same thing as his father, see? He will be a great musician, play or...”

Tristani: “What will happen later?”

Fernanda: “afterwards I don’t know what will happen—he will become a musician, play the violin, or something like that.

Tristani: “You don’t know?”

Fernanda: “There are so many things about one’s destiny—he could play until he turns himself into a fag (*pato*, or duck, is derogatory Puerto Rican slang for a male homosexual).

Tristani: “*Hasta pato*. Very good.”³³

Tristani cut off Fernanda before she was able to finish the answer about how there were “two ways to play the violin.” The reference is unclear—it could be that she was about to make the same kind of innuendo that she made with the “*hasta pato*” line.

³³ “Psychological examination of [Fernanda Ríos] by Albert Tristani,” Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 27. Spanish original: Fernanda: “Yo lo que veo aquí es un niño, muy pensativo, mirando a un violín. Este violín está como encima de una mesa con un paquete (tapete) yo no sé si en la boca tiene algo, porque yo no veo muy bien ahí. Un violín es lo que yo veo ahí, yo no veo más ná, la mesa, un paño, ese niño pensativo. No le veo más nada.”

Tristani: “Ahora, que sucedió antes del niño estar ahí”

Fernanda: “Bueno sería que el papa era músico o algo así.”

Tristani: “Que el papá era músico”

Fernanda: “O algo así y tocaba el violin, porque hay dos formas de tocar violin.”

Tristani: “Hay dos, cómo?”

Fernanda: “Hay dos formas de tocar el violin. Como dice, él que roba, está tocando el violin, y el parece también cuando sea grande hacer lo mismo, ve, que él padre, ser un gran músico, tocar o...”

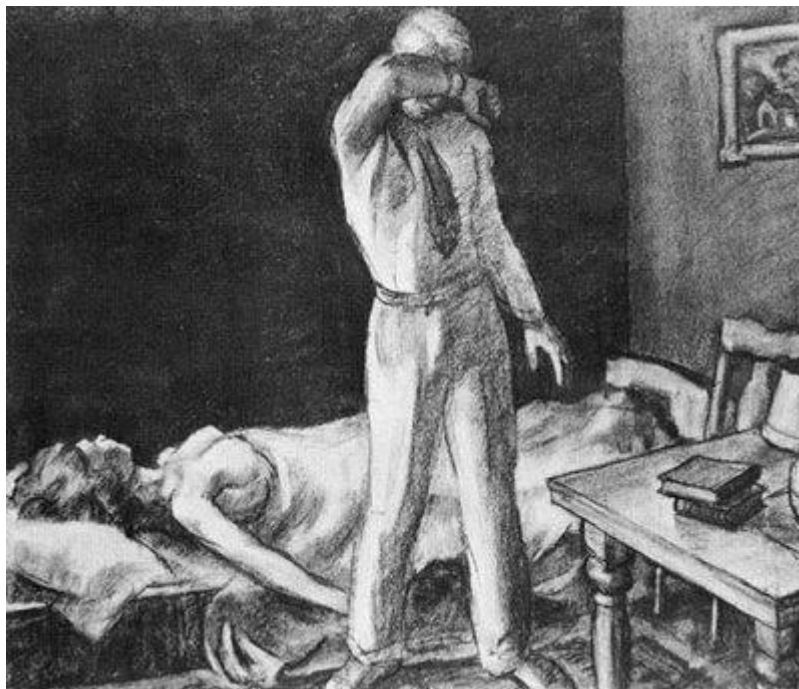
Tristani: “Que pasará despues?”

Fernanda; “Después no sé que pasará, si el se meterá a músico, a tocar el violin o algo así.”

Tristani: “No sabe.”

Fernanda: “Son tantas cosas del destino de uno se puede meter hasta pato.”

Tristani: “Hasta pato. Muy bien...”



When shown this image, Fernanda remarked:

Fernanda: “Well here it looks like the woman is dead and the man is crying. It looks like he killed her.”

Tristani: “That happened before?”

Fernanda: “It looks like they were living together and all that, see? It looks like they had an argument, and they had a fight or something, and then it looks like he killed her, because she has...she looks like someone who is dead, see? And he’s there covering her up.”

Tristani: “What will happen later?”

Fernanda: “What will happen later? The police will come, and they will take him away.

They will lock him up there [in prison] and they will make him eat *patitas con garbanzos* (a Puerto Rican dish, pig’s feet with beans.)”

Tristani: “*Patitas con garbanzos?*”

Fernanda: “Uh huh, *patitas con garbanzos*.”³⁴

Fernanda was making another sexual innuendo here, with *patitas* and *garbanzos* standing in for penis and testicles. She was suggesting that the perpetrator in the picture would be taken to prison and forced into performing fellatio.

³⁴ Ibid. Spanish original: “Ahi yo veo que parece que esa señora está muerta y él está llorando. Parece que él la ha mata[d]o.”

Tristani: “Eso sucedió antes?”

Fernanda: “Parece que ellos antes vivían y todo eso, ve? Parece que han tenido alguna discusión, y alguna discusión han tenido o alguna pelea, entonces él, parece que la mató, porque ella tiene, está como la persona que está muerta, ve? Y él está así tapándose.”

Tristani: “Qué pasará después?”

Fernanda: “Que pasará después? Que venga la policía y se lo lleve...y lo encierran allá, lo encierre, y lo pongan a comer patitas con garbanzos.”

Tristani: “Patitas con garbanzos?”

Fernanda: “Ujú...Patitas con garbanzos.”



The interview continued along the same lines with this image:

Fernanda: “Well, here there is a girl—a girl? And a little old lady. And the little old lady has a shawl on her head, and the little old lady is all wrinkled. Well I don’t know what she’s explaining, but the girl has a fag’s face [she used *pato*, or duck, again to refer to a male homosexual], she has the face of a man—yes, she has the face of a man, and in the form of that, as if she had a wig.

Tristani: “And what happened before?”

Fernanda: “Of what happened before, I cannot say. I know that the old woman is smiling more than ever. God forbid that I should become an old woman.”

Tristani: “And after?”

Fernanda: Well, later, I don't know what will happen, it could be that the one I say looks like a man will marry another man, a *bubarrón* (defined by Fernanda within the text of *La Vida* as "a man who gives it to a faggot in the ass."). He will marry another man, you see?"³⁵

Alberto Tristani produced a psychological profile of Fernanda based upon these interviews. He pronounced that she:

tends to react to unstructured situations by limiting herself to the conventional aspects of the environment. Her attempts to view a situation from different perspectives is (sic) born more out of what is felt to be a negativistic reaction to demands than an intellectual attempt to consider more than one alternative. A highly impulse ridden fantasy life also prevents the utilization of what is felt to be a dull-normal to low-average intellectual capacity.

Further,

[Fernanda] may be described as a woman whose preoccupation with sexuality in a context of a hostile view of the male makes a mature heterosexual relationship highly improbable... Attempts to hide this view of life through evasion or feeble intellectualizations are short-lived and her crude, unadulterated sexuality, and hostility breaks through in a narcissistic exhibitionistic fashion. There is little question that [Fernanda] perceives males as impotent individuals who are ugly, empty creatures with little to offer her emotionally. It might be said that she feels that men are dressed-up

³⁵ Ibid. Spanish original: Fernanda: "Bueno aquí hay una muchacha, muchacha? Y una viejita...Aqui hay una señora con una viejita y la viejita tiene un paño en la cabeza y la viejita está toa arrugá, bueno yo no sé lo que está explicando, pero eso mujer tiene la cara de ser un pato porque tiene la cara de hombre, sí, tiene la cara de hombre y en la forma así, como que tiene peluca."

Tristani: "Y que sucedió antes?"

Fernanda: "De lo que sucedió antes no le puedo decir. Yo sé que la viejita está es, mas risueña que ná, hay Dios perdona que yo voy a ser vieja.

Tristani: "Y despues?"

Fernanda: "Bueno, después yo no sé que suceda puede ser que ese que yo digo que se parece a un hombre se case con otro hombre...un bubarrón. Se case con otro hombre, ve?"

For "bubarrón" quote, see Lewis, *La Vida*, 104.

penises...since she tends to seduce males on the one hand, and castrate them, on the other, she is forever in conflict with them...there are homosexual tendencies which would be consistent with the low concept she has of men, and at the same time, her identification with them.³⁶

Tristani's report on Fernanda was uniformly negative and focused solely on Fernanda's sexuality and supposed hostility towards men, alongside her reputedly low intelligence. Her responses to the TAT did rely upon very basic descriptions, and she turned the interview towards sex at every opportunity. Yet Tristani's report was undeniably degrading to Fernanda and was a simplistic portrait of a human being.

Other team members came to similar judgments; translator Muna Muñoz Lee offered that Fernanda was "so far from accepted feminine behavior that even her non-psychologically oriented relatives and neighbors say that she is like a man."³⁷ Fernanda herself made some outrageous comments about homosexuals, but at one point in the narrative of *La Vida*, she related an erotic lesbian vampire fantasy. This passage certainly reads like a narrative of repressed homosexual desires:

Fernanda, dropping her voice, said, 'Once, a long time ago, I had a strange dream about a lesbian. I dreamed I had gone into a big warehouse to see what they kept there. They closed the door and shut me in. I kept going farther in, crying, when suddenly a man appeared and invited me to—you know. I refused and kept going. Then a lesbian appeared and gave me the same invitation. I didn't want to, but then she turned into a vampire. She showed her fangs and something like horns. She said, 'if you won't let me do it, I'll suck your blood.' Then she came nearer and nearer and did everything she wanted to do with me. Next day I still felt the sensation of that woman's body lying on me.'³⁸

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Muna Muñoz Lee to Oscar Lewis, May 9, 1966. In Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 261.

³⁸ Ibid., 19.

Lewis did not make any derogatory statements about Fernanda's sexual behavior or questionable femininity. This might have been because her behavior was nothing new to him. In many ways, Fernanda resembled a type of woman described by Lewis amongst the Blackfoot Indian tribe of the North Piegan in his first published article, "Manly-Hearted Women among the North Piegan" (1941). Lewis described the manly-hearted women as "a small group of women who do not behave in the restricted manner of this tribe but who have a freedom and independence more like that of women in our own culture." These women were notable for their sexuality: "All manly-hearted women today are reputedly *ikitaki* (passionate women), and their sexual unconventionalities are the subject of much gossip. They are known to be more demonstrative, to take the male position in sexual intercourse..." Further, manly-hearted women were often known to move through several husbands in the course of their lives. Manly-hearted women were not, however, homosexual or transgendered. Rather, "The Piegan culture is a man's culture, and women who achieve distinction can do so only in terms of men's values..."³⁹

Like the manly-hearted woman, Fernanda moved through several marriages as the men around her failed to satisfy her in one way or another. In a sense, Fernanda appropriated the *machismo* ideal for herself. As men in a *machismo* society take pride in their ability to seduce women and then cast them away, so Fernanda took pride in her ability to do the same to men. Tristani took this characteristic as proof of psychosis, and suggestive of homosexuality. Fernanda viewed it as a positive part of her identity, even as a source of power and authority:

I would rather be a man than a woman. If God had made me a man I would have been the worst son of a great whore ever

³⁹ Oscar Lewis, "Manly-Hearted Women among the North Piegan," *American Anthropologist* 3, no.2 (1941); in Oscar Lewis, *Anthropological Essays* (New York: Random House, 1970), 213, 223, 227.

born. Not a woman would have escaped me. *Ave María!* I'd have a woman everywhere, and if they didn't give me what I wanted I'd kick my way in. That's why God made me a woman, a real bitch of one. I'm forty now and I've had six husbands, and if I want, I can have six more. I wipe my ass with men.⁴⁰

Fernanda was not claiming homosexuality here—rather, she was a straight woman who would rather have been a straight man, because of the increased power and prestige available. She was not transgendered either. She did not claim to be a man with a woman's body, but rather to be a powerful woman who would have been even more so if she had been a man. The passage, admittedly, is hardly an enlightened treatise on gender equality or personal kindness, but it is notable that Fernanda described herself as a feminine version of the macho ideal. Fernanda was aware of her sexual power over men. Erasmo fell in love with Fernanda—their recollections on why differed. Fernanda claimed that Erasmo tailed her around for months enduring insults and rejections from her. Why did Erasmo fall for Fernanda? In her words: “Men become infatuated with a woman because she has suction in her cunt. I have that attraction, see? That's why men fall in love with me and never want to leave me. I can't help it. It's the suction that holds a man. That's what happened to Erasmo.”⁴¹

To get a sense of where Lewis developed his own understanding of homosexuality, it is instructive to return to the work of two of his teachers, Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton. Their writing shows that anthropology had a long-standing tradition of tolerance for homosexuality. Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* discussed homosexuality with a surprising frankness. Benedict believed that homosexuality was an innate characteristic of some

⁴⁰ Lewis, *La Vida*, 27.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

people. Psychiatric troubles around homosexuality arose when societies considered it to be “categorically abnormal” and mistreated homosexuals. Benedict described other cultures that accepted or even valorized homosexuality. The “Greece of Plato’s Republic,” for example, believed in the “honourable estate of homosexuality.” The *berdache* (men who assumed female roles and styles of dress) of several American Indian tribes were understood to be valuable members of their society. Some tribes even considered them to be “exceptionally able” because they excelled at both male and female tasks. Other tribes were not so charitable towards them, and oftentimes male lovers of the *berdache* were viewed as weak and suspect men. Yet generally the *berdache* were accepted: “men who have chosen openly to assume women’s dress have the same chance as any other persons to establish themselves as functioning members of society...If they have native ability, they can give it scope; if they are weak creatures, they fail in terms of their weakness of character, not in terms of their inversion.”⁴²

Benedict also described the psychiatric calamity that transpired when homosexuality was vilified by a society. Western societies, Benedict argued, were especially culpable in suppressing and condemning homosexuality: “Western civilization tends to regard even a mild homosexual as an abnormal.” Gay people were not predisposed to psychiatric troubles, but if their nature was held as immoral, and society treated them as deviants, psychiatric problems would inevitably arise:

When the homosexual response is regarded as a perversion, however, the invert is immediately exposed to all the conflicts to which aberrants are always exposed. His guilt, his sense of inadequacy, his failures, are consequences of the disrepute which social tradition visits upon him, and few people can achieve a satisfactory life unsupported by the standards of

⁴² Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934), 262-265, quotations from 262-263, 264. Invert was commonly used as a word for a homosexual in the 1930s.

their society. The adjustments that society demands of them would strain any man's vitality, and the consequences of this conflict we identify with their homosexuality.⁴³

Homosexuality was an important topic for Linton as well. In a series of lectures, Linton included homosexuality in his discussion of hysteria, though he allowed that it “cannot be considered a psychological aberration fully comparable to neuroses and psychoses, since it is institutionalized in many societies.” He described how men in some societies adopted transvestitism, feminine roles and patterns of speech and dress, and in rare cases how women adopted masculine roles, citing Lewis's manly-hearted women. Hysteria, argued Linton, could be distinguished from more serious mental conditions like psychoses in that hysteria was a method for an individual to gain “ego gratification.” It was a learned performance that an individual could use to react to an otherwise unsatisfactory situation. Thus among the Tanala people of Madagascar, transvestites came from the ranks of younger sons within families, and found in the practice an “out” when their egos were unsatisfied due to domination by their fathers and older brothers. Regarding homosexuality itself, Linton pointed to ancient Greece, where adolescent homosexuality was culturally accepted, even lauded and therefore was not damaging to its participants.⁴⁴

Lewis himself was curiously silent on the role of sexual identity in the personalities of the Ríos family. Lewis was not the sort to judge a woman as a closeted lesbian or transsexual merely because she acted in unconventional ways. To Lewis's credit, this was reflected in the description of the Ríos family and in his description of the culture of poverty. Lewis rejected the judgments of the psychological professionals on the staff, and he did not describe homosexuality as a vice or mental illness, although “a confusion of

⁴³ Ibid., 265.

⁴⁴ Ralph Linton, *Culture and Mental Disorders*, (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1956), 64-132, *passim*. Quote from 101.

sexual identification” made it into his list of traits.⁴⁵ Promiscuity did not appear on his trait list, though Lewis mentioned it in the *Harper’s* Gabi article. Although he showed their sexuality, Lewis did not claim that the Ríos family was sexually immoral.

Lewis and his research assistants debated the meaning of the psychological tests for Puerto Rican identity. Carolina Luján, whom Lewis met while working with the Asociación Psicoanalítica Mexicana on the psychological makeup of the poor in Mexican society, became his chief psychological interpreter. Luján postulated that the culture of poverty was defined, psychologically, by “emotional and intellectual immaturity,” and since these traits could “be equated to psychopathology, psychopathology [was] endemic among the drastically poor.” Several of the psychological traits of the culture of poverty probably came from Luján, including the “immediate satisfaction of instinctual needs,” “a lack of foresight,” “a ‘present time’ organization with little capacity for long-time planning and objectives”, and “concretistic” thinking with “very limited conceptual abilities.”⁴⁶

Luján did not originally accompany Lewis and his researchers to Puerto Rico and New York City, nor did she conduct the TAT and Rorschach tests on the Ríos family. Luján took Tristani’s individual analyses of the tests and made collective judgments about the psychology of the Puerto Rican poor. She wrote that “the Puerto Rican people of the culture of poverty, unlike the Mexicans, are essentially not depressives. They have never received enough love as infants and children to produce depression.” Puerto Ricans were “closer to the schizoid pole of the continuum.” After Muna Muñoz Lee protested to Lewis that Fernanda was actually rather caring and generous in many aspects of her life, and hardly a “schizoid,” Luján personally administered a set of projective tests for Fernanda, and found

⁴⁵ It is unclear what Lewis meant by “confusion of sexual identification.” He did not claim that this meant homosexuality, though it might have. It might also have signified the repressed sexual personality described by Benedict in *Patterns of Culture*, to mean a person whose public sexual identity was at odds with his true nature.

⁴⁶ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 64-68.

her (as Lewis related to Muñoz Lee), “even more ‘psychotic’ than we believed her to be.” Luján claimed that the desperately poor tolerated the insane in their midst more than did the middle class. But that did not make for a saner world: “The fact that they are out in the world in a tolerant environment may allow them to function apparently better than in an institution, but it doesn’t make them any less psychotic.”⁴⁷

Tristani argued that poverty and the physical environment of the poor neighborhood were brutalizing. This led to a life that was geared towards satisfying purely biological functions. The world of the “ghetto” was “economically, physically, emotionally, socially, culturally, and morally deprived.” This led the inhabitants to:

live a life where biological needs are primary, that is to eat, to drink (water, beer, and rum), to engage in sexual relations, to express aggression...this biological orientation could be considered ‘normal’ under these circumstances...if an individual’s life is based on values more materialistic and biological and less human because he lives in a crude, hard, and poor environment, it is to be expected that he also will be crude, hard, and impoverished.⁴⁸

Tristani held up high culture as the missing ingredient in the lives of the poor. “In order that an individual may be able to appreciate the significance of a good book, a Casals Festival, a good play, a good painting, it is necessary to remove him from his physically impoverished [sic] environment, and gradually educate him regarding significant social and cultural values.” Tristani went so far as to claim the existence of a continuum “between the rich and the poor, between the slums and society, between the moral and immoral, between the human and subhuman animal....”⁴⁹ This was printed publicly during the furor over the book.

⁴⁷ Oscar Lewis to Muna Muñoz Lee, May 24, 1965; Oscar Lewis to Muna Muñoz Lee, June 5, 1965; Carolina Luján to Oscar Lewis, June 25, 1965. Reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 245-251.

⁴⁸ Alberto D. Tristani, editorial in *The San Juan Star*, December 16, 1966, 47.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Lewis was unmoved. He grew more doubtful of the psychological analyses as they became more pessimistic. He wrote, "I have found the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test useful but by no means essential to the kind of work I have been doing. Indeed I have come to the conclusion that our concepts of mental health are thoroughly middle class and therefore of limited value for cross cultural analysis."⁵⁰ Whereas Luján argued that the poor experienced mental health problems disproportionately because of their poverty, Lewis claimed that middle class professionals disproportionately diagnosed the poor as insane because of their own class biases. Lewis returned to his understanding of the poor as people who persevered despite their problems. He protested to Luján that her judgments were too harsh, but only won a concession from her that Soledad and Fernanda were "near psychotics" instead of full-blown ones. They were "at home with their psychosis. And they have not given up, they are still searching, struggling, maintaining themselves in a hostile world against impossible odds."⁵¹

Lewis's analysis in *La Vida* came out of this debate. Lewis's take on Puerto Ricans and Mexicans differed from Luján's, but her influence was evident. Puerto Ricans were not introspective enough to be depressed:

One of the most striking differences between our material on Puerto Ricans and our material on Mexicans of the same socioeconomic level, both urban, is what I would call a much greater thinness of content. The Puerto Ricans are less capable of introspection, of looking into themselves, than are the Mexicans.⁵²

For Lewis, the life of a poor Puerto Rican was a life lived on the surface, a life of action and not of reflection. Absent depression-inducing introspection, the Puerto Rican poor turned to an adventurous, carefree lifestyle:

⁵⁰ Oscar Lewis to Kenneth Brown, July 2, 1965. As reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 252.

⁵¹ Carolina Luján to Oscar Lewis, January 25, 1966. As reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 256-257.

⁵² Joseph Finney, ed., *Culture Change*, 166.

The people in this book, like most of the other Puerto Rican slum dwellers I have studied, show a great zest for life, especially for sex, and a need for excitement, new experiences, and adventures. Theirs is an expressive style of life. They value acting out more than thinking out, self-expression more than self-constraint, pleasure more than productivity, spending more than saving...⁵³

The majority of Lewis's work occurred before the 1960s women's rights movement and its accompanying scholarship on gender issues, but family structure was central to his thought. He made surprisingly little analysis of family and gender beyond simple observations of family patterns, however. One reason that some might see Lewis's work as conservative, or even reactionary, is that it seemed to anticipate a later backlash against feminism. It was difficult, after all, to include the matrifocal household as a trait of the culture of poverty, and then not see it as a deviant form of family organization. Likewise, Lewis might raise some eyebrows with his claim that consensual and temporary unions tended to perpetuate the culture of poverty, but he did not advocate a return to traditional family forms or to traditional gender relations.

Lewis did not articulate a masculinist understanding of the culture of poverty either, but others made that leap. DeVos said at the 1965 Kentucky conference: "What is poverty? I define poverty as a loss of social role. What goes on in these situations is that the adult male doesn't have a role. The women don't have the problem, because they pretty much make their role as homemaker." Joseph Finney rephrased for him, "You mean that what characterizes the culture of poverty is that the adult man doesn't have a useful role in which he can respect himself and expect other people to respect him."⁵⁴ In a similar vein, in

⁵³ Lewis, *La Vida*, xxvi.

⁵⁴ Joseph Finney, ed., *Culture Change*, 143.

La Vida, Lewis turned towards a gendered understanding of the culture of poverty. As usual, there was a comparison to gender in Mexico.

The women in this book show more aggressiveness and a greater violence of language and behavior than the men. The women are more demanding and less giving and have much less of a martyr complex than the Mexican women I have studied. In the Ríos family it is the women who take the initiative in breaking up the marriages. They call the police during family quarrels and take their husbands into court for nonsupport of the children. Indeed, a great deal of the aggressiveness of the women is directed against men. The women continually deprecate them and characterize them as inconsiderate, irresponsible, untrustworthy and exploitative. The women teach children to depend upon the mother and to distrust men.⁵⁵

According to Lewis, women in the Ríos family were domineering, controlling, and dismissive of men, but this was not true of the culture of poverty generally. It was specific to Puerto Rico and to the Ríos family.

The role of women within Puerto Rico was changing, argued Lewis. It “reflects the general trend toward the greater freedom and independence of women which has accompanied the increasing urbanization, industrialization, and Americanization of Puerto Rico.” The culture of Puerto Rico emphasized submission for women, but the women in the Ríos family were not submissive. Changes in society, and their “experience as heads of matrifocal households,” caused them to reject the submissive role and to “express their independence” in “bizarre ways.” This caused “problems in their marital relations.”⁵⁶ Puerto Rican men were “more passive, dependent and depressed than the women.” They sought family stability while women often sought to break up families. In comparison with

⁵⁵ Lewis, *La Vida*, xxvii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

Mexican men, Puerto Rican men were “less stable, less responsible, and except when goaded, less concerned with *machismo*.”⁵⁷

Lewis traced this to the nature of Latin American family organization:

I think that all the societies in Latin America, even in the culture of poverty, have a full patriarchal ideology, while the reality is matrifocal. It's not that men are demeaned, it's just that husbands are especially demeaned...As a matter of fact, I can't conceive of a true culture of poverty developing in what we anthropologists would call a true matrilineal system. I don't know of any example of a culture of poverty in anything but a bilateral family system.⁵⁸

Lewis's thoughts on gender and poverty, however, remained raw and unexplored.

A few Puerto Rican academics expressed concerns about the manuscript before its publication. Celeste Benítez de Rexach of the Universidad de Puerto Rico at Humacao, who had connected Lewis with the social workers who suggested families for his research, wondered about the extreme language of some of the interviewees. She noted that one of the subjects told the interviewer that she thoroughly cleaned her house before the interviewers came. Benítez theorized that she must also have prepared herself for the interview: “I am troubled...by the question of spontaneity...the doubt arises whether the book really is a section of the life of these people, or rather the way in which they present it to a middle-class audience (the interviewer, the social worker).” Benítez speculated that the subjects of the book may have intentionally used coarse language and discussed their sexuality to shock the interviewers: “One senses a marked hostility on the part of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., xxvii.

⁵⁸ Joseph Finney, ed., *Culture Change*, 171.

women speakers toward the interviewer...It is as if they were thinking, ‘well as long as I am—or he thinks I am—a social derelict, let me play the part to the hilt.’”⁵⁹

Benítez also distrusted the poor, and wondered if “honesty and sincerity are values absent from the *weltanschauung* of poverty.” Benítez did see some value to the book, hoping that it would shock Puerto Ricans into action to ameliorate the conditions of the poor. She also congratulated Lewis for having the bravery to publish the book in all of its naked vulgarity. Lewis rejected Benítez’s criticism. Referring to her comment that the people in the Ríos family had played the part of social derelict “to the hilt” to shock the interviewers, Lewis wrote that her comment “reflects a thorough misunderstanding of the nature of the field work and of the quality of my relations with the people that I studied...I do not think of the Ríos family as ‘social derelicts,’ but apparently you do. Had I approached them with your own middle-class biases, I assure you that I never could have obtained the intimate data of *La Vida*.”⁶⁰

Benítez’s criticism could be raised of any ethnographic project: how can the reader be sure that the author has gained the trust of his subjects and that the ethnography may be judged confidently as a transparent portrait of their lives? To dissect the construction of the narrative is one thing, but Benítez’s criticism ran deeper. How can we trust that the Ríos family exposed their true selves to people whom they may not have fully trusted or accepted? Lewis did not develop the depth of friendship or rapport with the Ríos family that he had with the Sanchez family.

⁵⁹ Celeste Benítez de Rexach to Oscar Lewis, December 15, 1966. Oscar Lewis papers, Box 60.

⁶⁰ Celeste Benítez de Rexach to Oscar Lewis, December 15, 1966, Oscar Lewis to Celeste Benítez de Rexach, January 20, 1967. Oscar Lewis papers, Box 60.

Lewis had a genuinely sympathetic view of prostitutes and their struggles. But this does not prove that his subjects were honest in their interviews. Lewis and Butterworth were white, mainland American, middle-class, and native English speakers. What that may have meant to the way that the Ríos family interacted with Lewis and his team can only be a matter for speculation. Much of the most salacious material in *La Vida* came from sessions with native Spanish speakers, such as Tata's interviews with Gabi and Tristani's TAT on Fernanda. The TATs that Lewis performed were not nearly so sexual. When Felícita took the TAT with Lewis, she said of the picture of the boy with the violin:

O.K. this child...I see he's thinking of something about music because he's watching this violin...and I suppose that he is imagining to himself a melody to play on the violin. That is the only thing that I see.⁶¹

Lewis did not ask any follow-up questions, and Felícita's normal, if uninspired, answer was left to stand.

Lewis's interview with Felícita was far less graphic, comical, and sexual than Tristani's interview with Fernanda. Obviously, Felícita and Fernanda were different people who would give different responses on standardized tests, though of all the major characters in *La Vida*, Felícita and Fernanda were the most consistently sexual and profane. Lewis's papers don't contain any TATs administered by different researchers on the same subject, so no direct comparison is possible. Tristani and Lewis were also very different people. Tristani, a native Spanish speaker, came from a Puerto Rican professional class—and clearly had some negative thoughts about the poor that may have shown through in his demeanor. Lewis spoke Spanish fluently—albeit with a discernible accent—

⁶¹ “[Felícita Ríos] T.A.T.,” Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 33. Spanish Original: Bueno, pues este niño...yo veo aquí que el está pensando como algo de música porque está mirando ese violín...y supongo que está imaginándose alguna melodía pal entonarla en el violín. Es lo único que yo veo.

and was also a professional, but from a different discipline. If some of Lewis's generalizations about the poor appear judgmental, he genuinely liked his subjects on a personal level, and perhaps he elicited less outrageous testimony from them. Benítez de Rexach's comment that the interview subject might have been playing the part of social derelict to the hilt to shock and anger the interviewer certainly seems plausible in reading Tristani's interviews with Fernanda.

How much of *La Vida* was true, and how much was fiction? Who was creating the story, the researchers or the researched? A relatively new literature from scholars like James Clifford addresses these questions of representation in ethnography. Clifford argues in his seminal work, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), that "Ethnographic texts are orchestrations of multivocal exchanges occurring in politically charged situations. The subjectivities produced in these often unequal exchanges—whether of "natives" or of visiting participant observers—are constructed domains of truth, serious fictions."⁶²

This might seem at odds with what has been presented here regarding Lewis and the authorship of *La Vida*. This description of the writing process has sought to demonstrate that Lewis represented the Ríos family with considerable fidelity to the truth, even as this truth inevitably was shaped by the interviewing and editing processes. Clifford wrote an expanded segment on this question of fiction in an earlier work, and gave a more complete idea of his perspective:

To call ethnographies fictions may raise empiricist hackles.
But the word as commonly used in recent textual theory has
lost its connotation of falsehood, of something merely opposed

⁶² James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 10.

to truth. It suggests the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned,’ the principal burden of the word’s Latin root, *fingere*. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely of making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real...social scientists have recently come to view good ethnographies as “true fictions,” but usually at the cost of weakening the oxymoron, reducing it to the banal claim that all truths are constructed.⁶³

Clifford does not claim that ethnography is fake, but that there are elements within it that are made up. But it can still maintain aspects of accuracy, of truth, even amongst interpretation and misinterpretation, representation and misrepresentation, narrative construction, and editing.

The gathering of data is not a one-way street. Clifford relates the story of Renato Rosaldo, who conducted a study of the Ilongot tribe of the Philippines. During months of lukewarm interviews, the Ilongot bombarded Rosaldo with what he initially considered to be dull tribal legends. Eventually Rosaldo recognized the importance of the legends, and they formed the basis of his published ethnography. “Who,” asks Clifford, recounting the tale, “is actually the author of field notes?” He adds, “indigenous control over knowledge gained in the field can be considerable, and even determining.”⁶⁴ This statement matches Benítez de Rexach’s concerns about Lewis’s work. Who, she was asking, was really controlling these interviews? Did the Ríos family “make up” part of the story?

Clifford’s work has launched a debate about the nature of ethnography. Lewis has not been mentioned, but his work is pertinent in three salient ways. First, his tape-

⁶³ James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 6.

⁶⁴ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 45.

recorder method represented a high order of scientism. Lewis maintained that the narrative in his books was indisputable because he had the tapes. Lewis portrayed informants in their own words. He attempted to solidify the most tenuous link in the ethnographic claim to scientific knowledge by introducing a technique that removed observer bias and interpretation from the representation of anthropological subjects. This chapter complicates that claim, but the claim itself remains important.

Scientism, of course, was also present in the introductions to Lewis's works, especially in *La Vida*. Lewis's use of material culture analyses, standardized questionnaires, and statistical evidence gave him ammunition to claim that his work was truly scientific, that it represented a higher degree of ethnographic truth because it was based on hard facts. But the psychological portrait of the Ríos family was subjective, as evidenced by the divergent views of Lewis and his researchers. Similarly, the culture of poverty, especially the trait list, ultimately was based on Lewis's impressionistic views about the lives of the poor culled from his years spent living and working in the poorest neighborhoods of the Western Hemisphere. In *Children of Sanchez*, Lewis had acknowledged this, admitting that his method was a combination of art and science, of intuition and fact.⁶⁵ In *La Vida*, he made no such qualifying statements, and presented his method as firmly scientific.

In Tezpotlán, Lewis carried out one of the first "re-studies" in the history of anthropology. Lewis's Tezpotlán study contradicted Redfield's. Two professional anthropologists studied a small Mexican village and came away with two very different interpretations of the social structure, psychology, and cultural sensibilities of that village. This laid bare the entire problem of science and interpretation within anthropology. It's

⁶⁵ Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), xxi.

possible that the difference came from predisposition and point of view, as Margaret Mead claimed, but Lewis didn't see it this way. To him, good ethnography was good science; bad ethnography was bad science. Lewis argued for his interpretation on the ground of superior empirical knowledge. It was not a question of whether Redfield had uncovered a sort of truth that differed from what Lewis had found. Rather, Redfield's romanticism, Lewis argued, had led him to misrepresent the culture of Tezpotlán.

Finally, Lewis was one of the few ethnographers who were read widely by the public in the 1950s and 1960s. This led fellow anthropologists to marginalize him somewhat, but still, like his teacher Ruth Benedict and fellow Columbia graduate Margaret Mead, he was bringing anthropology to the masses. Intellectuals, government workers, political activists, and the general public read Lewis. Insofar as there was a sense outside the discipline itself about the scientific possibilities of anthropology, Lewis was one of the most important figures. These questions of method and representation arose as academics and policy makers, intellectuals, and the general public began debating the meaning of *La Vida* and the validity of the culture of poverty.

Chapter Four

“The data we have on the [Ríos] family and other families can only be understood in the light of Puerto Rican history and it seems to me that it is an unusually sad history, a history of isolation and abandonment, a history with few glorious moments.”¹

--Oscar Lewis to Muna Muñoz Lee, 1965

La Vida sparked a debate amongst Puerto Rican intellectuals about the nature of Puerto Rican national identity, the colonial relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, and the meaning of Puerto Rican history. In *La Vida*, Lewis claimed that there were significant differences between the Puerto Rican poor and the poor from other regions. For Lewis, the reason was historical; he saw Puerto Rico as having a failed nationalism, and Puerto Rican citizens as having a flawed historical consciousness. Comparing Puerto Rico with Mexico, Lewis argued that “Puerto Ric[ans] as a people were more broken by the Conquest and the colonial period than was Mexico and somehow this has left a distinctive mark on the family and personal lives of many of its people, especially the poorest segments who as usual, have suffered the most.”²

The Puerto Rican political situation loomed large as Lewis was researching and writing his book. Lewis eventually cast his lot with the *independentistas* (Puerto Ricans

¹ Oscar Lewis to Muna Muñoz Lee, May 24, 1965, as quoted in Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Façade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 245.

² *Ibid.*

who advocated total independence from the United States); his correspondence with various *independentistas* and their defense of his work in the Puerto Rican press is one of the more surprising and illuminating stories from *La Vida*. There is substantial literature on the history of Puerto Rican nationalism. What follows is a brief summary, to situate the reader in the political struggles that Lewis got involved in when he went to Puerto Rico.

Current Puerto Rican historians acknowledge that most Puerto Ricans initially were supportive of the American conquest of the island in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. Puerto Ricans had been frustrated by Spanish colonial rule and the slow progress towards meaningful representation. Spain had made a series of political concessions to Puerto Rico in 1897, granting representation in the Spanish court and a limited amount of autonomy, in an attempt to maintain control over one of the few remnants of its once mighty empire. There was little open revolt against Spanish rule in Puerto Rico, but there was not much enthusiastic support for the Spanish, either. Later glorification of the era of Spanish rule, reflects, in part, an attempt to resurrect a nationalist understanding of Puerto Rican history that stresses its essential Spanish nature in contradistinction to mainland American English-speaking identity.

Puerto Rican enthusiasm for American intervention faded quickly, however. American generals and officials made clear that Puerto Rico was not to be made independent. American presidents appointed imperious and incompetent governors who had little knowledge of Puerto Rico and sometimes spoke Spanish haltingly, or not at all. American policy was aimed at “Americanizing” the island. Policies that made English the official language of instruction in schools especially angered Puerto Ricans.

The Puerto Rican economy began a dramatic shift as well. Open access to the enormous mainland American market brought agricultural consolidation. American capitalists purchased large pieces of Puerto Rico's most productive land. Sugar and tobacco planters began producing larger crops for export, and the island began purchasing American manufactured goods. Large sugar growers held disproportionate power in the island. Plantation workers received very low wages and had little organization. Most of the island's residents spent the first few decades of American rule in crushing poverty without political representation or significant rights.³

The Puerto Rican independence movement began here, and the Spanish language became one marker of a distinctive Puerto Rican identity. This had not been a factor, for obvious reasons, under Spanish rule. Spanish colonial rule had been marked by a slow understanding of difference and occasional resentment between the *peninsulares* (peninsular Spanish authorities), and the *criollos* (creole Puerto Rican residents). American imperial rule accelerated the development of a distinctive Puerto Rican identity, from which an independence movement would spring. American observers noticed the failure of the Americanization project and the simultaneous formation of Puerto Rican national culture. One observer, Victor Clark, had predicted in 1899 that Puerto Ricans were "plastic and malleable" and that the United States could shape them easily in the American mold. In the late 1920s, he returned to the island and described Puerto Rico as "vividly conscious of its individuality."⁴

³ Gordon K. Lewis, *Freedom and Power in the Caribbean* (New York: MR Press, 1963), *passim*. César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), *passim*.

⁴ Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 76.

There have been numerous divisions and schisms within the Puerto Rican independence movement, but two main branches dominate. The first, founded by Luis Muñoz Rivera, his son, Luis Muñoz Marín, and others, grew into the *Partido Popular Democrático de Puerto Rico*, or PPD. Muñoz Marín was famous not only as a political leader, but also as a poet. His artistic endeavors exemplified the PPD *autonomista* ideology that stressed the cultural achievements and distinctiveness of Puerto Ricans, but accepted as a political reality that Puerto Rico would remain within the sphere of the United States. The PPD dominated Puerto Rican politics from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The second, inspired by Pedro Albizu Campos, was for those independence activists who insisted on a fully independent Puerto Rico. Followers of this branch of nationalism are referred to as nationalists or as *independentistas*. Albizu Campos remains a legendary figure within Puerto Rico. Albizu Campos was Afro-Rican, born to very meager circumstances. He went to Harvard University and trained as a lawyer. He served as a lieutenant in the US Army during World War I. Afterward, he returned to Puerto Rico and became an independence activist.

The Puerto Rican nationalist movement in the 1960s was at a nadir in terms of electoral viability, yet the movement still held sway over many intellectuals, journalists, and artists. The PPD had been in power continuously since the 1930s. The PPD had succeeded in achieving real material gains for Puerto Ricans. Muñoz Marín had aligned himself closely with the Democratic Party during the Franklin Roosevelt years. Puerto Rico took part in the New Deal and Puerto Ricans received relief alongside mainland Americans impoverished during the Great Depression. Vito Marcantonio, congressman from New York City, whose district included the burgeoning Puerto Rican community in Spanish Harlem, served as an important political ally. The appointed governors had been abolished;

Muñoz Marín became the island's first democratically elected governor, in 1948. The Constitution of 1958 formalized the island's Commonwealth status.

The PPD had undertaken a total reformation of Puerto Rican society through Operation Bootstrap. The program was a crash-course in industrialization, modernization, and urbanization. American employers came to Puerto Rico in search of cheap labor as well as a locale that provided for easy re-export to the United States consumer market. Operation Bootstrap dramatically increased Puerto Rico's economic output, but left a great deal of the long-existing economic inequality and overpopulation untouched. It also brought a backlash amongst some, many of whom drifted towards the *independentista* political banner. The island's agricultural lands continued to be concentrated in the hands of large growers, further increasing the ranks of the landless poor. The poor went to work in the new factories, moved to shantytowns in San Juan, and migrated to the mainland United States. Puerto Rican migration to the United States was made easier as the Jones Act of 1917 made Puerto Ricans into United States citizens. The passage of the National Origins Act of 1924 sharply curtailed immigration into the United States, but Puerto Ricans could still come. Migrants to the mainland US frequently returned to Puerto Rico, and also sent money back to relatives in Puerto Rico.

Independentistas looked at the transformations of Puerto Rico critically. They argued that PPD leaders had given up on Puerto Rican independence, and replaced it with the hollow goal of cultural autonomism. Even the economic gains brought scorn from some nationalists. A few Puerto Ricans felt that the soul of Puerto Rico was being lost during modernization. Nationalist literary figure Nilita Vientos Gaston complained that the modern world measured progress solely in economic terms, and society became "a mere

conglomerate of producers and consumers.”⁵ Although nationalists were in the minority, the *independentista* movement found fertile ground in the migrant population in the 1960s, particularly amongst the working class in New York City, and many prominent intellectuals and artists in Puerto Rico proper were still *independentistas*. The faculty and student body at the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, largest and oldest university on the island, were strongly influenced by nationalist sentiments.

Many of Lewis’s closest Puerto Rican friends and confidants were *independentista*, and they helped to shape his interpretations of Puerto Rican history, which figured prominently in his anthropological understanding of the character of Puerto Rican poverty. In his interpretation of the history of Puerto Rico, Lewis saw an unbroken line of colonial domination: near complete destruction of the indigenous inhabitants of Puerto Rico by the invading Spanish, followed by colonial domination over the creole and mestizo populace of Spanish Puerto Rico, a slave regime without significant uprisings or revolts, followed by American domination after the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish American war. Puerto Ricans in the culture of poverty were especially acquiescent.⁶

Lewis bemoaned the admixture of Spanish and English within popular Puerto Rican Spanish. He cited Puerto Rican leaders and intellectuals who saw the loss of the Spanish language as “cultural breakdown” of “the single most important basis of Puerto Rican cultural identity.” Words and phrases like “el hamburger, el sandwich, lonchea [to eat lunch], el coat, la T-shirt, el jacket,” and “toma la vida easy muchacha, [take life easy, girl]” signified the cultural weakness of Puerto Ricans.⁷ This was not isolated to the poor. Lewis

⁵ As cited in Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century...* 216.

⁶ Rigdon, *The Culture Façade...*, 81-82, 241-245.

⁷ Oscar Lewis, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty, San Juan and New York* (New York: Random House, 1966), xvii-xviii.

claimed that no social class in Puerto Rico could easily find an identity, because “the mixture of Spanish and English is fantastic.”⁸

In addition, argued Lewis, Puerto Ricans were passive. In a series of plays, essays, and short stories on Puerto Ricans, René Marqués depicted Puerto Ricans as docile.⁹ Lewis wrote to Marqués in 1966 that authors like Marqués had produced the best literature on life in urban slums, far exceeding what social scientists had written. Lewis took the docility that Marqués proposed and applied it as an historical explanation. Lewis wrote Marqués:

You may be interested to know that I have contrasted your conception of the docile Puerto Rican as a possible explanation for the lack of a mass revolutionary movement in Puerto Rican history with the geographical determinist explanation given some time ago by Luis Muñoz Marín who, in comparing Cuba and Puerto Rico, suggested that the Puerto Ricans never developed a successful revolutionary movement against Spain because Puerto Rico was so small and there was no place to hide.¹⁰

Here, Lewis began to drift into thinking that would lead him into controversy. Lewis had maintained that the culture of poverty operated independently from race or ethnicity. On his first visit to Puerto Rico, however, Lewis began to perceive something different about Puerto Ricans:

I have just returned from a two week trip to Puerto Rico and was impressed by the startling differences between Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. It seemed to me that Puerto Ricans were less intense, more friendly, and perhaps also more docile than Mexicans...Some of the Puerto Rican intellectuals that I met are top flight people...and they are much concerned about the lack of a sense of history and the lack of a sense of

⁸ Joseph Finney, ed., *Culture Change, Mental Health, and Poverty* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), 169.

⁹ René Marqués, *La Carreta: Drama en Tres Actos* (Rio Piedras: Editorial Cultural, 1983c), *The Docile Puerto Rican: Essays*, Barbara Aponte, trans. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976).

¹⁰ Oscar Lewis to René Marqués, May 17, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58.

identification, which is so characteristic of the Puerto Rican masses.”¹¹

Muna Muñoz Lee, daughter of Luis Muñoz Marín, worked as a translator on the project. Muñoz Lee and Lewis engaged in a spirited debate about the nature of Puerto Rican identity in the year preceding the publication of *La Vida*. Lewis began by comparing the history of the Spanish conquest in Mexico and Puerto Rico:

Of course, in my evaluation of some of the highlights of Puerto Rican history, I am comparing it with Mexico. The Mexicans had attained a much higher pre-Hispanic civilization than had Puerto Rico and the Mexicans fought the conquerors with greater zeal than the natives of Puerto Rico. Most urban slum dwellers of Mexico know about the great Cuahemec who fought against Cortez and gave his life in the struggle. I wonder how many Puerto Ricans know about their Indian heritage. In Mexico the Indian heritage has persisted and is a point of great national and personal pride [in] that it gives the people a sense of a great past, a sense of historic continuity which seems absent in Puerto Rico.

Next, Lewis turned to the era of colonization and independence:

For most Puerto Ricans whom I have studied history begins and ends with Muñoz Marín—and only a few recall Muñoz Rivera. Perhaps one of the greatest differences between Mexico and Puerto Rico can be seen in their very different reaction to oppression and exploitation. The Mexicans were fighters and revolutionaries. Their wars of Independence against Spain were bloody and prolonged and heroic. Father Hidalgo, Father Morales, Vicente Guerrero, those are names which continue to live in Mexico—even among the poor and illiterate. The Puerto Rican heroes, men like Betances, seem to have less heroic, less dramatic stature. In the 19th century, Puerto Ricans who tried to wrest a few concessions from Spain, who tried to get just a bit more autonomy for Puerto Rico are the heroes.

Last, Lewis compared the internal revolutionary struggles of the two nations. “And finally, Mexico has produced one of the great revolutions of the 20th century when it

¹¹ Oscar Lewis to Dr. Calixta Guiteras, February 7, 1963. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

overthrew Diaz and I don't see anything comparable in Puerto Rico even though I admire and applaud the great progress made since 1940.”¹²

Muñoz Lee disagreed with Lewis's view that Puerto Rican history was insufficiently anti-colonial. She corrected some of Lewis's historical interpretations. As with the American colonists, Puerto Ricans were the descendants of conquerors and slaves, and not of the conquered American Indians. “To attribute any deficiency in our personalities to lack of knowledge of our Indian background is equivalent to interpreting the personalities of New Yorkers on the basis of their ignorance of their ‘Indian background.’” The question of the African heritage of Puerto Ricans was much more germane, she argued. Puerto Ricans had, after all, engaged in slavery. “The treatment of both groups [Indians and Africans] is extremely significant to our history and, no doubt—but just how?—to our personality.”

Muñoz Lee also objected to Lewis's characterization of the political shifts of the last years of the Spanish imperial system in Puerto Rico:

What P.R. finally got from Spain, one year before the American conquest, was not a ‘wresting of a few more concessions’ nor a ‘bit more autonomy’ but full status as a Province of Spain, with representation in the *Cortes*. To call this a ‘bit more autonomy’ is like saying Hawaii and Alaska ‘wrested a bit more autonomy from the U.S.’ when they were made States of the Union.

Lewis's connection of Puerto Rican history to Puerto Rican family organization was ludicrous, wrote Muñoz Lee: “[I] don't really understand how the connections between having been an abandoned colony of Spain and having such a high incidence of maternal

¹² Oscar Lewis to Muna Muñoz Lee, May 24, 1965. As reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 245-246. Rigdon's book reproduces these letters; they are not available in Lewis's papers.

indifference and hostility in at least one group of our population can be worked out in detail.”¹³

Lewis brushed aside Muñoz Lee’s objection that Puerto Ricans were not meaningfully descended from Indians:

I agree that the absence of Indians in your population makes the question of the knowledge of the pre-Hispanic Indian background less germane in Puerto Rico than in Mexico. However, it does not really violate my point, namely that by comparison to Mexico, Puerto Ricans have less of a sense of historic continuity, their knowledge of history is more truncated and shallower.

Turning to slavery, Lewis again lamented the lack of revolt. The history of Puerto Rican slavery demonstrated further that Puerto Ricans were gradual rather than revolutionary. “I am now reading a history of slavery in P. R. which claims that even slavery was very mild, that emancipation was easy and without violence and the transition period peaceful and gradual. Were it not for the few nationalists we might conclude that gradualism was genetic to Puerto Ricans!” Lewis lamented that he wished he “knew what Puerto Rican Negroes were taught about their past, about Negro civilization in Africa,” and boasted about how African-Americans were being taught about the glorious civilizations of Africa. Lewis did acknowledge that his knowledge of Puerto Rican history was perhaps not as good that it ought to be and admitted that “I must do a great deal more reading on these matters before I go into print.”¹⁴

Muñoz Lee rejected Lewis’s commentary on Puerto Rican slavery. The comparison with mainland America was misguided and demonstrated Lewis’s ignorance of the ethnic makeup of Puerto Rico, as well as the different meaning of race in Puerto Rico:

¹³ Muna Muñoz Lee to Oscar Lewis, May 25, 1965. As reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 246-247.

¹⁴ Oscar Lewis to Muna Muñoz Lee, June 1, 1965, as reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 247-248.

A Puerto Rican would have spoken of what 'Puerto Ricans are taught about their Negro background.' A Puerto Rican without Negro blood must be a statistical rarity...It would never occur to anybody here, if they started to teach about African civilization...to think that only *one* group of the population would have an interest in it!

Muñoz Lee rebuked Lewis sarcastically for claiming that Puerto Rico's history was not bloody enough:

It is a pity and a crying shame that in P.R. 'even slavery was very mild...emancipation easy and without violence...the transition period peaceful and gradual.' We are bad masters, not being tyrannical enough; and bad slaves, never really (in spite of colonialism) having learned to be individually subservient enough. Think of all the fun we are missing now by not having made the institution of slavery all it ought to have been. But no matter, if we want excitement we can always take the next plane to Alabama.

Finally, Muñoz Lee quoted Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Adams in the years immediately preceding the American Revolution advocating gradual reform and the maintenance of ties with Britain. "The men seem to have been gradualists—obviously broken by colonialism. If Britain had granted a few reforms..there might not have been a revolution at all and the U.S. might be a Dominion, like Canada and Australia."¹⁵

Although Muñoz Lee had basically demolished his argument about the connection between Puerto Rico's history and the culture of poverty, Lewis repeated his ideas without significant modification in the introduction to *La Vida*. Lewis gave short shrift to the Puerto Rican struggle for autonomy from Spain, and to the real accomplishments of the Puerto Rican commonwealth. He remained wedded to his interpretation that the absence in Puerto Rico of a full scale revolution *a la* Mexico had led to a stunted Puerto Rican national identity. This limited and dismissive vision of Puerto Rican history would not

¹⁵ Muna Muñoz Lee to Oscar Lewis, June 4, 1965, as reprinted in Rigdon, *The Culture Façade*, 248-249.

serve Lewis well upon publication of the book. He had also alienated a potentially important ally. Muñoz Marín remained the symbolic leader of Puerto Rico and the PPD; his handpicked successor, Roberto Sánchez Vilella was in office during the research and publication of *La Vida*. The presence of Muñoz Marín's daughter on Lewis's research team could have been a feather in his cap, but Lewis ignored Muñoz Lee's criticisms.

The shadow of the Cuban Revolution hung over Lewis's Puerto Rico project, and he became interested in comparing the histories of the two islands. Lewis made a brief visit to Cuba in 1947, and returned following Castro's revolution. Lewis admired the role of the poor in the Revolution. "It is my impression that the Cuban regime—unlike Marx and Engels—did not write off the so-called lumpen proletariat as an inherently reactionary and anti-revolutionary force, but rather saw its revolutionary potential and tried to utilize it."¹⁶

Lewis met Fidel Castro in March 1968, while conducting research in Cuba. Castro had read some of Lewis's early work and been impressed by it:

I spent nine hours with Fidel Castro and, of course, this was the highlight of my trip. I was surprised, but pleased, by his intimate knowledge about my book, *The Children of Sanchez*. I felt that he knew it better than most of my own colleagues in anthropology. He was also very much interested in my other work, especially my work in India and the caste system.¹⁷

In a letter to fellow anthropologist Marvin Harris, Lewis speculated about Castro's theories of revolution:

Fidel Castro generally distinguishes between what he calls the objective and subjective conditions necessary for a successful revolution. The objective conditions stated by Castro are very similar to those enumerated by Lenin. However under subjective conditions he stresses the importance of

¹⁶ Lewis, *La Vida*, xlix-l. The results of the Cuba study were published by one of Lewis's graduate students years later: Douglas Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

¹⁷ Oscar Lewis to Manuel Maldonado-Denis, March 28, 1968. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58.

revolutionary leadership, courage, and the readiness of people to give their lives in aggressive and violent attacks against the existing regime.

Lewis was interested in how Castro's theories might apply to Puerto Rico:

The environmental, technological, and economic conditions in Cuba and Puerto Rico seem to me to have been remarkably similar during the nineteenth century when both were colonies of Spain. How then can we explain the presence of a revolutionary tradition in Cuba and the absence of one in Puerto Rico? When I asked Fidel Castro this question, he said it was simply historical accident that there were some courageous men in Cuba who decided to fight against Spain and that their struggle then established a tradition which clearly was a deterministic factor in the evolution of the Castro approach.

Castro's answer did not satisfy Lewis, however, and he theorized that personality traits, such as those identified by his intensive case studies of families, might be important in understanding the formation of revolutionary potential in individuals.¹⁸ As he conducted his Puerto Rican research, Lewis would claim to discover linkages between the Puerto Rican family, the psyche of the individual Puerto Rican, the history of Puerto Rico, and the lack of what Lewis saw as a satisfactory revolutionary tradition.

In the introduction to *La Vida*, Lewis quoted Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, agreeing with Fanon that if a revolution were to come in the colonial world, it would come from the desperately poor of the shanty towns. For Fanon, the urban poor, the "lumpen proletariat," far from being some counter-revolutionary force as envisioned by Marx, would be a revolutionary force *par excellence*. These urban revolutionaries, armed with empty bellies, and isolated from old ties of "tribe and clan," would become the

¹⁸ Oscar Lewis to Marvin Harris, September 12, 1969. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 57.

revolutionary spearhead to de-colonize the world.¹⁹ This had not been the case, however, with Lewis's subjects in the Puerto Rico study. Most of the families in the larger sample for *La Vida* had been politically conservative. Half were supporters of the Republican Statehood Party (which was generally seen as the conservative party in Puerto Rican politics). The political consciousness of the poor, argued Lewis, was historically contingent:

In a country like Algeria, which was fighting for its independence, the lumpen proletariat was drawn into the struggle and became a vital force. However, in countries like Puerto Rico, in which the movement for independence has very little mass support, and in countries like Mexico which achieved their independence a long time ago and are now in their postrevolutionary period, the lumpen proletariat is not a leading source of rebellion or of revolutionary spirit.²⁰

There were similarities between the works of Lewis and Fanon. Fanon's psychological portraits of Algerians twisted by the effects of colonialism, poverty, and racism and Lewis's narrative of the impoverished inhabitants of *La Esmerelda* both showed people prone to sudden anger and violence, depression and malaise. For Fanon, the French colonial science which claimed that Algerians were innately violent, criminal, impulsive, and dim was illegitimate. French researchers accurately recorded (according to Fanon) high rates of violence carried out by Algerians against other Algerians, much as *La Vida* detailed acts of violence carried out by Puerto Ricans against other Puerto Ricans. Colonial French psychologists saw this as proof of an innate inclination towards violence and impulse amongst Algerians. Fanon claimed it as proof of the psychological damage wrought by the twin forces of colonialism and poverty:

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 103. As cited in Lewis, *La Vida*, I.

²⁰ Lewis, *La Vida*, I.

In the colonial context...the natives fight amongst themselves. They tend to use each other as a screen, and each hides from his neighbor the national enemy...When he goes to beg for a little semolina or a drop of oil from the grocer, to whom he already owes some hundreds of francs, and when he sees that he is refused, an immense feeling of hatred and an overpowering desire to kill rises within him: and the grocer is an Algerian...the native comes to see his neighbor as a relentless enemy. The Algerian's criminality, his impulsivity and the violence of his murders are therefore not the consequence of the organization of his nervous system nor of characterial originality, but the direct product of the colonial situation.²¹

Lewis hinted at the psychological damage that colonialism could wreak, but he did not tie it in a systematic way to his characters. The only damage from colonialism that he described in *La Vida* was a cultural weakness that he claimed to see in Puerto Ricans. Because, argued Lewis, they had been stomped on throughout history, they had been left with a debilitated culture that provided the poor no defense against class oppression.

This was not very different from what Fanon was writing nearly simultaneously:

I am ready to concede that on the plane of factual being the past existence of an Aztec civilization does not change anything very much in the diet of the Mexican peasant of today...But it has been remarked several times that the passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped.²²

Beyond that, Fanon affirmed that the existence of a glorious national past was not just defensive; it was critical in constructing a new de-colonized psyche: "The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of the psycho-affective equilibrium it is

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 240-250. Quote from 248.

²² *Ibid.*, 169.

responsible for an important change in the native.”²³ Fanon argued that an essential operation of colonialism is the intellectual destruction of the worth of the pre-colonial culture. A program of de-colonization, argued Fanon, must be accompanied by the building up of a native culture.

Lewis did not explicitly position *La Vida* as a criticism of American colonialism in Puerto Rico. But Puerto Rican nationalists took *La Vida* and made it into an anti-imperial tract. Far from rejecting as insulting the argument that Puerto Ricans had a flawed historical consciousness or incomplete sense of Puerto Rican identity, Puerto Rican nationalist activists trumpeted Lewis’s findings as proof of the debilitating effects of colonialism. Following Fanon, they argued that American colonialism had served to break the Puerto Rican sense of identity, creating within Puerto Ricans a feeling of inferiority.

Publicly, Lewis was silent on the political situation in Puerto Rico. Privately, he tried to make friends as best he could with the PPD. He penned a letter to Muñoz Marín, acknowledging that the book “runs the risk of offending Puerto Ricans who have dedicated their lives to eliminating poverty.” Still, Lewis claimed that “In the case of Puerto Rico, there has been so much publicity given to the great strides made in such a short time that it may be a positive contribution to the Puerto Rican cause to...indicate how much there is yet to be done.” Lewis hoped that his work would serve as an antidote to a “Rousseauan tendency” amongst anti-poverty authors to “play up the courage, dignity, and capacity for leadership of the very poor, without sufficient realization of the terribly destructive consequences of extreme poverty.” Muñoz Marín sent Lewis a short letter informing him

²³ *Ibid.*, 170.

that he would read the book with “interest and sympathy.” A planned review by Muñoz Marín of the book in *Time* magazine never materialized.²⁴

Before *La Vida* was published, representatives of the Puerto Rican government were already petitioning Lewis for a kind representation of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans. Joseph Montserrat, director of the Migration Division of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, an agency in New York City that helped Puerto Rican migrants adjust to life in the city, sent a copy of Clarence Senior and Don Watkins’s “Toward a Balance Sheet of Puerto Rican migration” to Lewis. The Migration Division had waged a campaign to convince Americans of the beneficial impact that Puerto Rican migrants had upon New York City and the American mainland. Lewis wrote back to Montserrat:

There is no question in my mind that since 1940, and especially since the Commonwealth, great improvement has been brought about in Puerto Rican life. Unfortunately, this has not reached down to many of the slum families who seem to have been bypassed by the industrial progress of Puerto Rico. I am afraid that this is not going to be a pretty picture but I am certain that it is a thoroughly accurate one. Because of my identification and love for Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans, I am deeply disturbed by my own findings as I suspect you will be.²⁵

Lewis’s correspondence with the PPD establishment indicated a degree of respectful disagreement, but Lewis’s sympathies were elsewhere. One of Lewis’s closest Puerto Rican confidants was Nilita Vientos Gaston, one of the leading literary figures of the 1950s and 1960s in Puerto Rico. She edited the foremost Puerto Rican literary journal of the day, *Asomante*. Vientos was a liberal, non-Marxist scholar, influenced by economic radicalism,

²⁴ Oscar Lewis to Luis Muñoz Marín, January 7, 1966. Luis Muñoz Marín to Oscar Lewis, January 17, 1966. Dave Scherman to Jean Ennis, June 23, 1966. Oscar Lewis papers, Box 58.

²⁵ Oscar Lewis to Joseph Montserrat, October 29, 1963. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58.

but open to a variety of ideas and cultural influences.²⁶ Vientos discussed *La Vida* in a series of panels held on Puerto Rican public television. Though Vientos had defended the book, Lewis lamented to her, “I am sorry that you didn’t utilize the forum to say something about the meaning of my book from the point of view of an independentista. It seems to me that you might also have related some of my findings to the long history of colonialism which Puerto Rico has suffered.”²⁷ Vientos’s response was instructive:

I think that, contrary to what you believe, things would have gone badly for me if I had focused on the book from the point of view of an independentista, because I believe the book, on its merits, does not need support exclusively from that point of view to stress its significance. The colony [Puerto Rico] is only one of the aspects to consider in the problem of poverty, because the United States, the wealthiest country in the world, confesses to having about 50 million impoverished people. I hope you are not preoccupied with the criticisms of the book. The history of Mexico [she was referring to the controversy over *The Children of Sanchez*] is repeating here, only more aggravated; books like *La Vida* fog the so-called “Showcase of Democracy” or as it is called today, “The image of Puerto Rico”, that most of the time is nothing more than a made up image to attract tourists and investors and does not correspond to the Puerto Rican truth.²⁸

Vientos saw *La Vida*’s importance as revealing the limitations of Puerto Rican progress under PPD leadership. The PPD, in order to attract business investment and tourists, carefully cultivated an image of Puerto Rico as a modern, safe, progressive island.

²⁶ César J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century*, 129, 216-217.

²⁷ Oscar Lewis to Nilita Vientos Gaston, November 22, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61.

²⁸ Nilita Vientos Gaston to Oscar Lewis, undated letter, (late November, 1966), Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61. Spanish original: “Creo que, al réves de lo que usted piensa, yo hubiera procedido muy mal si hubiera enfocado el libro desde el punto de vista de una independentista, porque creo que el libro, por sus méritos, no necesita apoyarse exclusivamente en dicho punto de vista para recalcar lo que significa...La colonia sólo es uno de los aspectos a considerar en el problema de la pobreza porque Estados Unidos, que es el país más rico del mundo confiesa tener cerca de cincuenta millones de pobres. Creo que usted no debe preocuparse tanto por las críticas que se hacen al libro. Se repetirá aquí la historia de México; sólo que agravada, ya que libros como *La Vida* empañan la llamada ‘Vitrina de Democracia’ o lo que se llama hoy ‘La imagen de Puerto Rico’, que no es la mayor parte de las veces mas que una imagen fabricada para alentar a los turistas e inversionistas, y que no responde en modo alguno a la verdad puertorriqueña.”

La Vida showed to its readers that in the midst of Puerto Rican progress, there were still Puerto Ricans living at a level of poverty that was almost unimaginable. Vientos believed that Puerto Rican leaders allowed gross injustices to occur because addressing them would mean admitting that they existed. In one sense, Vientos agreed with Lewis: for her, the furor over his book was the product of the insecurity of Puerto Rican elites who felt that the book threatened the image of progress that they had worked to build. But she rebuked him for presuming that his book was evidence of the need for Puerto Rican independence. For Vientos, poverty amongst the people in the slums of Puerto Rico was emblematic of a deeper problem within American society, not of the colonial relationship *per se*. There was no point, she was showing Lewis, in arguing that Puerto Rican poverty was a colonial problem when there were tens of millions of other poor Americans who were not in a colonial situation.

Vientos also defended the book in the Puerto Rican press. She offered, “I am in favor of his theory of the culture of poverty to describe a section of the Puerto Rican people that lives in the slums.” She continued:

To me it is insanity to be insulted by the things that Lewis says. In the U.S. a sociologist Michael Harrington wrote a study in which he indicated that there are 50,000 poor people living in the United States. The study was used to do something about their condition. But here, on an island that is basically poor, you just say there are a thousand poor families and everyone feels insulted.²⁹

This over-simplified Lewis’s argument. He had gone beyond documenting the existence of poverty in Puerto Rico. Even those who attacked the book acknowledged that there was

²⁹ Penny Maldonado, “An Evening with Nilita Vientos Gaston,” *The Sunday San Juan Star Magazine*, Jan. 1, 1967, 4-5.

poverty in Puerto Rico. Lewis's formulation of the culture of poverty, especially as it related to Puerto Rican families, was what stirred their ire.

A few years after the English publication of *La Vida*, a Spanish translation emerged. Vientos published a new defense of the book. This time she undertook a more thoughtful analysis that did claim *La Vida* as an anti-imperialist book. She summarized the major findings of the book and then dissected it:

La Vida presents, in a mode that is truthful, dramatic, and unforgettable, the daily tasks of a family from a sector of our society that the majority would rather not see. It bothers, more than anyone, the colonialist political leaders. It breaks the "showcase of democracy." It demonstrates that the economic progress, the principal motive for not confronting the status problem, has not come to the poor."³⁰

Vientos pushed her criticism of the PPD leadership further. Attacking Samuel Quiñones, the leader of the Puerto Rican Senate, who had been one of the chief political critics of *La Vida*, she wrote:

Samuel Quiñones said that *La Vida* is an insult to the poor. I would say that it's a shame for us. For not having given the poor the attention they merit. The mode of living of these poor people entails the negation and deformation of authentic life, of that which justifies the existence of man, of the values that give meaning to his work.³¹

³⁰ Nilita Vientos Gaston "Puerto Rico y la Cultura de Pobreza," *Cuadernos Americanos* 1 (Enero-Febrero 1970): 31-45. Reprint preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 63. Spanish original: "*La vida* presenta de modo veraz, dramático e inolvidable el diario quehacer de una familia de un sector de nuestra sociedad, que la mayoría prefiere no mirar. Molesta, sobre todo, a los líderes políticos colonialistas. Empaña "la vitrina de la democracia". Demuestra que el auge económico, el motivo principal para negarse a afrontar el problema del *status*, no ha llegado a los pobres...que la "imagen" de Puerto Rico que muestran los anuncios para atraer inversionistas y turistas no responde a realidad."

³¹ *Ibid.*, Spanish original: "Samuel Quiñones dijo que La vida es un insult a los pobres. Yo diría que es una vergüenza para nosotros. Por no haber dado a los pobres la atención que merecen. El modo de vivir de estos pobres conlleva la negación o deformación de la vida auténtica, de la que justifica la existencia de hombre, de los valores que dan sentido a su quehacer."

Vientos detailed the degradation of the poor as represented in *La Vida*: “It would not be exaggerating to say that the protagonists of this story are hunger and sex. We contemplate here man almost reduced to the struggle of basic instincts. Living is only surviving.”³²

Existence at the margins had made the poor fearful, Vientos wrote. In the Puerto Rican context, this made them conservative. Their situation at the moment might have been bad, but they feared that any change was likely to make their situation even worse:

Like the society from which they come, they are conservative in their politics. They fear change, lack a sense of risk. They don't have a spirit of rebellion. They fear the political independence of Puerto Rico, not for lack of love of their country but because the United States, an omnipotent nation, offers security. It is not a question of loyalty, but of fear that the economic situation would get worse.³³

Like Lewis, Vientos confirmed that the colonial experience had stolen from Puerto Ricans a proper sense of national pride. She quoted Lewis's research demonstrating that Puerto Ricans knew more about American national heroes than they did their own. “It could be said that the Puerto Rican poor feel more destitute than the poor Mexicans studied by Lewis that had national pride. Poor Puerto Ricans lack the archetypes, the spiritual roots to give them a sense of dignity. They don't identify with their nation's destiny.”³⁴

Another *independentista*, César Andreu Iglesias, published a series of articles on *La Vida* in a nationalist newspaper, *El Imparcial*. Andreu was a Marxist labor organizer, author, and journalist, active in both the Puerto Rican nationalist movement and

³² Ibid., Spanish original: “No se exageraría al decir que los protagonistas de este estudio son el hambre y el sexo. Contemplamos aquí al hombre casi reducido a la lucha con los instintos primarios. Vivir es sólo sobrevivir.”

³³ Ibid., Spanish original: “Al igual que la sociedad a que pertenecen, son conservadores en política. Tienen temor al cambio, carecen del sentido del riesgo. No tienen espíritu de rebellion. Temen la independencia política de Puerto Rico, no por falta de amor a su país sino porque Estados Unidos, nación omnipotente ofrece seguridad. No es cuestión de lealtad sino de temor a que la situación económica empeore.”

³⁴ Ibid., Spanish original: “Podría decirse que los pobres puertorriqueños se sienten más destituidos que los pobres de México estudiados por Lewis que tienen orgullo nacional. Los pobres puertorriqueños carecen de arquetipos, de raíces espirituales que les den sentido de dignidad. No se identifican con el destino de su país.”

Communist Party. Although he left the Communist Party in the early 1950s, he remained a devoted nationalist. In 1956 he wrote a nationalist novel, *Los Derrotados* (The Vanquished), which chronicled a fictitious Puerto Rican nationalist assault on an American military base. Andreu edited the popular memoirs of New York Puerto Rican labor organizer and social activist, Bernardo Vega. In 1961, Andreu wrote a seminal essay on Pedro Albizu Campos. There, Andreu argued that Albizu's refusal to live by the rules of a market society marked him not as a man of the past, but as a visionary. In the 1960s, Andreu wrote a column, *Cosas de Aqui* (things from here), in *El Imparcial*.³⁵

In several columns devoted to *La Vida*, Andreu defended *La Vida* and even went beyond Lewis in claiming its importance as an anti-colonial tract. For Andreu, the book was proof of the degrading effects of colonialism on Puerto Ricans of all social classes.

The author is the first to call attention to the limit of his study, and he does not adventure to aim for more conclusions than he esteems indispensable. But I suspect that many of the attitudes, conflicts, and tragedies that march across the pages of his book are not exclusive to the lower class. They could well be generalized, not a few of them, and applied to Puerto Rico generally.³⁶

Lewis only haltingly tried to connect the mentality of the Ríos family to Puerto Rican society writ large. The culture of poverty was still a class model that transcended across national boundaries. Although there might be limited areas where the lifestyle of

³⁵ Ayala and Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century...*, 139-141, 214-216. César Andreu Iglesias, *Los Derrotados* (Mexico: Los Presentes, 1966). Bernardo Vega, *Memoirs of Bernardo Vega: A Contribution to the History of the Puerto Rican Community in New York*, César Andreu Iglesias, ed., Juan Flores, trans. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984).

³⁶ César Andreu Iglesias, *La Cultura de la Pobreza, El Imparcial*, Nov. 6, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Note: no page numbers are given here for some Puerto Rican nationalist newspapers. The newspapers are rare; in a few cases the clippings in Oscar Lewis's papers might be the only ones still in existence. These clippings sometimes do not include page numbers, but I have included them wherever possible. Spanish original: "El autor es el primero en llamar la atención hacia el límite de su estudio, y no se aventura a apuntar más conclusiones que las estime indispensables. Pero me sospecho que muchas de las actitudes, conflictos y tragedias que desfilan por las páginas de su libro, no son exclusivas de la gente bajo estudio. Bien podrían generalizarse, no pocas de ellas, y aplicarse a Puerto Rico entero."

the poor said something about a national culture, Lewis still primarily was concerned with the poor. Andreu went further, claiming that the book provided evidence of a colonial mindset, of people who had been twisted by colonial assaults on their culture and material well-being to the point where they did not understand their own situation or interests. He used Erasmo as an example of a man with the colonial mindset:

One of the most despicable individuals in *La Vida* is Erasmo. By chance, he is the same individual who makes the most direct allusion to politics and to our colonial problem. Of course, he is an estadoísta [supporter of statehood for Puerto Rico]. Expressing his political philosophy, he says the following: 'In my opinion, Puerto Rico would do better as a state, because then the poor would enjoy the same rights and privileges as others.' He makes reference to unemployment insurance and social security. In speaking of independence, he opines that 'it would never work for Puerto Rico.' Pointing to the dictators and civil wars that Santo Domingo [the Dominican Republic], Venezuela, and other countries have suffered, 'If Puerto Rico were given its independence, the same thing would happen.'³⁷

Andreu argued, *à la* Fanon, that the most pernicious feature of colonialism was its ability to delegitimize the national culture of colonial subjects in their own minds. Beyond that, it convinced colonized peoples that their independence would be doomed to failure, that only under the control of a colonial power could they achieve any measure of stability and prosperity. Erasmo's argument that an independent Puerto Rico would be doomed to political instability and unrest showed this perfectly. This idea manifested itself not just in the populace, but also in the political leadership: "How does the political philosophy of this

³⁷ César Andreu Iglesias, "La Clave del Acertijo (The Key to the Riddle)" *El Imparcial*, Feb. 15, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original: Uno de los individuos más despreciables de "La Vida" es Erasmo. Da la casualidad que hace más directa allusión a la política y a nuestro problema colonial. Por cierto, es estadoísta. Expresando su filosofía política, dice lo siguiente: 'En mi opinión, Puerto Rico se econtraría mejor como estado, porque entonces la gente pobre gozaría de los mismos derechos y privelegios de todos los demás.' Hace referencia a la compensación por desempleo y al "social security." En cuanto a la indpendencia, opina que 'nunca funcionaría para Puerto Rico". Apunta hacia dictaduras y guerras civiles que han sufrido Santo Domingo, Venezuela y otros países latinoamericanos, y añade: 'si a Puerto Rico le dieran su independencia, sucedería lo mismo."

human wreck that is Erasmo differ from the political philosophy of our duly elected political leaders? Certainly there is a difference in degree. But that is the most that can be said.”³⁸

Andreu cited Erasmo’s political philosophy: “My own theory of “politics is this: if I don’t work, I don’t eat...When someone asks me: which party do you support?, I answer: “That doesn’t matter to anyone, because it doesn’t matter who is in power, if I don’t work, I don’t eat.”³⁹ Andreu saw this as the ultimate expression of a colonial political identity:

This is the political philosophy *par excellence* in the colony. There is no need to believe in anything, or to be in favor of anything. A person does not even believe in himself. The only valid position is for today’s food. And if one is for this, one is for the people who have control over the food, even when you don’t even believe in them.⁴⁰

Colonialism and impoverishment left people with dimmed horizons and shattered dreams. The most that a person could hope for was a job at a marginal existence. This inevitably led to support for political leadership that came from and represented the interests of the landowning and capitalist class. It also led to an implicit support of colonialism.

Particularly troubling for Andreu was the lack of knowledge that Lewis had found amongst Puerto Ricans of their past, of their national heroes. This was an undeniable truth in Puerto Rico, and also an effect of imperial rule:

³⁸ César Andreu Iglesias, “La Clave del Acertijo (The Key to the Riddle)” *El Imparcial*, Feb. 15, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original: En que se diferencia la filosofia politica de ese guiñapo humano que es Erasmo, de la filosofia politica de ciertos connotados lideres politicos actuales...? Ciertamente, hay una diferencia de grado. Pero eso es lo mas que se puede decir...”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Spanish original: “Mi propia teoría política es esta: si yo no trabajo, no como...Cuando alguien me pregunta: ¿cuál es tú partido?, yo contesto: “No pertenezco a ninguno, porque no importa quién esté en el poder, si yo no trabajo, no como.”

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Spanish original: “Esa es la filosofia política por excelencia en la colonia. No hay que creer en nada, ni estar a favor de nada. La persona no cree ni en sí misma. La única posición válida es la de estar por la comida immediate. Y como se está por eso, se está por los que tienen el dominio de la comida, aun cuando ni siquiera se crea en ellos.”

The anthropologist confronted the people of various countries with names of their great national figures. In Mexico City, there was a high percentage, including people who lacked any formal schooling, who knew of Cuahatemoc, Hidalgo, Morelos, Juarez, etc. On the contrary, in San Juan, the inhabitants of the neighborhoods demonstrated “an abysmal ignorance in respect to Puerto Rican national figures.” This does not surprise me, and it cannot surprise anyone in Puerto Rico. Our poor know something of George Washington and of Abraham Lincoln. But they know nothing of Ramón Power, of Betances, of Ruiz Belvis, of Baldorioty, etc... Some of these names they may know, but only as the name of some street, perhaps. And this, in my opinion, is still bad. Colonial cowards reduce our national historic values to mere place-holders from whence names for streets, avenues, and public buildings are extracted.⁴¹

Puerto Rican culture and history were degraded by colonialism. The Puerto Rican government was complicit in this; PPD autonomism left the Puerto Rican people with nothing of their history and culture except names for streets.

Another prominent *independentista*, historian Manuel Maldonado-Denis, also wrote about *La Vida*. Philosophically, Maldonado-Denis was a non-dogmatic Marxist and anti-imperialist. He served on the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico at Rio Piedras, the academic center of *independentista* thought. Maldonado-Denis co-founded, along with Andreu and others, *La Escalera*, one of the most important Puerto Rican critical journals of the 1960s. Maldonado-Denis saw the destruction of Puerto Rican culture as an essential

⁴¹ César Andreu Iglesias, “La Familia Rios” *El Imparcial*, November 9, 1966. Spanish original: “El antropológico confrontó a la gente de ambos países con nombres de sus grandes figuras nacionales. En Ciudad de México halló un altísimo porcentaje, incluyendo a personas que carecían totalmente de instrucción escolar, que sabían de Cuahatemoc, Hidalgo, Morelos, Juárez, etc. Por el contrario en San Juan, los habitantes de los arrabales demostraron ‘una ignorancia abismática en lo que respecta a figuras históricas puertorriqueñas’...Cosa ésta no me sorprende, y no puede sorprender a nadie en Puerto Rico. Algo sabe esa pobre gente nuestra de Jorge Washington y de Abraham Lincoln. Pero no conocen nada de Ramón Power, de Betances, de Ruiz Belvis, de Baldorioty, etc...Algunos de esos nombres deben conocerlos, pero sólo como denominación de alguna calle, si acaso. Y eso, en mi opinion, es todavía peor. Reducir nuestros valores históricos, por cobardías coloniales, a mero tarjetero de donde se extraen nombres para calles, avenidas, y edificios públicos...”

goal of American imperialism. He strove to build a Puerto Rican national identity centered around the vision of Albizu Campos, and saw the autonomist vision of Muñoz Marín and the PPD as antithetical to a Puerto Rican cultural identity. Cultural hybridization was a sign of weakness to be avoided.⁴²

Maldonado-Denis's 1968 book, *Puerto Rico: Una Interpretación Histórico y Social* (Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation), helped to launch a nationalist reinterpretation of Puerto Rican history. Maldonado-Denis described the contemporary Puerto Rican situation bluntly: "We are now more than one hundred years into the struggle for Puerto Rican independence...Today our people continue to live under a colonial regime—though this regime attempts to disguise itself beneath the pompous title of 'Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.'" Maldonado-Denis called PPD autonomism "freedom with a long chain." Quoting Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, Maldonado-Denis positioned his book as the unity of theory and practice, the book that would educate the Puerto Rican populace and spur them towards revolution.⁴³ Maldonado-Denis held court in the 1960s and 1970s as one of Puerto Rico's preeminent nationalist intellectuals. Later authors, including other nationalists, however, criticized Maldonado-Denis for his belittlement of hybridized Nuyorican culture and his belief that non-revolutionary Puerto Ricans harbored a false political consciousness.

In a long review, Maldonado-Denis defended *La Vida*, which he described as a chronicle of the deleterious effects of American imperialism. For Maldonado-Denis, the economic and structural side of *La Vida* mattered most; and it was a clear indictment of

⁴² Manuel Maldonado-Denis, *Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation*, 4th ed. Elena Vialo, Trans. (New York: Random House, 1972), 248-250.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3, 6, 8-10.

imperialism. Puerto Rico, argued Maldonado-Denis, fit Lewis's model perfectly—a colonial society undergoing rapid industrialization and modernization:

The recently enumerated factors by Doctor Lewis offer us the key to a better understanding of the prevailing confusion of the poorest strata of Puerto Rican society, our society fits perfectly into the criteria established by the author: it is a colonial society whose social-economic structure has been destroyed by the imperial power, and it is a capitalist society dependent—like every other colonial society—on the great industrial capital and finance controlled by the metropole.⁴⁴

Like Vientos, Maldonado-Denis saw *La Vida* as a terrific antidote to the PPD's Showcase of Democracy propaganda. The numerous and hidden poor, argued Maldonado-Denis, were proof of the shortcomings of Puerto Rican progress:

In this book, significantly titled *La Vida*, the author makes us descend even to the lowest social layers of Puerto Rican society, layers that have not been eliminated by all of the pious myths of the approach of public relations and of “image building” that we have known during the past years.⁴⁵

Maldonado-Denis also was intrigued by the religious beliefs of the Ríos family. Following his Marxism, Maldonado-Denis described the folk religion of the Puerto Rican poor—which included Spiritualism, witchcraft, and Santería—as an opiate of the masses, a salve for people whose destinies seemed to be beyond their control.

Those who live in the culture of poverty live in a world where fatalism reigns, where forces uncontrollable and blind

⁴⁴ Manuel Maldonado-Denis, “‘La Vida’ de Oscar Lewis,” *El Mundo*, April 1, 1967, 37. Spanish original: Los factores recién enumerados por el doctor Lewis nos ofrecen la clave para la mayor comprensión de la enajenación imperante en los estratos más bajos de la sociedad puertorriqueña, toda vez que nuestra sociedad cuadra perfectamente dentro de los criterios establecidos por el autor: es una sociedad colonial cuya estructura economico-social ha sido destruída por la potencia imperial, y es una sociedad capatalista dependiente—como toda sociedad colonial—del gran capital industrial y financier controlado por la metrópil.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Spanish original: En este libro tan significativamente titulado *La Vida*, el autor nos hace descender con el hasta las capas sociales más bajas dentro de la sociedad puertorriqueña, capas sociales que no han logrado ser eliminadas por todos los mitos píos elucubrados por el enfoque de relaciones públicas y de “image building” que hemos conocido durante los últimos años.

determine their lives. These supernatural forces can respond to exorcism and “free us” from the inexorable wheel of destiny.⁴⁶

Maldonado-Denis proclaimed that the characters in *La Vida* were proof of a false consciousness that infected the Puerto Rican poor.

From there too does the false consciousness of them become doubly profound: the traits of the Lumpen-Proletariat within a colonial context. The conservative attitudes of the residents of the neighborhoods—given substance by the experience of many and confirmed by what the protagonists have to say with respect to Puerto Rican politics—makes us think that Marx did not lie when he showed the lumpen proletariat as a potential ally of the propertied classes.⁴⁷

Maldonado-Denis saw *La Vida* as an important spur to change in Puerto Rico:

Doctor Lewis’s book has contributed to the creation of a conscience in respect to the problem of the culture of poverty in Puerto Rico. It cannot be denied that those who read the book will derive from the lesson a sense of urgency, of the problematic nature...The doctor Oscar Lewis has taken his assignment as an anthropologist to bring our eyes to this picture of misery and distraction to call the guilty to respond. We could tell ourselves that all of us are guilty. Maybe. But we are not all equally guilty. For there have been the guilty—the more guilty—those who have attacked the book with great rage. One day the innocents will sit in judgment on the guilty and ‘the last shall be first.’⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., Spanish original: “El persistente recurso al espiritismo, a la brujería, a la Santería, ilustra la tesis anteriormente enunciada. Los que viven la cultura de la pobreza viven inmersos en un mundo donde la fatalidad reina, donde fuerzas incontrolables y ciegas determinan la vida de sus componentes...Estas fuerzas sobrenaturales pueden responder al exorcismo y ‘liberarnos’ de la inexorable rueda del destino.”

⁴⁷ Ibid., Spanish original: “De ahí también que la falsa conciencia de éstos sea doblamente profunda: se trata del ‘Lumpen-Proletariat’ dentro de un contexto colonial. Las actitudes conservadoras de los habitantes del arrabal—hecho sustanciado por la experiencia de muchos y confirmada por lo que los protagonistas mismos dicen respecto a la política puertorriqueña—nos hacen pensar que Marx no se equivocó cuando señaló hacia el ‘Lumpen proletariat’ como un aliado potencial de las clases propietarias.”

⁴⁸ Ibid., Spanish original: “El libro de doctor Lewis ha contribuido a crear conciencia respecto al problema de la cultura de pobreza en Puerto Rico. No puede negarse que los que lean su libro derivarán de su lectura un sentido de urgencia, de problematicidad...El doctor Oscar Lewis ha llevado su cometido como antropólogo al traer ante nuestros ojos este cuadro de miseria y enajenación para que respondan los culpables. Podría decirse que todos

Other intellectuals in Puerto Rico who were not necessarily in the nationalist camp, but were perhaps sympathetic, chimed in as well. Ursula von Eckardt, a professor of social sciences at the University of Puerto Rico, and columnist for the *San Juan Star* (the major English-language daily on Puerto Rico in the 1960s), wrote a review published in the *New York Post*. She predicted that *La Vida* would be misunderstood and attacked by the Puerto Rican political establishment, “the earnest image-makers for the progressive Commonwealth of Puerto Rico will fear that the stench of the physical and psychological sewer of the urban slum...may be confused with the spirit of Puerto Rican life itself.” She also foresaw that *La Vida* would arouse critics of colonialism, “Others will point accusingly at the United States: ‘look what colonialist exploitation has done to us.’ Unhappily, such critics are not altogether wrong.”⁴⁹

It is tempting to dismiss some of the Puerto Rican nationalists’ use of *La Vida* as political opportunism: those things that made the PPD look bad, and highlighted the problematic nature of autonomism within the colonial relationship made independence a more viable political idea. But there was also a serious intellectual analysis going on within the writings of Puerto Rican nationalists that was congruent with their other works. The liberal use of false consciousness to describe the outlook not only of the Ríos family, but of Puerto Rican society writ large, mirrored the analysis that Maldonado-Denis, for example, had used in his writings on Puerto Rican history. Lewis stepped back from arguing that the poor in the culture of poverty had a false consciousness, but it was not too much of a leap for others to make. If the poor possessed a worldview of limited horizons, personified by Erasmo’s statement: “If I do not work, I do not eat;” if the poor held anti-

somos culpables. Quizás. Pero no todos somos igualmente culpables. Por eso han sido los culpable—los mas culpables—los que con más saña han atacado al libro que los señala. Algun día los inocentes se sentarán a juzgar a los culpable y los ‘últimos serán los primeros’”

⁴⁹ Ursula M. von Eckardt, “Viva ‘La Vida’: A Puerto Rican Family,” *The New York Post*, November 17, 1966, 43.

revolutionary, even conservative sentiments, where else could a nationalist intellectual turn for explanation?

Nationalist intellectuals in Puerto Rico also held public forums for the book. Nilita Vientos Gaston beseeched Lewis to come to Puerto Rico to discuss his book. She hosted two panel forums on her Puerto Rican public television show, *Puntos de Vista* (Points of View), with participants including Father Venard Kanfusch (Father Ponce from *La Vida*), social worker Rosa Celeste Marín, Maldonado-Denis, Puerto Rican senate leader Samuel Quiñones, and Joseph Montserrat as panelists. Lewis refused: “I am afraid that I will not be able to appear on any of the TV programs and certainly not with the gentlemen you have mentioned, Samuel R. Quiñones and Joseph Montserrat. I find that their comments on La Vida have been shameful...I am a scientist, not a politician, and I want to stay out of any of the political involvements surrounding the publication of my book.” Vientos wrote back to Lewis to express her disappointment:

Your letter was a surprise and a little disappointing. A surprise because, after what happened in Mexico and the nature of LA VIDA, the reaction of the general public is true to form. Did you really believe that it was going to be different? In fact, compared with Mexico, it has been rather mild...you promised to come for the program when we spoke about it in New York.⁵⁰

The Dean of the Colegio de Ciencias Sociales (College of Social Sciences) at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras, Robert Anderson, organized a campus forum on *La Vida*. He reported to Lewis:

⁵⁰ Oscar Lewis to Nilita Vientos Gaston, January 13, 1967, January 20, 1967. Nilita Vientos Gaston to Oscar Lewis, undated letter (late November 1966). Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61.

The reactions to your book continue to pour into the press, and you probably receive them continually. They run the usual gamut from hysteria to soberness; it's about what would be expected, I think. You've seen Rosa Celeste's cordial review, I'm sure, and there have been enough responsible comments on the book to permit a real discussion.⁵¹

Maldonado-Denis, also involved in the forum, assured Lewis, "we have invited serious and responsible people to participate, and I'm sure that the result will be fruitful." But Lewis refused to attend the forum, though it was hosted and planned by someone who was clearly a sympathetic reader. He wrote: "It seems to me that I have said what I had to say in La Vida and that as far as I am concerned, the book speaks for itself."

Lewis though, did have more to say:

I understand that La Vida has created a great deal of anxiety and hostility among some Puerto Ricans, particularly among government representatives, and I believe that it would be more constructive for this anxiety to be directed towards facing up to the problems rather than making a scapegoat of the author. I interpret the intensity of the reaction...as a very positive sign. If some of this energy could be directed towards finding more adequate solutions for some of the misery uncovered by La Vida, I would feel that my work as a scientist and a writer had made some significant contribution."⁵²

Maldonado-Denis still implored Lewis to come to further discussions:

I spoke with [Robert] Anderson, and he told me that you didn't show much enthusiasm for the idea of coming to Puerto Rico when your book is discussed. I am thinking of holding a forum in the Ateneo... I think you should come and that you should not take into consideration the stupidities that have been said about your book...I have much interest in you coming.

⁵¹ Robert W. Anderson to Oscar Lewis, December 5, 1966, Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 55.

⁵² Manuel Maldonado Denis to Oscar Lewis, January 23, 1967, Oscar Lewis to Robert Anderson, December 12, 1966. Box 55, Oscar Lewis Papers. Spanish original of Maldonado Denis letter: "Hemos invitado a personas serias y responsables para que participen y estoy seguro de que el resultado sera uno muy fructoso."

Lewis still refused, though he offered that if he were in Puerto Rico during the forums and debates that he “may come incognito and enjoy the proceedings.”⁵³

Four years after the publication of *La Vida*, an unusual exchange took place between Lewis and a young Nuyorican woman, Olga Rosado, who wrote Lewis in disgust over *La Vida*. She claimed that Lewis had singled out Puerto Ricans and maligned them.

I have read your book...and in my opinion this book shows nothing but disgust...the points which you are trying to get across will just be hopeless with such filth...I am a Puerto Rican myself and have been raised in the states...You are not giving us a voice but only giving us a Label!”⁵⁴

Lewis responded by pointing to his studies of different nationalities and ethnicities. He had “no intention of singling out the Puerto Ricans.” He suggested that Rosado get active:

If you don't like the style of life of the Puerto Ricans described in my book, La Vida, you should try to do something about changing the conditions which have produced them. Have you thought of joining the Young Lords or some other organization which is trying to help the Puerto Ricans? Simply closing your eyes and ears and saying “how disgusting” amounts to a rejection of your own people. Once you get over your initial shock I hope you can begin to show more sympathy for the people of La Vida than you did in your letter.⁵⁵

⁵³ Manuel Maldonado Denis to Oscar Lewis, December 28, 1966, Oscar Lewis to Manuel Maldonado Denis, January 13, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58. Spanish original of Maldonado Denis letter, “Hablé con Anderson y me dijo que tu no te mostrabas muy entusiasta con la idea de venir a Puerto Rico cuando se discutiese tu libro. Yo pienso celebrar un foro en el Ateneo...Yo creo que debes venir y que no debes tomar en consideración las estupideces que se han dicho sobre el libro...tengo mucho interés en que vengas.”

⁵⁴ Olga Rosado to Oscar Lewis, July 24, 1970. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

⁵⁵ Oscar Lewis to Olga Rosado, July 30, 1970. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56. The Young Lords were a revolutionary Puerto Rican nationalist group, similar in goals and methods and organization to the Black Panthers. The Young Lords sought to mobilize Puerto Ricans in the poorest neighborhoods towards self-empowerment and a sense of Puerto Rican national identity. Pedro Albizu Campos was a hero to the group. The New York branch was founded in 1969 and rapidly engaged in several high profile demonstrations. See Miguel “Micky” Melendez, *We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003), passim.

Lewis also supported black militant movements within the United States. Hence Lewis co-signed a letter to the editors of *The New York Times*, along with James Baldwin, Ossie Davis, Elizabeth Hardwick, Leroi Jones, Norman Mailer, Floyd McKissick, and Susan Sontag, protesting police repression of the Black Panther Party and advocating for Eldridge Cleaver's release from jail.⁵⁶ In the absence of the possibility of a national or class revolution in the United States, Lewis envisioned a movement for ethnic or national identity as one way the culture of poverty could be broken. Lewis understood himself not only as an observer, but as an activist. As he shifted into his role as activist, however, Lewis could sometimes cross a line into paternalistically telling the oppressed of the world what form their self-liberation should take.

It is interesting to speculate how Lewis would have dealt with what has transpired since he published *La Vida*: the annual Puerto Rican Day Parade through New York City, the demonstrations that forced the US Navy out of Vieques, and the countless other less dramatic demonstrations of Puerto Rican national identity. The Puerto Rican Day Parade was founded in 1958, but in 1970 it was not yet the massive event that it has become. Vieques was still a testing ground for the American military. Roberto Rodríguez-Morazzini argues that in the late 1960s, Puerto Rican activists began to reject the assimilationist and moderate politics of earlier Puerto Ricans in New York City and to create political movements grounded in Puerto Rican identity that sought more radical changes in economics and politics.⁵⁷ Likewise, Michael Lapp argues that the Puerto Rican

⁵⁶ James Baldwin, Ossie Davis, Elizabeth Hardwick, Leroi Jones, Oscar Lewis, Norman Mailer, Floyd McKissick, and Susan Sontag, Letter to the Editor of *The New York Times*, undated. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 59.

⁵⁷ Roberto P. Rodríguez-Morazzani, "Puerto Rican Political Generations in New York: *Pioneros*, Young Turks, and Radicals," *Centro Bulletin* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1991-1992), 96-116. As cited in Laura Ortiz, "Disrupting the Colonial Gaze: A Critical Analysis of the Discourses on Puerto Ricans in the United States." PhD diss., Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1998, 274.

government's assimilationist Migration Division lost influence in the Nuyorican community to groups that stressed Puerto Ricans' unique cultural identity.⁵⁸

Sociologist Nancy Ortiz, criticizing Lewis, points to the new politics of identity in the Puerto Rican community emerging in the late 1960s as proof that Lewis had missed the pulse of the Puerto Rican community in New York.⁵⁹ There may be some truth to that, but the flip side of the coin is true as well: a new Puerto Rican identity was emerging in contradistinction to an older identity that stressed assimilation and moderation—exactly the kind of politics and identity that Lewis and the *independentistas* criticized. Lewis almost certainly would have supported the new Puerto Rican nationalist politics. Lewis was slow to understand the new rules of 1960s identity politics and liberation movements, however, and it was naïve to think that an intellectual and an outsider would be taken seriously in his recommendation to a woman like Olga Rosado that she should engage in revolutionary national politics. Lewis, Vientos, Andreu, and Maldonado-Denis all deplored the moderation of Puerto Rican and Nuyorican politics and agitated for a new activist, nationalist, and radical politics. In a strange turn of events, this was beginning for Puerto Ricans exactly as Oscar Lewis was publishing *La Vida*.

⁵⁸ Michael Lapp, "Managing Migration: The Migration Division of Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1948-1968," PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 1990, 294-332.

⁵⁹ Ortiz, "Disrupting the Colonial Gaze," 273-274.

Chapter Five

This chapter will analyze the way that *La Vida* was received after its publication. Major publications in the United States, Puerto Rico, and abroad gave *La Vida* their lead review. Leading academics and intellectuals such as Michael Harrington, Barrington Moore, Jr., Nathan Glazer, and others reviewed it. The book garnered good reviews in mass circulation news outlets, such as *Newsweek*. *La Vida* reviews also appeared in small, local papers. The religious press in America reviewed the book, with an eye towards the meaning of the culture of poverty idea for their congregants and missionaries. The major British dailies and journals all gave it major attention.

La Vida was all over the Puerto Rican press for months. Government officials, academics, newspaper columnists, editors, and regular folks made their views known. Many Puerto Ricans felt that the book was an assault on their nation and identity. They accused Lewis of sloppy scholarship that would lead to negative stereotyping of Puerto Ricans. Many commentators who were not Puerto Rican argued this as well. A lesser though still significant number of Puerto Ricans defended the book. They claimed that Lewis had brought to light certain conditions in Puerto Rico that the government and press would rather have ignored. Yet the reaction demonstrated the saliency of identity politics in the 1960s, as constituencies mobilized to defend what they saw as insults to their national group.

In the United States, the reaction to *La Vida* and the discussion of the culture of poverty grant a window into the discourse about poverty in America during the 1960s.

Eventually, the culture of poverty (or at least a perverted version of it) became a conservative idea. In 1966, however, conservatives did not accept it. In *The National Review*, the reviewer panned the book and heaped scorn on the culture of poverty.¹ It remained popular among many liberals, but liberals were beginning to misuse the culture of poverty. A few liberals forecasted that the War on Poverty was headed for trouble, as the culture of poverty purportedly demonstrated that government aid to the poor would only go to waste. Other liberal commentators such as Michael Harrington and Nathan Glazer, though they came to different appraisals of *La Vida*, demonstrated that their thinking about poverty had shifted in the few years since the publication of their own landmark works on poverty. Liberal ideas about poverty were in a state of flux in the 1960s.

In the British press, some compared Lewis to French naturalist writer Emile Zola. The tape-recorder style of anthropology captured life at the margins in all of its gritty realism, with the sex, violence, and profanity lending an air of authenticity to *La Vida*. Others were not convinced. To them, Lewis had failed to exercise any reasonable power of selection. The book just dragged on with endless razor blade fights and sexual encounters, narrated by a stream of obscenities. Lewis had not shown any skepticism, taking his informants at their word and failing to understand that they might have embellished. The debate about style in Lewis's work got at the heart of the question of authenticity.

As publication of *La Vida* neared, Lewis knew that controversy was coming. He wrote to Joan Bundy at the *New York Times*:

¹ Michael Katz traces the conservative adoption of cultural explanations of poverty to the works of Edward Banfield, an author published earlier. The reaction to *La Vida* demonstrates that this was a more complicated and gradual process. Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 29-35.

My book will probably be out in early September and I suspect that it will cause as much of a scandal in New York as did The Children of Sanchez in Mexico. I am convinced that when a social scientist tries to do an objective and intimate study of poverty some people are bound to be offended and especially those who are in power positions and share some responsibility for the persistence of terrible conditions...American readers could take The Children of Sanchez in their stride because it dealt with Mexicans who were far away. I wonder how they will take a similar study of Puerto Ricans who are our fellow citizens who work and live among us and who are our responsibility.²

Lewis was right to expect controversy, but he anticipated it from the wrong corner.

Children of Sanchez had offended the political establishment in Mexico because it had exposed continuing class oppression within Mexican society. Lewis anticipated that something similar would happen in the United States. He could not have been more wrong. Americans had already accepted that poverty was a pressing issue. There was no negative reaction to *La Vida* simply because it demonstrated that there were people in New York City living in profound poverty. *La Vida* brought controversy because it agitated the ethnic and racial fissures of America. With *La Vida*, Lewis stepped onto the minefield of 1960s American ethnic tension and Puerto Rican national and diasporic politics.

The furor over *La Vida* began in Puerto Rico. Prominent Puerto Rican politician Samuel Quiñones, President of the Puerto Rican Senate and also President of the Puerto Rican Bar, denounced the book before the Puerto Rican Cultural Institute months before the book was even published, in February 1966.³ Manuel Maldonado-Denis wrote Lewis shortly after the book's release to inform him that the book had begun to make waves: "The fireworks against your book began in the *San Juan Star* today. It was a matter of time."⁴

² Oscar Lewis to Joan Bundy, April 21, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 59.

³ Oscar Lewis to Nilita Vientos Gaston, April 29, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61.

⁴ Manuel Maldonado-Denis to Oscar Lewis, November 16, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58. Spanish original: "En el San Juan Star de hoy comenzaron los "fireworks" contra tú libro. Era de esperarse."

Lewis portrayed criticism of his books by the Puerto Rican government as an attempt to “Cover up the sky with their hand,”⁵ of trying to discredit *La Vida* by acting as though the people Lewis wrote about did not exist. For Lewis, the accusations from Puerto Rican government personnel were always an attempt to cover up the failure of their own policies.

Prostitution emerged as a major theme. Lewis believed that his Puerto Rican governmental critics were refusing to acknowledge the existence of prostitutes, thereby dehumanizing them. He quoted to Maldonado-Denis the wise words of Amparo in *La Vida*:

I have never avoided whores. On the contrary, I love to talk to them. I enjoy their gaeity, their dances, their nice clothes. I didn't come out of my mother's womb to become a whore, but it seems that other women did because it was their destiny. Everyone is born to a different fate. Some babies are born head first, some feet first. Take any five people and you'll always find two wrong-headed ones. That's the way it goes, three good to two bad. Looked at in that way, a woman in the life is a woman like the rest of us. And why say in the life? Aren't we all alive and human? Aren't we all part of life, in life, too?

“It seems to me that Amparo reflects a greater sense of humanity than Samuel R. Quiñones!” concluded Lewis.⁶

But the criticism of *La Vida* by some members of the Puerto Rican political establishment was more sophisticated than Lewis allowed. Montserrat, for instance, wrote a telling critique of the book in the *American Jewish Congress Bi-Weekly*. Montserrat made several important criticisms of the book's methodology, its conclusions, and its importance. Montserrat pointed out that of the original one-hundred families selected to participate in the study, who were said to be representative of the culture of poverty, Lewis confined his finished product to the Ríos family, which Lewis himself admitted was an

⁵ Oscar Lewis to Nilita Vientos Gaston, January 13, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61. Oscar Lewis to Manuel Maldonado-Denis, November 23, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58.

⁶ Oscar Lewis to Manuel Maldonado-Denis, November 23, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 58.

extreme case. The review opened: “There are about four million Puerto Ricans. Oscar Lewis presents the lives of sixteen of them...the sixteen are all members of the Ríos family. Three of the four Ríos women whose autobiographies are presented are prostitutes. The fourth is promiscuous and adulterous. The twelve men are lewd, crude, and violent.” This style of life, argued Montserrat was not representative of Puerto Rico, and *La Vida* was flawed because it did not contain any contextualizing information for the reader:

No discussion of Puerto Rican life in general is provided as a context for understanding the Ríos’. No data is presented for measuring the Ríos’ against other poor Puerto Ricans or for weighing how typical they are of lower-class Puerto Ricans. The Ríos stand alone as the sole representatives of Puerto Rican society in Lewis’ study.

Montserrat showed that the lengthy introduction, while introducing the reader to the culture of poverty, did not make significant connections to the narrative that followed, which was comprised of long biographical sketches of the study’s sixteen family members.

The impression implanted by Lewis throughout the narrative is that this book is a study of a Puerto Rican family in the culture of prostitution. It is only in the 42-page introduction to the work that the author informs us he is writing about the culture of poverty. There seems to be no connection between the Introduction and what follows, except the not so subtle impression that the culture of poverty is to be equated with the culture of prostitution.

Montserrat pointed out the problematic nature of the psychological tests that Lewis used, and questioned why there were no samples included in the book itself. Montserrat criticized Lewis for failing to reveal who had conducted the interviews, and under what conditions, what the results were and how they had compared with other families, and who had interpreted them and how.

He also leaves the impression that his study was exhaustive. He tells us that he used questionnaires, interviews, participant-observation, biographies, a limited number of intensive whole-family case studies, and the application of selected psychological tests, such as Thematic Apperception

Rorschach, and the Sentence Completion. But nowhere in this volume are the results of this impressive, almost numbing battery of inquiry techniques offered.

Montserrat disagreed with Lewis's claim that a "personal social psychological crisis" was usually the cause of Puerto Ricans migrating to New York City, citing data that showed the job market in the mainland United States determined the rate of Puerto Rican migration. The Puerto Rican migration had been very rapid following 1953, but Puerto Ricans had left in greater numbers than they had come in 1961 and 1963 when job opportunities were scarce. "The prospect of employment, not a 'personal social psychological crisis,' is responsible for migration."

Montserrat also questioned whether the attributes of the culture of poverty were unique to the poor:

They serve as well to describe middle-class American culture—the culture of affluence, especially 'a relatively high incidence of the abandonment of wives and children, a trend towards female or mother centered families...verbal emphasis upon family solidarity which is only rarely achieved because of sibling rivalry, and competition for limited goods and maternal affection.'

Montserrat displayed a sophisticated understanding of the theories and literature of poverty and showed that Lewis had not proven that the poor "react in chorus—Negro, Puerto Rican, Italian and Jew alike—to the same circumstances. The difference between the culture of poverty and being poor is that the phrase attempts to put the poor in a common straitjacket, while the condition merely describes the economic reality of a class." Montserrat also disputed Lewis's claims that he had guarded against his book being misinterpreted: "far from carefully guarding against misinterpretation, he has supplied all

the ingredients necessary for it—linking prostitution with poverty, and the study of one family with the society within which it dwells.”⁷

In public appearances, however, Montserrat was not so nuanced. In testimony before a Senate subcommittee in 1966, called by Robert Kennedy to investigate methods of improving life in urban areas, he only asserted that Lewis had “purported to say that this is what Puerto Ricans are like,” and claimed that Lewis had over-generalized from one family. Montserrat charged that there were two types of prostitution present in *La Vida*, “the prostitution the author writes about and the prostitution of science.” Further, Montserrat asked if Lewis were “a scientist, or a writer whose perversion was sexual curiosity?” The two met at a press conference luncheon in New York City to announce the launch of the book. There, Montserrat told Lewis: “Puerto Ricans did not come to this city to create the slums; the slums were already here...it is not a Puerto Rican problem, but a general one. That is why I cannot be in agreement with what is said in this book, which, instead of helping, will hurt Puerto Ricans.”

During Montserrat’s Senate testimony, Lewis smiled throughout and then replied that “no one could accuse him of not writing the ‘truth,’ or of changing in any way an ‘incontrovertible reality.’”⁸ Privately, Lewis was even more dismissive. In a letter to Angus Cameron, Piri Thomas’s editor at Knopf, Lewis wrote:

Joseph Montserrat, the reviewer, is a public relations man for the Commonwealth and his concern is not social science but public relations. I am tempted to reply to his review but I hate to take the time. Montserrat’s ignorance of even the elementary concepts of social science is glaring...I am amazed that Natural History would publish this kind of crap.⁹

⁷ Joseph Montserrat, “La Vida: A Further View,” *American Jewish Congress Bi-Weekly*, October 16, 1967, 18-19.

⁸ *San Juan Star*, November 16, 1966, 1,14. *San Juan Star*, December 15, 1966, *San Juan Star*, December 9, 1966, *El Imparcial*, December 12, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original of Montserrat quote: “Es un científico, o un escritor cuya perversion es la curiosidad sexual?”

⁹ Oscar Lewis to Angus Cameron, May 1, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 55.

The reaction against the book was equally strong in Puerto Rico proper. Juan Garcia-Passalacqua, PPD loyalist and aide to Puerto Rican Governor Roberto Sánchez Vilella, wrote a long review in the *San Juan Star*: “Gone with this book is the romantic, almost Quixotic image of the stoic, good, dignified, ascetic jibaro as the Puerto Rican prototype. With it emerges the existential, shocking image of a new hustling, unprincipled, foul-mouthed, and ruthless Puerto Rican.” Yet Garcia-Passalacqua agreed overall with the book, claiming that it revealed what “our incapacity to deal with the problems of birth control, unemployment, and urban development have done to at least three generations of Puerto Ricans.”

Garcia-Passalacqua was appalled by the explicitness of the book, convinced that the book was not representative of the Puerto Rican poor, and fearful that it would lodge a hurtful stereotype of Puerto Ricans in the minds of mainland Americans. “The danger inherent in such a book is obviously that the uninformed reader will judge all of us by its contents. It is no small danger.” Garcia-Passalacqua denigrated the characters in the book: “Fernanda is 40, apparently a nymphomaniac, and formerly a prostitute. Poverty is her background, prostitution her past, a series of men her only life, and drink and self indulgence her future. She is the tough, aggressive, obscene, sexually oriented ‘mother’ of all other four main characters.” Of the book’s expression of its characters’ lives, he wrote: “that is the voice of the rarely heard. It is a distant, disagreeable shrill...It evidences the narrowness of the life interest of a great segment of our population.”

Garcia-Passalacqua challenged Lewis’s claims that the PPD was trying to “cover up the sky with your hand.” “One must question whether Mr. Lewis thinks his book presents even a substantial part of the Puerto Rican ‘sky,’ and must ask him to remove the ‘hand’ of

the so-called ‘culture of poverty’ so that his reader can see **all** of it.” Puerto Ricans could only hope for three things:

First, that the government and private sector of Puerto Rico will be able to mobilize the resources to improve and eventually transform the lot of these people. Second, that they do not become the Puerto Ricans of the future. And third, that Mr. Lewis’ book does not become a best-seller. All three seem, at this point, equally improbable.”¹⁰

The *Star*, a paper broadly aligned with the PPD, also published a rebuttal to the Garcia-Passalacqua editorial from young writer Kal Wagenheim. He challenged Garcia-Passalacqua and the Muñoz-Marín administration to stop “covering up...for political reasons” the problem of poverty on the island and to start searching for solutions, “that is they can recover from the traumatic revelation...and start facing up to the cold, hard facts of *La Vida*.¹¹ But Wagenheim’s dissent was the exception. William Dovillier, the editor of the *Star*, wrote a full page editorial criticizing *La Vida*. He lamented that Puerto Rico attracted a disproportionate share of the world’s attention, for good and ill. The paper admitted that the depiction of the Ríos family was probably accurate: “Mr. Lewis has the tapes and the story. What his characters say about their lives is true if we allow for human error and the urge to exaggerate the desperate situation.” The paper predicted that the book would be read for all of the wrong reasons, however:

Who will read Mr. Lewis’s book? When the word gets around the same people will read *La Vida* who pushed Peyton Place and *Lolita* into many printings; the average man and woman

¹⁰ Juan Manuel Garcia-Passalacqua, “Book Review: ‘A New Breed,’” *The San Juan Star*, November 16, 1966, 1, 16. Preserved in the Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Garcia-Passalacqua later became a political activist, television commentator, and radio talk show host with a daily listener base of over 300,000. He is one of the most known media personalities in Puerto Rico, where he advocates at least a partial separation of Puerto Rico from the United States, and was a key player in the protest of the US Navy’s bombardment of Vieques. His radio broadcasts today resemble his editorial of 1966, advocating for Puerto Rican national culture while castigating those elements of Puerto Rican society he finds disloyal or undesirable. An excellent description of Garcia-Passalacqua’s career and politics can be found online in the Harvard Law Class Notes, http://www.law.harvard.edu/alumni/bulletin/2002/fall/classnotes_03.html.

¹¹ Kal Wagenheim, Letter to the Editor, *The San Juan Star*, November 24, 1966, 25.

who wants to read about the intimate details of sex relations and who haven't the slightest interest in the science of anthropology and who, in most part, wouldn't know what the word means and couldn't care less.

As for the sexual content of the book, the editor wrote that Lewis had merely described "a slice of life that exists in our midst as it exists in almost every place in the world [in poverty]...the female of the species finds [sex] the only marketable product between sustenance and starvation. It is a grim slice of life but one that exists."

The paper lamented that the Commonwealth no longer maintained an "answering service" on the mainland to represent Puerto Ricans. As a sort of double-whammy, another American anthropologist, Sidney Mintz, had published an article claiming that since numerous nationalities had settled in Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico did not have its own culture or national identity. Dovillier wondered,

Will someone some day say that the people of Puerto Rico had no culture and no national identity because 'a Professor Mintz' said so in 1966? Or will writers of the future go to the archives and read *La Vida* and say that was 'the Puerto Rico of the last half of the 20th Century?' Of course they will.¹²

The paper's columnists also took up the charge. Dimas Planas pointed out the dangers inherent in anthropology in an imperial setting:

'One cannot cover the sky with one's hand,' Lewis cries, repeating a saying with which Puerto Ricans have been familiar since childhood. Now anyone familiar with Puerto Rico who reads the book will notice immediately that Lewis has selected a small portion of the Puerto Rican sky...As we read and hear the above phrase, we are suddenly aware that it is an indication of a 'poor-little-brown-brother' attitude toward Latin Americans.¹³

¹² William Dovillier, "The Editor's Sunday Memo," *The San Juan Star*, 27 November 1966, E-3. Harry Turner, "Does Island Have a Culture?" *The San Juan Star*, November 24, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

¹³ Dimas Planas, "Lewis's Life," *The San Juan Star*, December 1, 1966, 29. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

Lewis's book received some praise in the Spanish-language nationalist press. In a piece titled "La Vida y Samuelito," (La Vida and little Sammy), the nationalist paper *Claridad* heaped scorn on Quiñones:

Right away, little Sammy Quiñones, our ineffable president of the Senate, considers himself offended because the eminent North American sociologist Oscar Lewis has described...a true aspect of the social nucleus of the Puerto Rican community...He has classified La Vida as 'an insult to Puerto Rico and to all of the poor people of the world...' For our part, we recommend that all responsible Puerto Ricans read the valiant book of Oscar Lewis so that they might know the ugly and deplorable side of the situation that Yankee colonialism is bringing to us.¹⁴

Other Spanish-language papers in Puerto Rico also supported the book. Jorge Javariz wrote in *El Mundo* that "La Vida' hurts. Not because it is a lie but because it is the truth." For those who reacted with disgust, he suggested, "If Puerto Ricans are disgusted by the crudeness with which La Vida describes the poor class of Puerto Rico, there are two things to do: fix those conditions, or keep avoiding them."¹⁵

The Spanish-language press in Puerto Rico did not all celebrate *La Vida*, however. A.W. Maldonado reviewed the book in *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*. Maldonado sympathized with Lewis's aims, and revealed that he had spoken with Lewis, who had implored him not to write anything about the book until he had read the whole work. Maldonado pointed out that the debate about the book boiled down to two questions. First, was *La Vida* a

¹⁴ "Peronías por Don Pancho: La Vida y Samuelito," *Claridad*, December 4, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original: "De pronto, Samuelito Quiñones, nuestro inefable presidente del Senado, se considera ofendido porque el eminente sociólogo norteamericano Osxcar Lewis ha descrito...un aspect tenebroso de cierto núcleo social del pueblo puertorriqueño...ha calificado la obra 'La Vida' del doctor Lewis, como 'un insulto a Puerto Rico y a todos los pobres del mundo.'" "Por nuestro parte, recomendamos a todos los puertorriqueños responsables que se lean el valioso libro de Oscar Lewis, para que conozcan el lado feo y deplorable de la situación a que nos esta llevando el coloniaje yanqui."

¹⁵ Jorge Javariz, untitled column, *El Mundo*, December 17, 1966, 7. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original: "'La Vida' hiera. No porque sea mentira sino porque es verdad." "Si a los puertorriqueños nos disgusta la crudeza con que 'La Vida' describe a la clase pobre de Puerto Rico hay dos cosas que hacer: remediar esas condiciones o seguir avergonzándonos de ellas."

legitimate scientific study, or was it an excuse to write a book filled with sex and violence under the guise of science? Second, did *La Vida* tell the “truth” about Puerto Rico? Maldonado argued that the book was a legitimate scientific study. The poor were real, acknowledged Maldonado, and the Ríos family was real, although Maldonado expressed a belief that the Ríos women had exaggerated their sex lives to Lewis. But, argued Maldonado, the book did not tell the truth about Puerto Ricans. Lewis himself had acknowledged this in his introduction, but that was not enough. The Ríos family, because of the limited world-view of the slums of San Juan, revealed all kinds of misguided notions about Puerto Rican society writ large. There should have been hundreds of notes, argued Maldonado, to correct all of the misconceptions about Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans in the words of the Ríos family. The book failed in its intent, argued Maldonado:

Lewis declares in his introduction that his basic goal in writing the book is to help the world to understand the ‘culture of poverty’ in general, and Puerto Rican poverty in particular. His motivations are good. But it appears inevitable that ‘La Vida’ will only unjustly distort what Puerto Rico really is. Instead of bringing compassion and comprehension, the book brings incredulity.¹⁶

The Puerto Rican discussion about *La Vida* was not limited to journalists and intellectuals. Average people wrote letters to the editor. Most criticized the book. Nylda Davies opined that Lewis was “conveying to his readers a most unfair picture of the Puerto Rican image.” She called for a boycott of the book. Catalino Montijo Robles, in a letter longer than many book reviews, trashed the book. Robles attacked a reviewer of the book who had written that the book let Puerto Ricans see themselves “for the first time...as they

¹⁶ A.W. Maldonado, untitled review, *Puerto Rico Ilustrado Suplemento Sabatino*, March 18, 1967, 1. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original: “Lewis declara en su introducción que su propósito básico al escribir el libro es ayudar a todo el mundo a entender la ‘cultura de la pobreza’ en general y de la pobreza puertorriqueña en particular. Sus motivaciones son buenas. Pero parece inevitable que ‘La Vida’ solo logre distorsionar perjudicialmente lo que Puerto Rico en realidad es. En vez de despertar compassion y comprensión, lo que el libro despierta es incredulidad.”

really are, undistorted by romanticism and race prejudice.” Robles suggested that the book actually said more about mainland Americans: “For the first time, Americans see themselves as they really are, distorted with social and racial prejudice, always seeing the dirt in the neighbor’s clothes.” Despite their criticism, both of these readers admitted they had not read the book. Thomas Benner contributed, “[Although] the story of the poor who have not crumbled completely under the tortures of their deprivation would not be ‘newsworthy,’ they too deserve anthropological study.”¹⁷

Manny Suarez saw the Ríos family as unrepresentative of Puerto Rico:

With all the foundation money Mr. Lewis had at his disposal, would it not have been possible to select a more typical family from La Perla?...The canvas could have been broader and more meaningful if it included a prostitute, a housewife striving to make ends meet on the pitiful handout we call ‘mantengo’, a poorly educated man drifting from job to job, and—if possible—a family which managed to move out of La Perla into a so called ‘middle-income’ housing project who could look back on life in La Perla and give us the viewpoint of a family that found its way out.”¹⁸

Manuel Pena offered that he was not “a college man” but that he could show Lewis “10 ‘La Perlas’ and 10 ‘El Fanguitos’ right on the U.S.A. mainland for every one he can find in Puerto Rico, and these conditions has (sic) less right to exist in the U.S.A. mainland than in P.R. since P.R. is a very poor island compared to the wealthiest nation, the U.S.A.” Pena claimed that although there were many poor people in Puerto Rico, Lewis intentionally had

¹⁷ Nylde Davies, Letter to the Editor, *San Juan Star*, November 25, 1966, 51. Catalino Montijo Robles, “Looking at La Vida: A Reader’s Viewpoint,” *The San Juan Star*, December 12, 1966, 17. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Thomas E. Benner, Former Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico, Letter to the Editor, *The San Juan Star*, November 29, 1966, 23.

¹⁸ Manny Suarez, Letter to the Editor, *San Juan Star*, December 3, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

ignored all of the “humble, simple, and good religious people.” Pena concluded with “May the good Lord have mercy on your little bigoted soul.”¹⁹

US Army physician José Segarra wrote to the *Star* from his unit in Vietnam. He wrote that he had “seen the atrocities of war,” but that he had “never felt so astonished and shocked” as when he had read the *Star’s* review of *La Vida*: “How could [Lewis] dare to ‘choose’ such pathological personalities as three prostitutes, a cripple, and a sterile man as the typical Puerto Ricans?” Segarra theorized that “Lewis exploits the fact that American readers have always been fascinated with sex books,” and also offered that a psychoanalysis done on Lewis might “reveal that he has a maternal fixation with whores.” Segarra also wrote that Fernanda could not be a representative Puerto Rican, because she “is a negro, while 80 percent of the Puerto Rican people are caucasians.”²⁰ Lewis never answered the laypeople’s criticisms of *La Vida*. In correspondence with other academics, though, he made clear that they grated on him: “I must admit that I found it terribly irritating to read the nasty and stupid letters in the San Juan Review (sic) by readers who admit that they have never read La Vida.”²¹

Other letter-writers defended Lewis. Juan Ruiz urged his countrymen to learn from *La Vida*. “Why can’t we take the work of Doctor Lewis in his book, ‘La Vida,’ as a lesson, a hard lesson, and instead of lamenting what he has said, we can work a little on behalf of poor families, the elimination of the slums and a better education for our community?”²²

Robert Stephenson remembered a proposed solution for beggars in Old San Juan: send

¹⁹ Manuel Pena, Letter to the Editor, *San Juan Star*, November 24, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

²⁰ Jose A. Segarra, MD. Letter to the Editor, *San Juan Star*, December 13, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

²¹ Oscar Lewis to Ursula Von Eckardt, January 10, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61.

²² “Dura Lección” in *El Mundo*, December 22, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish Original: “¿Por qué no tomamos lo escrito por el doctor Oscar Lewis en su libro “La Vida”, como una lección, dura lección, y en vez de lamentamos de lo que ha dicho, nos ponemos a trabajar un poco en favor de las familias pobres, la eliminación de los arrabales y una mejor educación a nuestra comunidad.”

them back to their villages so that no one would notice them. “Keep it out of sight, and if you can’t keep it out of sight don’t, at any rate, talk about it,” mocked Stephenson. “Whose business is it to attract tourists?” he asked. “Why everybody’s, and everybody is working away at it.” Stephenson even included a poem—a limerick, no less:

It’s our duty, our patriot’s chore.
 To sweep all of the dirt off of the floor;
 When we see it we shrug,
 Sweep it under the rug,
 And stand there and bow in the door.²³

Gladys Gaumann wrote: “The great value of *La Vida* is that it gives us middle class and upper class Puerto Ricans a very poignant and vivid picture of the lives of thousands upon thousands of Puerto Ricans who still live in the slums.” She wrote of her relief work in poverty stricken areas, of families living with inadequate food and without running water or electricity. She accused Puerto Ricans who attacked the book of ignorance: “most of the people who have condemned *La Vida* have never been to La Perla or to any other slum.” She also defended Lewis for writing about prostitutes: “what does it matter whether he used five prostitutes, five drug addicts, five thieves, or five murderers? All the conditions of poverty would still be there.”²⁴

The *Star* even went to La Perla to gauge the book’s reception there. The paper announced that *La Vida* was “no bestseller in La Perla.” None of the interviewed inhabitants of La Perla had read the book. Those who had heard of it criticized it. José Fremaitt Cuchi claimed that Lewis had “discredited Puerto Rican womanhood...the

²³ Robert Stephenson, Letter to the Editor, *The San Juan Star*, November 22, 1966, 23.

²⁴ Gladys Gaumann, Letter to the Editor, *The San Juan Star*, November 30, 1966.

situation in La Perla could be found in almost any part of the world.” Cuchi added that Lewis “wouldn’t dare to show his face around here again.” Jorge Luis Rivera claimed that “If he portrayed a family that turned to sin in order to survive, he should also have portrayed an equally poor family that managed to survive while leading decent lives.”²⁵

The discovery by the Puerto Rican press that La Perla was the real setting for *La Vida* threatened the confidentiality of the book’s informants, which had always worried Lewis. Lewis wrote to Joseph Fitzpatrick, a Catholic priest and scholar at Fordham University, that he feared that the Ríos family would be identified and suffer retaliation for their participation in the project. Fitzpatrick in turn wrote to “Father Ponce” (Venard Kanfush, a Catholic Priest in La Perla who appeared in *La Vida*), asking him to keep the identity of the barrio and of the Ríos family confidential. Fitzpatrick did not instruct Kanfush to defend Lewis’s book. Rather, he suggested that the response of the Catholic clergy and spokespeople be “intelligent and perceptive...whether critical or favorable, I hope that they will reveal an awareness of what Lewis is trying to do.” Fitzpatrick told Father Venard that the book would also have value: “[Lewis] is convinced, and I would agree with him, that no such record of the life of this type of people is available. He hopes to give us a little glimpse of the many wonderful characteristics which are present in their lives and which are generally overlooked because we tend to center our attention on their deprivation and failings.”²⁶ The secrecy of the barrio was moot. The Puerto Rican press, government, and intelligentsia were all aware that *La Esmerelda* was really *La Perla*. There is not any evidence that the Ríos family was ever discovered.

The *Star* interviewed Kanfush, who revealed himself as “Father Ponce.” Kanfush admitted that “the book is probably accurate in describing at least a segment of life in La

²⁵ Frank Ramos, “‘La Vida’ no Bestseller in La Perla,” *The San Juan Star*, November 27, 1966, 1, 14.

²⁶ Joseph Fitzpatrick to Padre Venard, O.F.M. Cap., bcc to Oscar Lewis, October 26, 1966. Joseph Fitzpatrick to Father Venard, cc to Oscar Lewis, October 19, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

Perla but...it does not apply to the vast majority of people living there.” Kanfush praised Lewis for his “courage in writing the book,” and told Puerto Ricans that they “must not close their eyes to certain realities that exist in la Perla.” Kanfush allowed that he would have preferred for Lewis to have aimed the book more directly at professionals and clergymen who worked with the poor, rather than at a general audience that would read the book for its “immoral” content. Kanfush was glad, however, that the book had been written, to expose one type of life behind the wall that separated La Perla from the rest of San Juan, where he worked in “a ghetto, in a world apart.”²⁷

Puerto Ricans living in the mainland US had different reactions. In March of 1965, as Lewis was writing *La Vida*, and as Piri Thomas was writing *Down These Mean Streets*, his memoir of his life growing up as a poor Nuyorican, Thomas’s publisher, Angus Cameron, contacted Lewis and asked him to serve as an outside reader for a manuscript from Thomas. Lewis read the manuscript and gave enthusiastic comments to both Cameron and Thomas. “My over all impression of the manuscript was positive, even enthusiastic.” Lewis was especially impressed with the description of “the importance of color distinctions which are relatively benign in Puerto Rico but become explosive in New York.” Lewis gushed about the book, “We need more books like this. It is important that we understand how it feels and what it means to grow up as a Puerto Rican in New York.” Lewis urged Thomas to delve deeper into the relationships within Thomas’s family. As a result, Thomas evidently included more scenes in the book that depicted the reality of the relationship between his mother and himself. Lewis sent Thomas a letter encouraging him in his work. Thomas’s response was a planned acknowledgment in his book: “Oscar Lewis,

²⁷ Frank Ramos, “La Perla Priest Cites ‘Realities,’” *The San Juan Star*, January 8, 1967, 1, 14.

when I most needed assurance as a writer, your letter came. Gracias con todo mi corazon” (trans: “Thank you with all my heart”).²⁸

After *La Vida* was published, Piri Thomas, in a short letter to fellow Puerto Ricans, defended Lewis:

I walked with my good amigo, Angus Cameron...and we had been discussing Oscar Lewis, a most beautiful man in my heart, who had the courage and dignified honor to say it like it is in his book La Vida. I heard my own thoughts...reality is not a dream or sense of illusion, but the realest happening. I said out loud, ‘Oscar Lewis is a helluva man and he says it like it is.’

Thomas praised the realism of *La Vida*:

Puertorriquenos, La Vida serves a positive purpose by bringing to light a stick of living that exists not only in Puerto Rico and Nueva York, but throughout the whole world. Ugliness is ugliness and you cannot hide it under the corner of the proverbial rug...We must understand that in our zeal for our people to rise, we must also recognize the presence of the ugly conditions and the reality of these mean streets. It is a beautiful truth that we Puerto Ricans have all the right in the world to feel the greatest of pride in our achievements. But the horrified conditions of poverty are a screaming reality...But that didn’t keep us down. For we have the good blood, the pride, and the dignity to have arrived at the point where we are today, gracias a Dios [Thanks to God]. And like they say it in the street, ‘world, you ain’t seen nothin yet’. And we are going to give the best, the very best...Puertorriqueños, we have nothing to be ashamed of and all to be proud of.²⁹

But Thomas’s praise was not the norm. Lewis received angry letters from other Nuyoricans in connection with the book. One anonymous letter contained the only anti-Semitic correspondence that Lewis received, or at least that he bothered to keep. A letter

²⁸ Angus Cameron to Oscar Lewis, March 22, 1965. Angus Cameron to Oscar Lewis, May 27, 1965. Oscar Lewis to Angus Cameron, June 9, 1965. Angus Cameron to Oscar Lewis, June 11, 1965. Angus Cameron to Oscar Lewis, September 21, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 55. Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*, New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

²⁹ Piri Thomas Montanez, “My Own Thoughts in Answer to Criticisms of *La Vida* by Oscar Lewis,” Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 61. Underlining in original.

signed “A Puerto Rican” insisted that Lewis should study the sex lives of Jewish women, whom the writer insisted “have had as many sexual affairs with as many different men as any woman who stands at a corner waiting for a man (A prostitute).” After the rant, the writer launched into an interesting comparative analysis, pointing out the high rates of casual sex and narcotics consumption amongst middle and upper class students on college campuses in the United States: “You are walking in a university campus and you mean to tell me you do not know what goes on? Are you so naïve? Or are you trying to tapar el cielo con la mano?...It is interesting to compare the poverty stricken and the wealthy. They are all alike. Funny isn’t it?”³⁰

Another writer, Pedro A. Perez, Jr. complained that Lewis was furthering negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans. He boasted of his family’s accomplishments, describing a family in which everyone had been on welfare, but most had graduated from college and now had middle-class jobs. Perez appealed to Lewis, “Allow us to maintain the dignity we have earned.” Perez also, however, launched into his own stereotyping: “Any good we as individuals do is negated by your colleagues and yourself. We are slowly progressing and unlike the Negro are willing to work for our future.”³¹

Federico Ribes Tovar, a Spaniard who had lived in Puerto Rico and wrote extensively about it, edited *Isla Literaria* in San Juan. At the time of *La Vida*’s publication, he was writing about the conditions of the Puerto Rican migrant community in New York City and wrote a lengthy review of *La Vida* in *Isla Literaria*, so that Puerto Ricans on the island could understand the issues the book raised for Puerto Ricans living in New York. He saw the Ríos family as unrepresentative of the poor. “It is not just a poor family, it is a

³⁰ “A Puerto Rican” to Oscar Lewis. December 27, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56. Parentheses in original.

³¹ Pedro A. Perez, Jr. to Oscar Lewis, December 7, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

family whose women engage in prostitution...And prostitution, according to sociologists and doctors, is a pathological state not necessarily occasioned by poverty.”³² The book’s use of prostitutes as its subject matter insulted Puerto Ricans: “The subtitle of ‘La Vida’ [*A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty, New York and San Juan*] in the context of the book is an insult to poor Puerto Ricans. And the Puerto Rican community in New York continues, in the majority, to be poor.”³³ Puerto Ricans in New York, argued Ribes Tovar, were subject to discrimination because of their skin color, and simply because they were different. *La Vida*, he said, would give a new basis for discrimination: “This book, ‘La Vida,’ as the author recognizes, gives the pseudo-scientific basis for a new mode of discrimination: that the image of the poor Puerto Rican woman is, or is about to become, a prostitute.”³⁴

Ribes Tovar also criticized Lewis’s methodology, pointing out that Lewis himself was ambivalent about whether the Ríos family could be seen as representative. On the one hand, Lewis’s introduction said that they were not representative, that the family’s history of prostitution and extreme poverty made it an outlier, even within La Perla and Spanish Harlem. Ribes Tovar pointed out that Lewis’s own criticism of traditional anthropological methodology was that it studied culture in the abstract, taking generalizations from broad cultural studies and then extending them to the lives of individuals within those cultures, ignoring the significant differences that individuals might experience within a larger culture. Was not Lewis himself making the same error in reverse, asked Ribes Tovar?

³² Federico Ribes Tovar, “La Vida,” *Isla Literaria*, undated, 28-29. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Spanish original: No es solamente una familia pobre, es una familia cuyas mujeres ejercen la prostitucion...Y la prostitucion, segun sociologos y medicos, es un estado patologico no necesariamente ocasionado por la pobreza.

³³ *Ibid.*, Spanish original: El subtitulo de ‘La Vida’ en relacion con el contexto del libro, es un insulto a los pobres Puertorriquenos. Y la comunidad puertorriquena de Nueva York sigue, en la mayoria, siendo pobre.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Spanish original: Este libro, ‘La Vida,’ como su autor reconoce, sentara las bases pseudo-cientificas para un nuevo motivo de discriminacion la imagen de que la mujer puertorriquena pobre es, o esta abocada a ser, una prostituta.

Lewis had failed, continued Ribes Tovar, to make any sort of convincing connection between the Rios family and the broader life of the Puerto Rican poor, especially in New York City. “Unless he knows something he’s not telling us, and that implication stands out from his introduction, Dr. Lewis must confront the accusation that his method is therefore false, anti-scientific, even antisocial-scientific.”³⁵ Had Lewis given some sort of caveat that *La Vida* was really a study of prostitution within poverty, and not of either poverty generally or of Puerto Ricans, it might be a valid study, but he did not:

Therefore, ‘La Vida’ as an anthropological study of Puerto Rican poverty appears to us as an insult to Puerto Rico and to the Puerto Rican Nuyorican community. Call it what it is: a study of prostitution by new methods... We raise our protest against the pages of the book that describe, beyond the fights and suffering of the poor Puerto Rican migrants in New York, many successes and profits individually as well as collectively, that these too are ‘true’ fruit of the culture of poverty amongst the most unfortunate Puerto Ricans: the uprooted.³⁶

Puerto Rican academics in New York tried to organize efforts around the book. Paul Caballero, Chairman of the Association for Puerto Rican Studies, invited Lewis to a forum on *La Vida*. Participants were to include Lewis, Sidney Mintz, Puerto Rican scholar Edwin Seda Bonilla, linguist Joshua Fishman, and others. Lewis declined to attend, citing overwork.³⁷ Edward Ortiz, a faculty member of Brooklyn College, coordinated with faculty from Hunter College and the East Harlem Tenant’s Council to form a research group on the

³⁵ Ibid., Spanish original: A menos que él sepa algo que no nos dice, y esta implicación resalta de su introducción, el Dr. Lewis debe afrontar la acusación de que su método resulta falso, anticientífico—incluso ‘antisocial-científico.’

³⁶ Ibid., Spanish original: Por eso ‘La Vida’ como estudio antropológico de la pobreza puertorriqueña nos parece un insulto a Puerto Rico y a la comunidad puertorriqueña neoyorkina. Llámesele lo que es: un estudio por métodos nuevos de la prostitución...alzamos nuestra protesta desde las páginas de este libro que describen, además de las luchas y sufrimientos de los pobres migrantes puertorriqueños en Nueva York, muchos de sus éxitos y logros tanto individuales como colectivos, que son también ‘verdadero’ fruto de la cultura de la pobreza entre los más infortunados puertorriqueños: los desarraigados.

³⁷ Paul Caballero to Oscar Lewis, November 8, 1967. Oscar Lewis to Paul Caballero, 24 November 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 59.

book. The group featured several anthropologists and sociologists and was even lent semi-celebrity status by the participation of Puerto Rican actress Miriam Colon. The research group aimed to formulate a “methodological and conceptual” challenge to *La Vida*, particularly with respect to the culture of poverty.³⁸

Finally, in 1970, as Lewis was suffering from heart troubles, Puerto Rican novelist Pedro Juan Soto wrote to Lewis inviting him to give a lecture on *La Vida* and to meet with students at the Puerto Rican Studies and Research Center in Buffalo, New York. Lewis declined, citing his health. “I have been quite ill this semester...I have had some serious heart trouble and I have been out of action for quite a while. I am still not able to give a public lecture even though I am feeling much better.”³⁹ He died days later.

Lewis’s Puerto Rican and Nuyoricano critics earnestly believed in what they said and wrote. His supporters did as well. Lewis was probably right when he accused government officials and middle class Puerto Ricans of not wanting to face the problem of poverty in their society, fearing that it would reflect badly upon them, but the PPD officials, newspaper columnists and average people who wrote letters to the editors also had a very earnest and proud Puerto Rican nationalism that Lewis did not fully understand. Their belief that they were sticking up for all Puerto Ricans was just as sincere as Lewis’s belief in the culture of poverty. The two sides were speaking different languages and asking different questions.

This is one of the lessons of *La Vida*. The collision of nationalism and anthropology, of politics and science, produced a set of beliefs that were not in opposition, but that could

³⁸ Seymour Bernstein to Oscar Lewis, January 2, 1968. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 55. John Gotsch promotional letter to colleagues, March 6, 1967. John Gotsch to Oscar Lewis, March 25, 1967. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

³⁹ Pedro Juan Soto to Oscar Lewis, September 22, 1970. Oscar Lewis to Pedro Juan Soto, November 20, 1970. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 60.

not be reconciled. There was no inherent conflict between the possibility that Lewis's culture of poverty was real, at least in part, or that *La Vida* was accurate (with the qualification that it described only one segment of the Puerto Rican poor, who could not be equated with all other Puerto Ricans), and the statement that *La Vida* served to malign many Puerto Ricans in the popular mind. Puerto Rican critics claimed that they had a kinship with and knowledge of the Puerto Rican poor that outsiders could not understand.⁴⁰ Lewis claimed to understand a segment of the Puerto Rican poor in ways that other Puerto Ricans did not understand them. The two statements are not in contradiction.

The American reception of *La Vida* was dramatic as well. Elmer Bendiner, writing in *The Nation*, meditated on the liberal mindset and its problems:

It is embarrassing to a reformer to find that new housing projects quickly become skyscraper slums, and that when a trickle of affluence sweeps down to the lowest strata of society it sometimes enables a slum dweller to feed a narcotics habit or buy a Cadillac instead of paying the rent. An explanation of why some of the poor behave as they do, and why handouts and social work are inadequate, has now been formulated neatly, concisely, even brilliantly by Oscar Lewis.⁴¹

Bendiner's interpretation was unfair, both to Lewis and to the characters in *La Vida*. None of the characters in the book were drug addicts or drove Cadillacs. The characters in the book sometimes spent money haphazardly, but never on hard drugs, and never on luxuries

⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson argues out that nationalism posits a strange notion, that members of a nation have a special relationship with other members of their national group, most of whom they do not know, and will never meet. Hence nationalism constructs imagined communities, where the members of a nation must constantly imagine what these national bonds consist of. Particularly influential in this process are newspapers and the printed word. While Anderson's book covers a much earlier political epoch, it is interesting that in 1960s Puerto Rico, this process of Puerto Ricans imagining themselves as a nation was very much in action. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁴¹ Elmer Bendiner, "Outside the Kingdom of the Middle Class," *The Nation*, January 2, 1967, 22-23. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Bendiner had himself undertaken a study of poverty. Elmer Bendiner, *The Bowery Man* (New York: Nelson, 1961).

like Cadillacs. Lewis bristled at suggestions that the poor, even those that he described as belonging to the culture of poverty, were immoral, lazy, or stupid. The reactions to Lewis's work, even in respectable journals like *The Nation*, demonstrated that Lewis would never be in control over how his ideas would be used and misused.

Others understood what Lewis wrote and gave the book a sympathetic reading. Nat Hentoff reviewed *La Vida* for *The New Yorker*. Hentoff praised Lewis's ability to bring the lives of the poor to his audience: "As seldom happens in non-fiction descriptions of the poor, the people of La Esmerelda...have an actuality, a vividness, and an impact that will reverberate in the mind." The culture of poverty idea made "a real contribution" to the problem of poverty. But what could be done with this knowledge? The American War on Poverty solution of welfare, social work, and psychiatric services did not solve the problem, at least not according to Hentoff. He cited Cruz's experience in the housing projects at the end of *La Vida*. Public housing had taken Cruz into a dull, impersonal, but modern neighborhood. This had improved Cruz's material standard of living, but at the loss of the vibrancy of her old neighborhood, *La Perla*: "May God deliver me from quiet places; I can defend myself in the wild ones," Hentoff quoted Cruz. Was "there no way...for the strengths of the poor to survive the removal of the more destructive elements of the culture of poverty?"⁴² asked Hentoff.

Michael Harrington reviewed the book for *The New York Times*. He proclaimed that it was "unquestionably one of the most important books published in the United States this year." Harrington had his disagreements with Lewis: Lewis had greatly underestimated the number of people in the United States who were poor or in the culture of poverty; he erred in referring to "Communism as socialism;" (no doubt Harrington was guarding his

⁴² Nat Hentoff, "Life Near the Bone," *The New Yorker*, March 4, 1967, 156-159. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

own American democratic socialist turf here from Marxist intrusion); and, Harrington claimed, a social work solution was just as unfeasible in the United States as it was in the Third World.⁴³ But overall, Harrington was supportive of Lewis and *La Vida*. Lewis had steered a path around several oversimplifications of poverty. The first of these was represented by Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and in America by the "Black Power ideologists" who were advocating for the black poor in America as a "potential source of social regeneration." The second, Harrington identified as those who believed "that poverty holds only degradation." Finally, there were the "reactionaries" who "believe that the slum dwellers 'got that way' because they wanted to and lacked the Goldwaterite virtues of thrift and enterprise." Lewis revealed "the half-truths and falsehoods behind these contradictory myths."⁴⁴

Harrington's own thinking had changed considerably in the five years since he had published *The Other America*. There, he had argued that the poor were beaten beyond helping themselves: "The other Americans are those who live at a level of life beneath moral choice, who are so submerged in their poverty that one cannot begin to talk about free choice. The point is not to make them wards of the state. Rather, society must help them before they can help themselves."⁴⁵ Historian Michael Katz argues that Harrington's analysis of poverty in *The Other America* assumed that the poor were far less activist than did Lewis: "Harrington's call to action against poverty lacked Lewis's appreciation of the potential of organized militance and assumed the passivity of the poor. Only the intervention of sympathetic elites could begin to lift poor people out of their degraded and

⁴³ Lewis's position in *La Vida* on the feasibility of a social work solution for poverty in the United States or Puerto Rico was unclear. In correspondence with Herbert Gans, Lewis claimed that Gans and Harrington misunderstood his position on the social work question (see Chapter Two). Oscar Lewis to Herbert Gans, November 23, 1966. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

⁴⁴ Michael Harrington, "Everyday Hell," *The New York Times Book Review*, November 20, 1966, Section 7, pg.1. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

⁴⁵ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1972c), 162.

helpless condition.”⁴⁶ Now in the Ríos family, Harrington found the poor as a people who had “not been overwhelmed; they have a capacity to act on their own behalf that demands liberation, not *noblesse oblige*.”⁴⁷

Nathan Glazer reviewed *La Vida* for *Commentary*. Glazer’s sociological work, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, co-written with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, had been one of the primary intellectual works of the 1960s dealing with the Puerto Rican migration.⁴⁸ Glazer’s review accepted certain aspects of Lewis’s work. He acknowledged, for instance, that *La Vida* and the description of the culture of poverty presented there made an important contribution to the national discourse on poverty. But Glazer criticized Lewis for not making clear how the Ríos family was representative, or not representative, of Puerto Ricans generally, of the culture of poverty, or of a family living in a slum.

The Ríos family, argued Glazer, was more representative of “what might be called the culture of prostitution and of the most disorganized forms of slum life.” Glazer argued that those who were protesting against the book as a “misleading picture of the Puerto Rican community” were far more justified than the Mexicans who had protested against *Children of Sanchez*.⁴⁹ There was a certain irony here in that Glazer was criticizing Lewis for speaking in much the same language that Glazer himself had used only a few years earlier. In *Beyond the Melting Pot*, published three years before *La Vida*, he and Moynihan had described the prototypical Puerto Rican family as “patriarchal and authoritarian, the man reigning as absolute despot, demanding obedience from his wife and children.” They wrote that Puerto Ricans lacked a “rich culture and a strong family system,” and—along

⁴⁶ Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), 20.

⁴⁷ Michael Harrington, “Everyday Hell,” 1.

⁴⁸ Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1963).

⁴⁹ Nathan Glazer, “One Kind of Life,” *Commentary*, February 1967, 83-84. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

the same lines that Lewis would explore in his correspondence with Muñoz Lee—that Puerto Rican culture was weakened because the native population was small and assimilated, and their African population had not retained its rich African traditions. Like Harrington, Glazer had completed an about face, albeit along somewhat different lines. The scholar who once had made broad critical statements about Puerto Rican history, culture, and family life was now criticizing Lewis for making what were objectively milder and more carefully hedged statements.⁵⁰

Harrington had gone, in just a few years, from believing the poor were beyond helping themselves to believing in their agency. Glazer had gone from criticizing the Puerto Rican family and community structure to positioning himself as a defender of Puerto Rican virtue from assaults by unsympathetic outsiders like Lewis. Both represented the journey of the 1950s social scientist into the new 1960s liberal scholar. Lewis was one step behind. His belief, as stated in his letter to the editorial staff of the *New York Times*, that *La Vida* would be a bombshell in the United States because it punctured some 1950s national conformist illusion that poverty did not exist, was hopelessly outdated. Harrington and Glazer already understood something about the 1960s consciousness of national groups that Lewis had thus far failed to grasp.

Barrington Moore, Jr. reviewed *La Vida* in the *New York Review of Books*. In the same year that *La Vida* debuted, Moore published *Social Origins Of Dictatorship And Democracy : Lord And Peasant In The Making Of The Modern World*, which studied the transformation of peasant societies towards modern society along various pathways—revolutionary democratic, fascist, and revolutionary socialist.⁵¹ Moore was most interested in the dynamic of the Puerto Rican poor, their absence of revolutionary tradition, as well as

⁵⁰ Glazer and Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 88-89.

⁵¹ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

the meaning of the poor in an industrialized world. Moore saw the world of *La Vida* as a small part of a larger society that was sick:

The pages of *La Vida* suggest to me that these slums are essentially the poor man's version of the affluent society. There is the same fragmentation, meaninglessness, and consequent resort to erotic stimulation, alcohol, or more powerful drugs, the same senseless violence. Naturally, there are differences, but they are not necessarily in favor of suburbia. Right now, the violence of the slum may be less dangerous to human civilization than that of the affluent. Broken bottle tops and razor blades cannot do as much damage as napalm, phosphorous, and hydrogen bombs.

Moore was interested in understanding why the Puerto Rican poor didn't revolt. He claimed that they did not have a revolutionary class consciousness because they did not experience direct and systematic conflict with employers. He contrasted the Puerto Rican poor with the Chinese Communist peasant class. The Chinese peasantry saw their life work stolen from them on a yearly basis by oppressive and imperious landlords and taxmen. But he read the Puerto Rican poor in *La Vida* as having rather cordial and friendly relations with their employers. The populace of the slums, thought Moore, had a low degree of cooperation, so they directed their anger about the system into violence against one another, "instead of being directed outward in violent class warfare or in sublimated and peaceful forms of political conflict." Residents also lacked an "independent moral code that would enable these slum dwellers to judge and condemn in unequivocal terms the society that surrounds them...the hopes and fantasies of these poor people revolve mainly around acquiring the outward trappings of respectability...a slightly Hispanicized version of American suburbia."⁵²

⁵² Barrington Moore, Jr. "In the Life," *New York Review of Books*, 15 June 1967, 3-4. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

Ritchie Lowry, a Boston College sociology professor writing for *The Boston Sunday Herald*, worried that *La Vida* did not sufficiently reveal who or what the Ríos family was supposed to represent. Lowry admired Lewis's realism. He accepted the culture of poverty, but its application to political solutions for poverty was unclear:

If we, as both scientists and citizens are to make knowledgeable decisions about programs such as the War on Poverty, VISTA and Headstart, we must have more than emotional empathy with the culture of poverty. We must, in addition, know something about its extent, its limits, and the manner in which it varies from one location to another.⁵³

Not all liberal scholars accepted the culture of poverty. In a review that dealt extensively and intelligently with the methodology of the book, Irving Louis Horowitz pointed out some of the contradictions. "We are told that 'the culture of poverty transcends regional, rural-urban, and national differences'...But earlier in his introduction, Lewis states the opposite: that in his studies comparing the Sanchez and the Ríos families "a number of differences emerge, differences which are undoubtedly related to the different histories of Mexico and Puerto Rico." Horowitz also wondered about the definition of the culture of poverty, pointing out that Lewis used the term to refer to "the urban poor, the *lumpen proletariat*, and finally those who simply believe in the 'reality of the moment...enjoyment of the sensual, the indulgence of the impulse, etc.'" Horowitz also questioned how, if the culture of poverty, was "both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individualistic, capitalistic society," the United States, according to Lewis, had few people living in the culture of poverty.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ritchie Lowry, "The Poverty of Puerto Ricans," *The Boston Sunday Herald*, January 1, 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

⁵⁴ Irving Louis Horowitz, "Muerte en Vida," *Trans-Action*, March 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19. Although Horowitz's review pointed out some of the problems in *La Vida*, that was evidently not enough for some.

American conservatives reviewed *La Vida* as well. Max Geltman took *La Vida* to task in *National Review*. Invoking Marshall McLuhan, Geltman posited that Lewis had captured the spirit of the age with his tape-recorder. “Electronic anthropology” was a natural in an age when Americans had gotten “used to reading headlines on the run and book titles instead of books.” Geltman complained about the imprecision in the book, using the example of Soledad and Benedicto, who earned a decent income and spent quite a bit of money on new clothes and the like. Since it was “actually not necessary to be poor to belong to the culture of poverty,” what differentiated someone who was poor and not in the culture of poverty from someone who was not poor but was in the culture of poverty? At this point, Geltman went off the rails, insinuating that Lewis manufactured the Ríos family out of thin air. Even if they were real, Geltman asked, what did they represent? Nothing, he argued. Sex drove attention to the book. The limited conservative reaction to *La Vida* revealed a politics that denied the social fissures wrought by class divisions, and lambasted an author who wrote matter-of-factly about human sexuality.⁵⁵

There were endless reviews of the book in the American press. Mainstream mass publications like *Newsweek* reviewed it, as did major and minor dailies across the country. The review in *Newsweek* typified these. Not concerned with technical debates about the culture of poverty or with the specific political ramifications of Lewis’s work for poverty programs, the review praised the book for its timeliness, its relentless realism, and its power: “The names are invented, but the people are real...Lewis continues to conquer the ground he broke in his earlier Mexican studies in the culture of poverty.” The reviewer did

Horowitz reported that he was being attacked by a former student for not coming down hard enough on the book. Irving Louis Horowitz to Oscar Lewis, May 2, 1967, 50-52.

⁵⁵ Max Geltman, “Electronic Anthropology,” *National Review*, April 18, 1967, 426-428. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

stress that the book was not about all Puerto Ricans; this was a book only about “those who live in the implacable, self perpetuating and inherited culture of poverty.” The review opened and closed with Gabi: “How he will grow up is at the present time foreordained. He cannot control the shaping forces; only ‘society’ can do that.”⁵⁶

Religious journals reviewed *La Vida* with an eye towards its meaning for their adherents. The majority of the reviews were good. Unsurprisingly, religious journals tended to argue that absent any viable solution for poverty, the churches of America were the answer. Michele Murray wrote in *The National Catholic Reporter* that the blame rested with all Americans: “Our larger society has been deficient in supplying authentic beliefs worthy of sacrifice and struggle because it lacks conviction of its own professed standards.” But “beyond giving money, the state is perhaps not the best agency to provide even a partial solution, simply because any assistance beyond the financial does involve profound questions of value and belief. I would like to suggest further that this is the mission of the churches, their opportunity, their hope.”⁵⁷

An academic mainline Protestant journal, *Soundings*, offered up a review essay of *La Vida*, along with works by Robert Coles and Studs Terkel. *La Vida* stood out as the superior work in the eyes of the reviewer, John McDermott, a philosopher at CUNY. One of the real gifts of Lewis was that his method engendered a humanistic understanding of his subjects. “Those trapped in the culture of poverty, as Lewis shows, build a life somehow, no matter how meagre or afflicted. They have thrust and energy. This judgment may go against Lewis’s ultimate intention, but my reading of *La Vida* reveals a people human

⁵⁶ Saul Maloff, “Man’s Fate?” *Newsweek*, November 21, 1966. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

⁵⁷ Michelle Murray, “The Despair in Poverty’s Subculture,” *The National Catholic Reporter*, January 4, 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

throughout.”⁵⁸ This humanism was what gave the book its power to serve as a real tool in combating poverty:

If we have not had a long personal experience within the Puerto Rican community in question, how could we possibly develop a sense for their life and needs except by the method chosen by Oscar Lewis? And if we were responsible for alleviating some of their major difficulties how could we proceed unless we shared Lewis’s empathetic insight into their way of life? *La Vida* demands at least this of us; and it rules out all forms of condescension, self-righteousness, or manipulation in any attempt at amelioration of poverty as lived by the Rios (sic) family.⁵⁹

“It is deeply wrong to pray for that upon which we refuse to look,” proclaimed the review in *Mission*, an evangelical Protestant journal. *La Vida* granted a chance for evangelical Protestants to experience, in book form, the world of the poor. “It has been our sin in the past to be content with what the missionary, the ‘sent one,’ has told us upon returning from the field. We ‘oohed’ and ‘ahed,’ and to our credit we prayed and gave.” The extreme content of the book had given the publishers of *Mission* reservations about reviewing it for its readership. But by not doing so, the editors feared “that we would come to look upon the poor as a separate breed, inherently inferior because they are different in their pathways and folkways. These are people first, then they are poor people. The same gospel love that saves us will save them.”⁶⁰

In the American Jewish press, reviewers did not focus upon a specifically Jewish religious or humanistic response to poverty. The *Detroit Jewish News* praised the book for its exposition of the world of the poor and also made note of Lewis’s argument that

⁵⁸ John J. McDermott, “Privacy and Social Therapy,” *Soundings* LI, No.3 (Fall 1968), 346-357. Quote from 351.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁶⁰ Untitled review, *Mission*, May 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

Ashkenazi Jews had never succumbed to a culture of poverty.⁶¹ The *American Jewish Congress Bi-Weekly* published a scathing review which claimed that Lewis's pretensions of objectivity had really only served to produce amorality:

While it is the most vivid product of the study of poverty, *La Vida* is also a product of a new kind of anti-humanistic moralism to which, of course, none of the great novelists about poverty have ever succumbed. It's not simply that Lewis can't bring himself to share the indignation of a Dickens or an Orwell about the conditions of the poor; he also seems to accept it as a working fiction that such indignation might interfere with his 'scientific' concerns.⁶²

In Israel, Lewis's work did spur a discussion about poverty that directly involved Judaism. Jacqueline Kahanoff, an Israeli philosopher, published a review of *La Vida* in *Haaretz*. In it, she claimed that Lewis's culture of poverty scholarship provided a description as well as a model of action for Israeli society. She saw oriental Jews (Jews from Middle Eastern nations living in Israel, many of whom spoke Arabic as their first language) as displaying a culture of poverty lifestyle:

For years, we have pretended to believe that part of our population is poor because it is oriental, while the opposite is true: it has remained trapped in an oriental sub-culture of poverty because here, as elsewhere, class interests colored by ethnic prejudice have too often prevented our poor from becoming anything but an oriental sub-proletariat manipulated by party bosses.

⁶¹ "La Vida—Powerful Social Document," *Detroit Jewish News*, January 6, 1967, 27. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

⁶² Richard Elman, "The Over-Studied Poor," *American Jewish Congress Bi-Weekly*, February 6, 1967, 16-17. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

She urged fellow Israelis to educate themselves about poverty in society, with attention to Lewis's methods. "This might give content and meaning, relevance and purpose to both our socialism and the Jewish humanism we often boast of but seldom live up to."⁶³

La Vida received heavy coverage in the United Kingdom. For sheer joy of reading, the American reviews could not hold a candle to the British. British reviewers turned their characteristic sarcastic wit towards *La Vida* with great gusto. The graphic violence, sexual content, and language provided plenty with which to work. Novelist and critic Anthony Burgess reviewed the book for *The Listener*. For Burgess, the book showed the true nature of Puerto Rican society, with blame for the island's poverty placed squarely on the inhabitants: "We've all been conditioned into believing...that Caribbean original sin as well as Caribbean poverty, is the responsibility of the white colonial oppressor. As these Puerto Ricans revel in their uninhibited and highly sophisticated patterns of sexual fulfillment, we are left holding the baby." Burgess launched into a raw diatribe about Puerto Ricans:

Puerto Ricans are never unwilling to talk. I traveled from London to New York with a Puerto Rican girl of 20 sitting next to me, and I got the lot: it took six hours and there was plenty more to come about Uncle Pedro's drunkenness and Juanito's seven-years-of-age sexual precocity and the pregnant tapeworm that was once dragged out of someone's grandmother...This girl was a cut above the average PR. She had saved up the air fare to England in order to marry Paul McCartney of the Beatles...Not many of her race, as *La Vida* shows, have that tenacity of purpose.

Burgess's reaction was exactly what Puerto Rican civil leaders and politicians feared would come from *La Vida*: that readers would connect Lewis's conclusions about a limited subset of impoverished Puerto Ricans to Puerto Ricans generally, and that a stereotype of

⁶³ Jacqueline Kahanoff, "A Great Study of the Culture of Poverty," *Haaretz*, 14 July 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

drunkenness, poverty, hypersexuality, and a strange mixture of laziness and wildness would come to define Puerto Rican life. Burgess's description of his own Sussex homeland, though, suggests that he was more a misanthrope than a bigot:

We can't blame our backwardness on poverty: there's a rather admirable low streak in the Sussex villagers, unsubmitive to the rector's shibboleths, coloured with incredible superstitions and stubborn faith in ghastly medications, made dramatic with adultery, incest, and general fornication. The Fernandas and Simplicios of rural England are less voluble than their Caribbean counterparts but, *Dios en un retrete* ("God in a toilet," from *La Vida*), they know all about *la vida*.⁶⁴

Punch featured a glowing review from Elspeth Huxley. She wrote that Lewis's use of the tape-recorder had remade the world of anthropology and was about to remake the world of literature as well:

This is the new-style anthropology: the study-in-depth carried to its nth degree and based upon the spoken, not the written, word—the outspoken word... We have come a long way from Abbé Breuil, Malinowski and even Margaret Mead, into a new territory where anthropologist and novelist meet head-on. No novelist could have invented all this... What the camera did for the painter, forcing him inwards into abstract, image-creating art, the tape-recorder may do for the novelist.

Walter Allen reviewed *La Vida* in the *Daily Telegraph*. Allen compared Lewis to Zola and even claimed that "in some ways, Prof. Lewis is [Zola's] superior." Allen saw the Ríos family as resembling the cast of characters in a Zola novel as well. While their life was often brutal, they retained "an indomitability, a vividness and a sense of comradeship that command respect and even admiration."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Anthony Burgess, "The Culture of Poverty" *The Listener*, September 28, 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

⁶⁵ Walter Allen, "A Zola Observes the Puerto Ricans," *The Daily Telegraph*, September 21, 1967, 22. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

But as in the United States, English reviews were mixed. In *The Financial Times*, Julian Jebb compared *La Vida* unfavorably with *Children of Sanchez* and *Pedro Martinez*: “Those who have read the earlier books will, I think, by the time they have laid down the present one, feel more punchdrunk than informed or elevated.” The newer book obfuscated the differences in personality of the subjects: “By the end of ‘La Vida’ I had a blurred vision of a tenement room infested with rats and cockroaches in which huddle five dimly differentiated individuals in attitudes of violence or dejection.” Jebb contrasted the humanistic tone of Lewis’s earlier books with the effect of *La Vida*: “Sometimes the book reads like the transcription of some insane trial in which a mass of voices are raised in a cacophony of reproach and self-justification.”⁶⁶

La Vida made the lead review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and the commentary there was scathing. Lewis erred in thinking that he had found something new with his culture of poverty, argued the anonymous reviewer:

Any reader of Dickens could have told one this in the last century, or any reader of Shakespeare, for that matter. One of the points the great writers were forever making was that the poor had their own culture and in doing the human thing and making the best of their lot, they often had a better time than the rich. Anyone in fact, who is not blinded by his fears, and has supped at the tables of both the rich and the poor, will probably agree the culture of poverty puts on by far the livelier show...It is a middle-class illusion that the poor are forever dreaming of how they can make it into the middle-class.

Beyond that, Lewis’s tape recorder method was an abominable invasion of privacy:

One remembers James Agee’s horrible shame at spying on a poor family in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and he had intruded only as a poet and novelist...the family remained

⁶⁶ Julian Jebb, “Life and the Life,” *The Financial Times*, September 21, 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

victims to Agee, *his* victims and at last beloved victims, well observed but never substituted for guinea pigs; he never let the reader forget that neither writer nor reader had really any business to be there...There is no such shame in *La Vida*.⁶⁷

Lewis did not get any kinder treatment from the left-leaning papers in Britain. The *Manchester Guardian* also panned the book. Anthropologist Peter Worsley wrote:

One simply becomes submerged beneath a torrent of incident. At first it is dramatic, but the sensibility is swiftly dulled by several hundred pages of sex, razor-fights, sex, dancing and drinking, sex, beatings, sexual encounters, and so on, for the book does not develop in any way; it just goes on and on and eventually stops. It could have made as much impact in 60 pages, or 6000. After all, for most of us, our fiftieth razor fight never has that keen excitement of that first time.⁶⁸

An exchange between an angered reader and Lewis helps to summarize the meaning of *La Vida*. Siobhan Oppenheimer, a New Yorker living in Connecticut who claimed to have lived amongst and worked with poor Puerto Ricans in New York City, wrote to Lewis in 1968, two years after the publication of the book. She accused Lewis of sensationalizing the Ríos family. She was especially angered by Lewis's follow-up article about Soledad that *New York Magazine* published under the lurid banner "Love in El Barrio." Lewis had failed to tell of the injustices that Puerto Ricans faced, along with their struggle to overcome them, and failed to properly identify the Ríos family as an outlier:

You must be aware of the Puerto Ricans' struggle for equality and opportunity. You must have discovered that all Puerto

⁶⁷ "Prying into Poverty," *Times Literary Supplement*, September 21, 1967, 829-830. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

⁶⁸ Peter Worsley, "La Vida longa," *Manchester Guardian*, September 22, 1967. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 19.

Ricans are not enjoying the 'life style' of the Rios family. You must have left your tape recorder long enough to have noticed that there is bigotry and prejudice directed against Puerto Ricans.

Readers would take the study and become prejudiced; employers would not hire Puerto Ricans; teachers would look down on Puerto Rican students. Oppenheimer lamented that the book was being read in college courses on social work and education.⁶⁹

Lewis wrote a long reply to Oppenheimer in December of 1968. Two years after *La Vida*, it was clear that criticism of the book and of his motivations still grated on him. *New York Magazine* changed the title of the Soledad piece without his knowledge, he protested, replacing his bland title, "Epilogue to Soledad" with "Love in El Barrio." But Lewis lit into Oppenheimer on the substantive issues, quoting his introduction to *La Vida* to the effect that the study proclaimed itself to be a study of a limited segment of the Puerto Rican population, and argued that the culture of poverty transcended national boundaries. Lewis was proud that teachers were reading the book: "Unless teachers understand something of what goes on in some of the homes of slum children, I don't think there's a chance that they can ever develop compassion for their students." What really chafed Lewis, though, was the very notion that the Ríos should be hidden. The response indicated that Lewis still retained a great deal of the anthropological humanism that had once illuminated his writing but that had sometimes been hidden over the years in his dry generalizing and theoretical writing about the poor:

Judging from your letter I suspect that you are not entirely free from prejudice. There is nothing in your letter which suggests to me that you are aware of and responsive to the many positive aspects of the Ríos family. You treat them as if they

⁶⁹ Siobhan Oppenheimer to Oscar Lewis, undated letter (late 1968). Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56. Oscar Lewis, "Love in El Barrio," *New York Magazine*, December 9, 1968, 33-46. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 63.

were vile untouchables whose very existence is denigrating to the image of the Puerto Rican community and you seem to suggest that the lives and struggles and sufferings of these people should be kept a deep dark secret...I do not share your sentiments in this regard. The Ríos family are my friends. I have lived with them for many years and I care a great deal about them. I see them regularly and feel perfectly at home with them, and I have accepted them and have treated them with love and kindness. The fact that some of the women were prostitutes for a while does not rule them out of the human race...I would urge you to try to shed some of your own middle class prejudices towards the lower class and try to take them into your heart.⁷⁰

A review in *The Irish Times* by John Broderick uncannily predicted Lewis's real legacy, however. Broderick was amused by the army of fieldworkers, translators, psychologists, and social scientists "let loose on a number of unsuspecting inhabitants of the slums of New York and Puerto Rico who, obviously overcome by this unwonted attention on the part of the master race, proceeded to talk their heads off, mostly about sex." Broderick theorized that the book would not be remembered for any scholarly contribution, but rather "for its descriptions of Puerto Rican fun and games which, had they been revealed in the 18th-century, might have inspired the Marquis de Sade to lift a languid eyebrow."⁷¹

Broderick was prescient. The decades after the publication of *La Vida* have witnessed an extraordinary backlash not only against Lewis, but against the sort of thinking and style of work that he represented. Glazer and Harrington understood by 1966 that a social scientist who came into a world of poor and disenfranchised citizens and proclaimed to know how their world was flawed and how it might be fixed was in for a rude awakening. Lewis's small army of field workers, graduate students, psychoanalysts, and translators that so bemused John Broderick were certainly a soon-to-be relic of 1950s style

⁷⁰ Oscar Lewis to Siobhan Oppenheimer, December 17, 1968. Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 56.

⁷¹ John Broderick, "Tape-Worming," *The Irish Times*, September 30, 1967.

social science, with its emphasis on the expertise and authority of the social scientist over the people they studied.

Broderick also was right when he predicted that *La Vida* would not be remembered for its scholarly contribution, but for the sex and violence of the narrative. The culture of poverty was soon to be in retreat, attacked as a pseudo-scientific relic of an imperialist style of social science. The question of whether or not Lewis had captured the world of the poor, of whether anthropology could appropriate from the world of literature the documentation of the real human experience, was rendered moot by the backlash against the whole method and theory underlying the project. *La Vida* itself came to be viewed as a piece of pornographic academic literature. Today, Oscar Lewis's books are largely unread. Where he is remembered, it is usually to disclaim him and to heap scorn upon the culture of poverty idea.

Chapter Six

The intellectual reaction against *La Vida* and Oscar Lewis began more tamely than did the popular reaction. Eventually, however, it would outlast and outstrip that reaction. A landmark critical work by Charles Valentine and a volume edited by Eleanor Leacock, both dedicated to picking apart Lewis's method and conclusions, dimmed his reputation, establishing to many observers that, from the standpoint of social science, the culture of poverty was invalid. Occurring alongside this, thinkers like Nathan Glazer were reworking the culture of poverty thesis into a conservative critique of the modern welfare state. Eventually Lewis's reputation shrunk still further. Beyond questioning his method and conclusions, social scientists began to question Lewis's ethics and morals. Postmodern critiques have relied upon a caricature of Lewis's work, twisting it, misusing it, and helping to establish Lewis's current reputation as a purveyor of lies, prejudice, and pornography.¹

¹ There is a vast literature on the culture of poverty and insufficient space to cover all of it here. Here is a sampling of a few works. Helen Icken Safa, *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico: A Study in Development and Inequality*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974), also studied Puerto Rico and criticized many of Lewis's conclusions. Safa studied another shantytown in San Juan and argued that many of the traits of the culture of poverty were not manifested in the neighborhood or in her subject families. Lee Rainwater, "Marital Sexuality in Four Cultures of Poverty," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 26, no.4 (Nov. 1964), 457-466, found that the poor in four different countries had similarly negative attitudes towards married women's sexual enjoyment. Jack L. Roach and Orville R. Gursslin, "An Evaluation of the Concept 'Culture of Poverty,'" *Social Forces* 45, no.3 (March 1967), 383-392, criticized the theoretical use of the subculture concept. Lola M. Irelan, Oliver C. Moles and Robert M. O'Shea, "Ethnicity, Poverty, and Selected Attitudes: A Test of the 'Culture of Poverty' Hypothesis," *Social Forces* 47, no.4 (June 1969), 405-413, empirically demonstrated that the poor of differing ethnic groups held different values, and rejected the culture of poverty concept. Seymour Parker and Robert Kleiner, "The Culture of Poverty: An Adjustive Dimension," *American Anthropologist* New Series 72, no. 3 (June 1970), 516-527, claimed to have empirically demonstrated the existence of a subculture of poverty amongst the black poor, but argued it was just one part of their "attitudes and reference values."

In 1967, *Current Anthropology* published a spotlight discussion about three of Lewis's books: *Children of Sanchez*, *Pedro Martinez*, and *La Vida*. Here, Lewis provided his most detailed description of the motivations behind his life's work. Recalling the wretched urban poverty and social displacement brought about by the industrial revolution, Lewis recalled that the stories of the poor of that age had been told by "novelists, playwrights, journalists, and social reformers." In the middle of the twentieth century, wrote Lewis, "a similar process of cultural change is going on among the peoples of the less developed countries," yet there was "no comparable outpouring of a universal literature which would help us to improve our understanding of the process and the people." Lewis argued that writers from the slums were not a reliable source: "by the time they have become great writers, they generally look back over their early lives through middle class lenses and write within traditional literary forms, so that the retrospective work lacks the immediacy of the original experience."

Social scientists, anthropologists in particular, needed to step in and record the lives and history of these people, but this required a revolution in writing and method. "How can the anthropologist gather and present scientific data on these people and their cultures without losing a sense of the wholeness and vividness of life?" Lewis's method was to study individual families intensely. He described the method he deployed in *Children of Sanchez*:

I offered the reader a deeper look into the lives of one of these families, by having each member of the family tell his own life story in his own words. My purpose was to give the reader an inside view of what it meant to grow up in a one-room home in a slum tenement in the heart of a great Latin American city which was undergoing a process of rapid social and economic change.

Lewis believed anthropologists tended to filter the lives of their subjects through a middle-class Western lens. His method of depicting his subjects in their own words solved this problem. He also saw it as a way to steer clear of “over-sentimentalization and brutalization,” which he considered were common problems in studies of the poor. He described the way that his method let him show the Mexican Revolution through the eyes of one of its participants in *Pedro Martinez*: “The story of Pedro Martínéz gives us one of the few first-hand accounts of a great revolution (the Mexican Revolution) as seen by a peasant who not only lived through it but actively participated and identified with its ideals.” Lewis had little that was original to say about *La Vida* in his *Précis*. His comments about *La Vida* were lifted directly from the book.²

One of Lewis’s respondents, sociologist Theodore Caplow, recalled the excitement with which he had once welcomed *Children of Sanchez*:

I was one of those who welcomed the appearance of *Children of Sanchez* as an epical (sic) event, marking a happy convergence of the realistic novel and descriptive ethnography... *Children of Sanchez* seemed to embody a new form, at once more accurate, candid, and comprehensive than any novel, but capable of arousing that compassionate empathy we associate with the best novels.

But Caplow believed that Lewis’s work had lost its humanism and grown mean:

In *La Vida* the author’s connection with the deplorable Ríos family is not very fully described, but it is plain that they are not his friends and that numerous research assistants, observers, and intermediaries were introduced into their lives...The result is a nasty book in every sense, unfair to its readers as well as its subjects.³

² “The Children of Sánchez, Pedro Martínez, and La Vida, by Oscar Lewis—A CA Book Review” *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 5 (December 1967), 480-500. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 1.

³ *Ibid.* Caplow was aware of the problems in the slums of San Juan. He had recently co-authored a sociological survey of San Juan under the auspices of the Social Science Research Center at the University of Puerto Rico. He and his co-authors described La Perla as “one of the world’s most spectacular slums” and described the ill health

Although Lewis maintained that he did not, in fact, dislike the Ríos family, Caplow's criticism struck a chord. Lewis was not as close to the Ríos family as he had been to his earlier subjects. But Caplow's comment that the Ríos family was "deplorable" was unfair. Although the Ríos family was dysfunctional, the individual members were not bad people.

Other critics were not as harsh. Most saw Lewis's work as important and influential. Puerto Rican Eugenio Fernández Méndez described the objections to both *Children of Sanchez* and *La Vida* as a product "of hurt pride and fear of malicious identification of the subcultural variant with the larger national group." Fernández argued that Lewis had made an important contribution to anthropology with his work. Psychiatrist Robert Coles argued that Lewis was breaking new ground in the field of psychology as well as anthropology. Lewis, he claimed, understood what most psychologists did not, that the study of the mind was conditioned by cultural contexts, by assumptions made by middle class Western psychologists that did not transport easily to other cultures. Lewis was able to bridge the gap by studying the meaning of actions and ideas in the context of a culture. According to Coles, Lewis avoided the facile tendency of Western analysts to confuse mental health with morality and to see people as creatures of either virtue or vice based upon their psychological makeup. Coles found in Lewis's books the ability to study the actual lives of people, free from debates over the makeup of the human psyche. "Rather than pit hunger, sex, and anger against class and caste, he aims to show the body and soul fighting it out or giving up, in the face of social and economic odds that seem to me psychologically impossible." Coles, though, still read the lives of Lewis's

and social development of the slums of San Juan: "Welfare cases, infant mortality, tuberculosis, pneumonia, delinquency, truancy and other indices of social pathology are much higher than anywhere else in the urban area. Income, education, and life expectancy are much lower." Theodore Caplow, Sheldon Stryker, Samuel E. Wallace, *The Urban Ambience: A Study of San Juan, Puerto Rico* (Totowa: Bedminster Press, 1964), 35, 41.

subjects through a primitivist prism: “They do not have the complicated, thoughtful, and ‘subtle’ minds that ‘we’ have, but neither do they develop the neuroses that Freud wisely saw inextricably tied to ‘civilization.’”⁴

Eric Wolf wrote the most insightful piece on *La Vida*. Wolf admired Lewis’s technique of combining the study of families with sociological research into communities. This allowed Lewis to straddle the anthropological divide of “studying men from without and studying men from within.” Wolf’s most interesting commentary, however, dealt with the relationship between colonialism and anthropology. Wolf saw anthropologists as “both the offspring and handmaidens of colonial expansion,” but noted that, “we have also been among its foremost critics.” Wolf saw *La Vida* and the culture of poverty as opening up a window into an “internal colonialism,” which, like classical colonialism, produced “powerlessness, social isolation, and anomie.”⁵

Lewis replied to his reviewers. He bristled at the criticism from Caplow that the members of the Ríos family were not his friends. “His statement reveals a profound ignorance of some of the basic and elementary conditions necessary for my kind of intensive family studies: a complete acceptance of the people, a deep sense of sympathy and identification with their problems, and an enduring friendship.” Lewis insisted that the different character of his various books, and the increased level of sex and violence in *La Vida* reflected the interests and discussion topics of his participants.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This argument that the culture of poverty described what was really a colonial psyche would appear again. Frederick Holliday, criticizing Nathan Glazer at the 1969 Temple Conference (see later in this chapter), would cite Frantz Fanon and offer that the black situation in America was really, at heart, a colonial situation. Holliday argued, however, that this did not prove Lewis’s claim that the culture of poverty was endemic to early capitalism or to colonialism, since the United States was long past that era. Frederick D. Holliday, “Comments on ‘The Culture of Poverty: The View from New York City,’” in J. Alan Winter, *The Poor: A Culture of Poverty or a Poverty of Culture*, (Grand Rapids: William D. Eerdmans, 1971), 49-50.

Pedro Martínez...has very little on sex because it is not a subject highland Mexicans like to discuss. I used the same techniques, asked the same kind of questions and had the same biases in doing Pedro Martínez as in the other books. The differences between these books reflect the objective differences in the nature of the families studied...for some of the women in the Ríos family, whose occupation involved sex, talking about it was like shoptalk and came easily.⁶

In 1967, Lewis still defended his work. But this was only a brief last stand. The backlash against Lewis really began to hit full force just a year later, with the publication of *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* by fellow anthropologist Charles Valentine.⁷ Although the book portrayed itself as a counter to a variety of scholars who had written about culture and poverty, it was clear that Lewis was the prime target. The scholarship on culture and poverty, claimed Valentine, had taken anthropology away from its proper understanding of culture: “Culture, in [the anthropological] sense has come to mean, most simply, the entire way of life followed by a people...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

Valentine defended the culture concept:

Three aspects of the culture concept combine to make it a great idea. The first is its universalism: all men have cultures, and this helps define their common humanity. Second is a focus on organization: all cultures show coherence and structure...Third is a recognition of man’s creativity: each culture is a collective product of human effort, feeling and thought...The idea of culture has been a most important weapon in the intellectual attack against racism, ethnocentrism, bigotry and cultural imperialism.⁸

⁶ “The Children of Sánchez, Pedro Martínez, and La Vida, by Oscar Lewis—A CA Book Review” *Current Anthropology* 8, no. 5 (December 1967), 480-500. Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 1.

⁷ Charles Valentine, *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

One way that the culture of poverty differed from traditional uses of culture was that it assigned people in the culture of poverty a value system that differed from that of the broader society. This was why Lewis claimed that the culture of poverty was, more accurately, a subculture. People in the subculture of poverty were aware of the values of the broader society, and often would claim them as their own, but in reality, lived by a different set of values. Valentine disagreed. The poor, he argued, pushed to the margins of society and stripped of material resources, were forced to make life choices that did not necessarily conform to their cultural values. But this did not mean that they did not have those values:

What is prized and endorsed according to the standards of a cultural system is not always manifest or practically available in the exigencies of ongoing existence...opportunities to choose goals, in accordance with value priorities or otherwise, are objectively narrowed when life chances in general are reduced by the structure of society.⁹

It also was wrong, wrote Valentine, to judge any culture as flawed. To do so violated the nature of ethnography, which required that the anthropologist attempt to penetrate a culture and to understand it on its own terms, not to judge it from one's own cultural standards. By positing that the poor had a damaged culture that failed to provide sufficient support for its members, Lewis and others had failed the science of anthropology: "it is neither intellectually nor ethically acceptable to portray another way of life merely in terms of comparison, invidious or otherwise, with one's own cultural standards."¹⁰

Although the theorists about culture and poverty had intended otherwise, by describing the cultural world of the poor as flawed, Lewis and others blamed the poor for their own poverty. "Analysis in terms of the 'culture of poverty' may distract attention from

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

crucial structural characteristics of the stratified social system as a whole and focus it instead on alleged motivational peculiarities of the poor that are of doubtful validity or relevance.”¹¹ Valentine traced this back to E. Franklin Frazier, who wrote about the lives of poor black Americans. Frazier had established a “pejorative tradition” of describing the poor as disorganized, pathological, and undisciplined. Valentine argued that Frazier and his successors were not actually describing a culture at all. “While these constructs are labeled and treated as ‘cultures,’ they are nevertheless presented as so lacking in basic elements of organization universal among human lifeways that they stand quite outside any usual definition of the term culture.”¹² Valentine also claimed that Frazier misinterpreted census data for cultural patterns, did not live amongst the poor and experience the world from their perspective, and was peddling class prejudice disguised as scholarship. He took Glazer and Moynihan to task along similar lines, arguing that Glazer’s research and Moynihan’s report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, basically took Frazier’s fallacious judgments and made them into national poverty policy.¹³

All of this was a preface to Valentine’s criticism of Lewis. Valentine allowed that Lewis was, in many ways, a better scholar than Frazier, Glazer, and Moynihan:

Lewis is an anthropologist who knows what the theoretical concept of culture has meant in the works of his professional colleagues. He has employed ethnographic methods in much of his own research. It is clear that he shares many of the positive values associated with the idea of culture...one often feels that he came to know some of these people very well and achieved an empathetic rapport with them.

¹¹ Ibid., 16-17.

¹² Ibid., 20-21.

¹³ Ibid., 22-29; United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC.: GPO, 1965)

But while Lewis's family studies held great promise, he had failed to connect them to the study of communities and cultures, which was, after all, the goal of anthropology.

Valentine used *La Vida* to illustrate the problems in Lewis's scholarship. Valentine praised Lewis's "refreshing methodological candor" in his admission in *La Vida* that the Ríos family represented one style of life of a slum in Puerto Rico, and that any broader judgments would have to wait for supporting studies. Later in *La Vida*, however, Lewis claimed that the Ríos family was representative of a subculture of poverty that cut across national boundaries. Valentine questioned why Lewis chose a family of prostitutes. Were they chosen "not because of their representativeness, but on the contrary because they manifested deviant extremes?" Valentine claimed that Lewis portrayed the Ríos family:

in turn, as (1) typical of the culture of the poor, (2) following a lifestyle of unknown frequency and distribution, (3) deeply affected by a specialized occupational pattern [prostitution] confined to one-third of their community, (4) characterized by an extreme deviance unique in the chronicler's experience, and (5) spanning the gap between the upper and lower classes both in wealth and family patterns.¹⁴

Valentine highlighted the inconsistencies in Lewis's claims for the lack of community development in the neighborhoods of the poor. He quoted Lewis:

When we look at the culture of poverty on the local community level, we find...above all a minimum of organization beyond the level of the nuclear and extended family...Indeed it is the low level of organization which gives the culture of poverty its marginal and anachronistic quality...most primitive peoples have achieved a higher level of socio-economic organization than our modern urban slum dwellers.

Later, Lewis described *La Perla* as "forming a little community of its own with a cemetery, a church, a small dispensary and maternity clinic, and one elementary school. There are

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-54.

many small stores, bars and taverns.”¹⁵ The two statements were irreconcilable, argued Valentine.

While he applauded Lewis’s statements of methodology, and acknowledged that they were more extensive than many ethnographers gave, Valentine argued that there still should have been more. Like Montserrat, Valentine lamented that there were no sample questionnaires, no transcripts of TAT examinations, no statements about the rapport Lewis shared with the Ríos family, no statement of how much editing was done and how it was done. Absent this, the reader was left to judge with insufficient evidence whether or not Lewis’s account of the Ríos family was fair.

Valentine then questioned Lewis’s statement that the poor were localized and provincial, unaware of the broader world:

They know only their own troubles, their local conditions, their own neighborhood... usually they do not have the knowledge, the vision or the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of their counterparts elsewhere...they are not class conscious.¹⁶

Countering this, Valentine pointed out that *La Vida* had numerous examples of members of the Ríos family holding broad sensibilities of the world around them. Valentine held up Soledad’s trip to Washington, D.C. for Kennedy’s funeral as evidence of a political consciousness that belied the supposedly apolitical and provincial outlook of the culture of poverty. Sometimes, however, Valentine was too generous: “Here and there Soledad offers rather extensive reflections on race relations in the United States and the implications with respect to education and employment for Puerto Ricans.” Soledad’s commentary on race relations in *La Vida* was mostly limited to comments like “I don’t like the black people

¹⁵ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁶ As cited in Ibid., 60-61.

around here because they're all sons of a great whore.” Where Soledad commented about discrimination, she only complained about prejudice against Puerto Ricans. She never claimed that there was discrimination against many groups of people. To call this some kind of consciousness that extended beyond the local and provincial level seems a stretch. Other characters were a little more learned. Valentine claimed Erasmo: “spends some two and a half pages comparing socioeconomic opportunities within Puerto Rico and the United States, touches lightly on the politics of four other Latin American countries and expounds on the major political issues, parties, and personalities in Puerto Rico.”¹⁷

Valentine questioned whether Lewis had any real basis for taking such a circumscribed view of the knowledge and aspirations of his subjects. Where was the information about the role of the community institutions, such as the church, school, shops, and health care facilities that did exist in La Perla? Lewis made no serious study of the role of religion in the lives of his subjects, of the kinship networks in the community (except for the Ríos family), nor of the structure of life in the slum. By not studying the larger connections, Lewis had failed to connect the Ríos family to the communities and nations in which it lived. This was Lewis’s greatest failing, argued Valentine.¹⁸

Valentine disparaged Lewis’s claim that the culture of poverty provided positive adaptive functions for the poor. The use of psychological traits lists and claims of family disorganization could not help but imply the opposite. And Valentine had little use for Lewis’s distinctions between the poor and those who live in the culture of poverty, nor for Lewis’s claims that it was “more difficult to eliminate the culture of poverty than to eliminate poverty *per se*.” Why not just alleviate people’s material poverty and allow them

¹⁷ Ibid., 60-61.

¹⁸ Ibid., 63-67.

to live as they chose, asked Valentine? Lewis's solution in the United States essentially meant that "the poor must become 'middle class,' perhaps through 'psychiatric treatment.'" Valentine also objected that Lewis was only willing to call for a revolutionary solution abroad, "where there are not enough psychiatrists and social workers to go around."¹⁹

While many believed that Lewis's books treated the poor more sympathetically than some of the sociological works did, Valentine disagreed. Insisting that the culture of poverty had to be abolished, Lewis's model had the same "implications in relation to modern issues of public attitudes and policies." Valentine theorized that the real reason Lewis insisted that the poor do away with their aberrant values and become like middle class citizens was "a conviction that the behavior of the unworthy poor is dangerous and threatening," and a "defensive projection of the values and interests of the middle class."²⁰

In 1969, Temple University hosted a conference on the culture of poverty. Headlined by thinkers like Nathan Glazer and Hylan Lewis, the conference demonstrated how quickly Lewis's reputation was declining by the late 1960s. Some rejected Lewis entirely. Glazer, however, began reformulating Lewis's ideas into a conservative interpretation of the culture of poverty. Glazer argued that Lewis's scholarship had made a valuable contribution by making it "clear—or clearer—that there are various ways of being poor and that some are better than others." Glazer, however, questioned Lewis's claims about the social and political conditions that brought the culture of poverty into being. Glazer argued, for instance, that a place like New York City had relatively low levels of absolute poverty in comparison with places like India, but had relatively high levels of a culture of poverty. Meanwhile, Glazer argued, Lewis was correct in stating that India,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-75.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

which had massive levels of absolute material poverty, did not have a culture of poverty, due to the kinship networks and traditional roles in the caste system. This created a strange situation, where the culture of poverty became more a marker of personal feelings of marginality and disenchantment than a description of poverty by an economic definition: “In New York City the culture of poverty has become divorced from the conditions of poverty themselves. We have the poor who do not show the culture of poverty, as Lewis pointed out. But more significantly, we have the nonpoor...who do.”²¹

Glazer pushed the definitional boundaries of the culture of poverty to the breaking point. Beyond Lewis’s argument that characters in *La Vida* like Soledad and Benedicto lived in a culture of poverty even though their income put them outside of a reasonable economic definition of poverty, Glazer offered that there was not much to the economic definition whatsoever. New York was a breeding ground for people who had risen out of material poverty but who still carried its social values. Glazer offered a new metric for measuring the number of people living in the culture of poverty: the welfare count. His rationale was that “the greatest part of those on welfare are women and children who have been abandoned.” “The weakness of the marital and parental ties,” Glazer wrote, was “*the* key characteristic of the culture of poverty lifestyle”²²

Lewis postulated that the culture of poverty took hold during certain economic epochs such as the development of early capitalism and a laissez faire economic system, and that nations with an expansive welfare state did not have a culture of poverty. Glazer argued that this was wrong and held up Hong Kong as an example. It was “the sole

²¹ Nathan Glazer, “The Culture of Poverty: The View from New York City,” in Alan Winter, ed., *The Poor: A Culture of Poverty or a Poverty of Culture?* (Grand Rapids: William b. Eerdmans, 1971), 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 39-40. Emphasis in original.

survivor of a Victorian level of pure laissez-faire capitalism in the world”²³ with no significant welfare state or protective economic legislation. It was also one of the last real outposts of European colonialism, also defined by Lewis as an ideal breeding ground for the culture of poverty. Glazer argued, however, that there was relatively little of the culture of poverty there. Lewis had gotten it exactly backwards, Glazer claimed: the culture of poverty developed apace with the introduction of a modern welfare state, not in its absence.

Glazer lamented the existing trend that argued that the culture of poverty was not really a problem:

There is a second and to my mind sadder means of dismissing the paradox: to deny that what we have is a culture of poverty in the pejorative sense of that term at all. If there are families headed by women, it testifies to their strength. If there are more illegitimate children, it testifies to greater honesty and love of children. If there is a greater rate of abandonment, it is owing only to the agony of being unable to provide adequate support. If there is mistrust, it is an accurate reaction to the nature of the environment. Indeed, there is no culture of poverty at all.²⁴

Further, the so-called strengths of the people living within the culture of poverty tended to be illusory. There was no research that demonstrated that the poor had a greater love of children, that their jaded worldview was more realistic, or that they were more honest. People in the culture of poverty did have real strengths, but this did not make up for all of their troubles: “There has been a lot of loose talk about the strength of the culture of poverty. There is strength, but those who exercise it would, it is my impression, gladly exchange the test that calls it forth for a stabler and more dependable existence.”²⁵

²³ Ibid., 41.

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

²⁵ Ibid., 43.

Glazer made some vague and hypothetical observations that members of certain cultures such as Puerto Ricans accepted dependency and that members of other cultures including Europeans, Asians, and other Latin Americans such as Cubans, resisted it. He included some findings from the Moynihan Report, namely that the number of welfare cases no longer bore an inverse relationship to the employment rate, but rather that welfare cases were rising independently, and a steadily increasing number of black children were born out of wedlock. Glazer offered that such phenomena should be researched further, but his analysis was, on the whole, not racial.

Glazer turned to Alexis de Tocqueville for an analysis of the degrading effects of dependency upon the character of the individual:

Tocqueville went on to analyze, correctly I think, the inevitable effects of public charity, which could only be degrading. He did not envisage that it should be turned into a right, so that it could be stripped of its degrading character. This is a hope we now cling to. We speak of redefining deficiencies into something ennobling.²⁶

According to Glazer, the coming of an advanced capitalist state brought along with it a sense of entitlement. Tocqueville argued that societies with greater prosperity had a greater demand for public welfare, and Glazer saw that dynamic at work in the United States. He pointed towards demands for increased welfare, in absolute terms from all corners. This was due to social change brought about by material progress and “changes in modern society itself—the downgrading of thrift, foresight, hard work, family responsibility.”²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

Glazer was the key thinker in the conservative reinterpretation and deployment of the culture of poverty framework. In this new paradigm, poverty remained cultural, but Lewis's critique of the injustices of modern capitalist society had vanished. Laissez-faire capitalism produced less of a culture of dependence, while the modern liberal state, far from being a mediating force against the effects of unrestrained capitalism, was implicated in the creation of the culture of poverty. What remained of the cultural attributes of poverty tended to be far more simplistic and degrading. If Lewis's trait list was flawed, to replace it with notions that the poor were irresponsible in their family lives, profligate, and lazy, was far worse. The culture of poverty would resurface in later decades with new terms like "welfare dependency," and with corresponding policy implications that contradicted everything Lewis had ever believed.

Sociologist Hylan Lewis worried that the culture of poverty had become "more ideological than scientific. Like the idea of race, the idea of a culture of poverty is an idea that people believe, want to believe, and perhaps need to believe." The notion that there was a culture that kept people from succeeding in the existing system seemed "chillingly like the idea of race." Hylan Lewis then embarked on a description of the culture of poverty that mislabeled it as a description of the black poor. He did not mention Oscar Lewis here, but he implied that the culture of poverty was a racial idea, although Lewis had insisted that it was not. Hylan Lewis quoted from various social scientists, educators, and behavioral scientists who claimed to have discovered hidden truths about the culture of the black ghetto that explained why people from that culture did not and could not succeed in the broader society.

Far from being irrelevant, though he clearly thought it incorrect, Hylan Lewis argued that the culture of poverty idea mattered because it impacted the way that policy

makers, social workers, and others interacted with the poor. The idea was driving a wedge between the poor and those who sought to help them but had been taken in by this misguided interpretation of the poor. The Black Power movement had shattered the explanatory power of the culture of poverty, according to Hylan Lewis, but ironically, it had increased the idea's ideological appeal to outsiders.²⁸

In 1971, Eleanor Leacock edited a book consisting of papers given at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 1966. She wrote that "it was already commonplace for people working in social welfare and education to refer to the 'culture of poverty' as a supposed explanation for the myriad problems to be found amongst the poor, a practice which served to mask the crucial issue of social and economic injustice that our society must face." Leacock wrote the book "to make critical material available to the many people working in education, health and welfare fields who know something is amiss but who are bemused by the scientific backing the 'culture of poverty' notion seems to have."²⁹ Like Valentine, Leacock described Lewis's work as a violation of the fundamental purpose of anthropology. Cultural determinism was the great discovery of anthropology, but Lewis twisted it from its original meaning. By using the culture concept in the way he did, and designating a subculture of people as having a flawed way of life, Lewis slid into using culture in the same way that biology had once been used to justify racial prejudice.³⁰

Leacock, though, blurred the line between Lewis's ideas and those scholars who misused them. Much of the rest of her introduction was a series of straw-man arguments. She proceeded to connect Lewis to an entire school of thought that equated the culture of

²⁸ Hylan Lewis, "The Culture of Poverty? What Does it Matter?" in Alan Winter, ed., *The Poor: A Culture of Poverty or a Poverty of Culture?* (Grand Rapids: William b. Eerdmans, 1971), 71-92, *passim*.

²⁹ Eleanor Burke Leacock, ed. *The Culture of Poverty: A Critique* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1971), 7-8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

poverty with the black poor, without clarifying that Lewis had made clear that he did not consider the culture of poverty to be racial. Leacock also cited proof from several scholars that the poor were not “uneducatable” as evidence against the culture of poverty. Lewis had never made any sort of statement that the culture of poverty had anything to do with native intelligence or educational potential.³¹

Not all Leacock’s criticisms were off-base. She pointed out that Lewis held up middle class values as normative and the values of the poor as opposite and oppositional. Thus the poor spend while the middle class defer and save. The middle class plans while the poor act. Most incisively, Leacock questioned the ability of a broader culture to shape the individual personality within it. This was as much a criticism of Ruth Benedict, perhaps, as it was of Oscar Lewis. Benedict’s cultural determinism was very strong, far more totalizing in its determination of the character of the individual within a culture, than Lewis’s ever was.

Leacock’s book brought together many essays that attacked cultural interpretations of poverty. About half dealt with education and made scarce mention of Lewis or the culture of poverty. Here, there were other targets, especially educational theorist Frank Reisman, who had argued that poor children were culturally deprived and that this made their education along traditional lines difficult, though not impossible.³² In her introduction, Leacock elided the distinctions between Reisman and Lewis. Reisman did not invoke the phrase “culture of poverty,” and it was not clear that his usage of the phrase “culturally deprived” meant the same thing. One difference was that Lewis argued that the

³¹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

³² Janet Castro, “Untapped Verbal Fluency of Black Schoolchildren,” in Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty*, 82, 88. Mildred Dickeman, “The Integrity of the Cherokee Student,” in Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty*, 140. Frank Reisman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper, 1962).

poor were aware of middle class values but did not live by them. Reisman's description of a culturally deprived person suggested that such people were not aware of the broader culture around them. This was why they supposedly were more difficult to educate: they did not share the cultural knowledge of their middle class peers.

Anthony Leeds, an anthropology professor from the University of Texas, argued in much greater detail the ways in which Lewis had allegedly misused the culture concept. A culture in the sense in which American anthropologists used it, Leeds argued, needed to be bound in some way, either by political boundaries, by territorial isolation, or some cultural boundary. It had to involve some sort of structured transmission of traits through multiple pathways—not just families or the state, or religion, but a combination of actors. Leeds wrote: Extrapolations from family histories to an alleged 'culture' simply fail to deal with the majority of institutional and social frameworks in which families are embedded."³³ Lewis claimed that the culture of poverty was transmitted through the family alone, and ascribed the culture of poverty to various peoples across vast geographical distances without any theoretical rationale as to why he was deviating from traditional uses of the culture concept:

If...standard uses of the term 'culture' are maintained, then the culture of poverty...cannot be a *culture*, though it may be some other kind of system, subsystem, or trait complex. It is not unique; it is not specific to a time and place and tradition; it has no particular or unique meaning structure; it is not sociogeographically isolable.³⁴

Lewis failed to provide any theoretical reason as to why certain people in the same society living in poverty developed a culture of poverty while others did not. The culture of

³³ Anthony Leeds, "The Concept of the 'Culture of Poverty': Conceptual, Logical, and Empirical Problems, with Perspectives from Brazil and Peru," in Leacock, ed., *The Culture of Poverty*, 226-232. Citation from 232.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 232.

poverty lumped together people of wildly differing economic levels, different national cultural groups, and different living conditions. The traits were fuzzily defined, and not satisfactorily linked in a theoretical way to a culture, or to class at all.³⁵

Lewis's belief that the Cuban Revolution had destroyed the culture of poverty in one small Cuban village was absurd, Leeds argued. If socialism had destroyed the culture of poverty, this would have implied that there had never been a culture at all, for anything that could so easily be wiped out could never have been a culture in the first place. Cultures were durable, and they could not be swept away easily.³⁶

Leeds turned to questions of ethics, and here, his essay was most cutting:

In sum, Lewis's very widespread, novelistic publication of uninterpreted material, exposing his still poorly thought out concept to popular and professional misuse; his use of provocative terms...like the term 'culture of poverty'...and his disregard for the effects of his publications on the field situation for later workers, testify to the ethical-civic failure of Oscar Lewis.³⁷

This was no longer merely a judgment that Lewis's thinking was wrong. Fellow anthropologists were now joining politicians and activists in accusing Lewis of being unprofessional, unethical, and even, perhaps, immoral.

By the early 1970s, Lewis was a regular target of attack. Some of the harshest criticism came from one of his own graduate students, Carol Stack. In 1974, she published a widely-read study: *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. Stack continued to blur the line between the culture of poverty and the black poor: "Recently,

³⁵ Ibid., 235-236.

³⁶ Ibid., 231*n*.

³⁷ Ibid., 281.

many behavioral scientists have attacked racist social science theories like those that have given rise to concepts such as the culture of poverty.”³⁸ Further: “Hylan Lewis’ essays...and Valentine’s early work...challenged the culture of poverty concept and questioned whether a self-perpetuating culture of poverty exists among poor Blacks.”³⁹

In fairness, Stack did write briefly about the culture of poverty in non-racial terms:

The culture of poverty notion explains the persistence of poverty in terms of presumed negative qualities within a culture: family disorganization, group disintegration, personal disorganization, resignation, and fatalism. An underlying assumption of the culture of poverty notion is that the social adaptation of the poor to conditions of poverty would fall apart if these conditions were altered.⁴⁰

But even this description of Lewis’s thought, though accurate in some ways, completely ignored his statements about the redeeming features of the culture of poverty as well as the basic goodness of the people within it. Stack ignored Lewis’s argument about historical economic developments creating the culture of poverty. Stack also misrepresented the change that Lewis had predicted would be required to undo the culture of poverty.

In contrast to the culture of poverty, Stack argued that kin networks formed the crucial response of the poor to a society that was fundamentally and intentionally unfair. In response to institutionalized racism and economic inequality, black families in Stack’s study developed informal networks of kinfolk that provided mutual security in tough times. She wrote of “the alliances of individuals trading and exchanging goods, resources, and the care of children.” The economic reality of poverty was what motivated them, not any abstract culture: “Poverty creates a necessity for this exchange of goods and services. The needs of families living at bare subsistence are so large compared to their average daily

³⁸ Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

income that it is impossible for families to provide independently for fixed expenses and daily needs.”⁴¹ The organization of the family in Stack’s study did not resemble the nuclear family at all. Children were raised within these kinship networks. They did not always eat and sleep in the same household with their biological parents. Sometimes their biological parents were married, sometimes not. But generally their mothers sought out the relatives of their biological fathers to include them in the web of mutual obligation. The traditional definition of family organization was useless to her study. Stack claimed that her respondents were aware of middle class values and believed in them, even if their lives were organized in ways that were quite different. Stack invoked Hyman Rodman’s “value stretch” theory (see below) to explain cultural differences between the middle class and the poor in American society.⁴²

Psychologist and sociologist William Ryan published a popular book, *Blaming the Victim*, with a chapter titled “Learning to be Poor: The Culture of Poverty Cheesecake.” Ryan criticized the notion that the poor were impulsive while the middle class deferred gratification. This was only the most onerous ingredient in the culture of poverty cheesecake, however. The notion that the poor were culturally responsible for their own poverty was outrageous: “This theme in the writing of Oscar Lewis—otherwise exciting and insightful when viewed as highly sensitive descriptions of some families living in poverty—is to me, very disturbing.”⁴³ Although he granted that Lewis was cautious in defining the culturally poor, he argued that others were not, and went on to cite numerous scholars who had deployed the culture of poverty in dubious ways.

⁴¹ Ibid., 28-29.

⁴² Ibid., 28-31, 124-129, *passim*.

⁴³ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 114-115.

The War on Poverty didn't have to be hard, wrote Ryan. For less than half of the federal government's annual expenditure in Vietnam, every poor person in the United States could be raised above the federal poverty line. But the culture of poverty was pushing anti-poverty programs astray. Ryan keenly perceived how the culture of poverty would be re-deployed as a conservative rationale for the end to social programs for the poor:

If poverty is to be understood more clearly in terms of the "way of life" of the poor, in terms of a "lower-class culture," as a product of a deviant value system, then money is clearly not the answer. We can stop right now worrying about ways of redistributing our resources more equitably, and begin focusing our concern where it belongs—on the poor themselves. We can start trying to figure out how to change that troublesome culture of theirs...how to deal with their poor manners and make them more socially acceptable. By this hard and wearying method of liquidating lower class culture, we can liquidate the lower class, and, thereby, bring an end to poverty.⁴⁴

To claim that the poor had a different culture was absurd, argued Ryan. He posited that there was no simple definition of culture, but that there were three crucial elements in identifying a culture: first, it had to be passed through generations; second, it had to provide a set of ready-made solutions for living; and third, the members of a culture must accept it as good and as something not to be questioned. Citing George Murdock's claim that there were seventy-three traits in every culture ever identified, Ryan argued that the vast majority of Americans shared common cultural traits:

Every American, beyond the first-generation immigrant, regardless of race or class, is a member of a common culture...We...share the same language. There may be differences in diction and usage, but it would be ridiculous to say that all Americans don't speak English. We have the calendar, the law, and large numbers of other cultural items in common...There are other items that show variability, not in

⁴⁴ Ibid., 118.

relation to class, but in relation to religion and ethnic background...Specific differences that might be identified as signs of separate cultural identity are relatively insignificant within the general unity of American life.⁴⁵

Ryan did allow, however, that the poor in America might “constitute a subculture, on the basis of...values, sex and family life, child-rearing, and some personality characteristics.”⁴⁶ Just about everything that Lewis had claimed about the culture of poverty would have fit into Ryan’s definition of a subculture. Lewis probably would have agreed with most of what Ryan wrote, and to read Ryan as he believed he was disagreeing with Lewis is ironically similar to reading Lewis. But Lewis had played fast and loose with the use of “culture” versus “subculture,” and had set himself up for misinterpretation.

For an alternate explanation of how the values of the poor differed from those of the larger society, Ryan turned to Rodman’s “value stretch” theory. Once Americans accepted this, argued Ryan, they could back away from trying to change the culture of the poor. What was really needed was more money, coupled with greater access to power and opportunity. The culture would take care of itself.⁴⁷

Occurring alongside Lewis’s anthropological studies of the poor, there was a substantial sociological discourse about poverty. There is not room in this paper to cover it in the detail that it merits, but two authors, Hyman Rodman and Lee Rainwater, deserve mention. Authors who criticized the culture of poverty cited Rodman frequently. Rodman wrote an article in 1963 that argued that the lifestyle differences between the poor and the dominant class in a society could be traced to a “value stretch.” Rodman tried to reconcile two sides in a lengthy sociological debate, in which some scholars had argued that the poor

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119-120.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 123, 134-135.

shared the values of the larger society, and others had argued that they did not. Rodman split the two by arguing that the poor shared the common values of the larger society, but that they “stretched” them to fit the circumstances of their social reality:

By the value stretch I mean that the lower-class person, without abandoning the general values of the society, develops an alternative set of values. Without abandoning the values placed upon success, such as high income and high educational and occupational attainment, he stretches the values so that lesser degrees of success also become desirable. Without abandoning the values of marriage and legitimate childbirth he stretches these values so that a non-legal union and legally illegitimate children are also desirable. The result is that the members of the lower class, in many areas, have a wider range of values than others within the society.⁴⁸

While Rodman’s and Lewis’s observations of behavior and value-shifting amongst the poor were not significantly different, the ramifications of their differing explanations were huge. In Lewis’s model, there was a distinct culture, and to cure poverty would be difficult, because values as well as incomes had to change. In Rodman’s model, there was not a distinct culture, and a value change was not necessary. If there was only a stretch of legitimately held cultural beliefs, then money alone could perhaps fix poverty.

Rainwater also addressed this long sociological debate about the values of the poor. Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, among many, had held that the values of the poor did not differ significantly from those of broader society. Other scholars, such as Allison Davis, W. Lloyd Warner and Warren Miller, had argued that there was a broad difference and had posited the existence of a “lower-class culture” that was a manifestation of these different values. Rainwater also mentioned Lewis, claiming that, working independently, he had also described the existence of a world of poor people with values that differed from mainstream

⁴⁸ Hyman Rodman, “The Lower Class Value Stretch,” *Social Forces* 42, no.2 (December 1963), 209.

ones.⁴⁹ Rainwater tried to bridge the gap between many social science thinkers by locating cultural adaptations and traditions within the economic structural realities of impoverished communities in America.

Many of Rainwater's conclusions looked similar to Rodman's and Lewis's, although he at least rhetorically paid greater attention to the role of economics and racism in creating and perpetuating communities of people with autonomous value systems. Rainwater wrote: "The result of these processes is the development and maintenance of a lower-class subculture which is distinctive yet never free of conventional culture and its norms."⁵⁰ Like Lewis, he also saw redeeming factors in this culture. Poor people had autonomy from the social norms of the broader society, and both they and the broader society were better for this autonomy. But the redeeming factors were minimal, and Rainwater gave them even less attention than Lewis had. Unlike Lewis, Rainwater traced the creation of the lower-class subculture both to the broader culture that rejected the poor and to the agency of the poor themselves: "Lower-class subculture can be regarded as the historical creation of persons who are disinherited by their society but who retain limited functional autonomy for their group."⁵¹

Rainwater's unit of study was the black poor, and he maintained that "Negro lower-class identity and culture" was caused by an unequal system, but was also a product of the adaptations of black people to the twin injustices of classism and racism. Rainwater connected the structural and cultural elements of race and class oppression, and placed the onus on the victims in terms of culture: "In short, whites, by their greater power have

⁴⁹ Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), 362-365.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 396.

created situations in which Negroes do the dirty work of class victimization for them.”⁵²

This was more expansive than what Lewis claimed. Not only was the culture of the victims partially to blame for their troubles, the victims had an active hand in creating that culture and committing the injustices, even if racism also contributed.

By the 1980s, sociologists were writing about a supposed “underclass” of submerged people with distinct cultural values. Lewis has been cited as an inspiration for this idea, popularized in the 1980s by journalist Ken Auletta and sociologist William Julius Wilson. This is true, in part. Auletta wrote a series of articles in *The New Yorker* in 1982 arguing that amongst the poor there existed a smaller subcategory of people who were stuck in intractable poverty. These people were socially alienated and legally repressed. But more importantly, they had behavioral traits that kept them poor. Deficient work skills, acclimatization to welfare, criminality, addiction, and mental illness were the hallmarks of the underclass as defined by Auletta. Auletta cited Lewis as a major influence, and granted that the culture of poverty had shaped his own thinking. Further, Auletta’s method mirrored Lewis’s. Auletta followed a group of the urban poor as they embarked on a new program that taught “soft skills” to chronically unemployed workers. Much like the “participant-observer” anthropologist, Auletta befriended a class of students, entered their world, and then wrote about their lives and history.⁵³

Wilson did not see Lewis as an inspiration. He placed Lewis firmly within a conservative tradition that he sought to write against, arguing that the modern conservative understanding of the underclass as a pathological group began with Lewis. The black poor, argued Wilson, had been isolated geographically into ghettos of extreme

⁵² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵³ Ken Auletta, *The Underclass, Updated and Revised Edition* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1999), 18, 65-66.

poverty, as black professionals, the middle class, and even the working class fled to suburbs. “Left behind” were people outside of the mainstream. They lacked job skills, were engaged in petty crime, and were chronically unemployed. Their neighborhoods had been stripped of meaningful employment. These structural changes had produced a distinctive culture that was a reaction to inequality. This culture could and would change, predicted Wilson, if the inequality were made less severe. While Wilson studied the black poor, he argued that race-neutral policies were the real solution to the issue of the urban underclass. Macro-economic issues were to blame, and racially-specific policies did little to assist the desperately poor.

Wilson’s portrait of the underclass held much in common with Lewis’s biographical sketches of people within the culture of poverty, but Wilson objected to Lewis’s idea that there was a trans-generational culture that defined an underclass.⁵⁴ Seen in comparison with *Rainwater*, Wilson’s theory of the underclass does not appear as a sharp break with the past. It was a further development of what had been percolating in the sociological literature for decades.

Outside of sociology, few scholars after 1970 were working along cultural lines regarding poverty. By the 1980s, scholars were vilifying Lewis routinely, yet their characterization of his ideas bore less and less resemblance to reality. One book, Leonard Beeghley’s 1983 work, *Living Poorly in America*, offered a particularly egregious example:

This whole analysis seems ludicrous, at least to me; it appears to be little more than a projection (in a psychoanalytical sense) of middle class ennui. But it is important to remember that Lewis’s analysis does make sense to many people. For underlying much public discussion of the poverty problem is

⁵⁴ William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 13, 182-183.

the lingering suspicion that poor people really enjoy their impoverishment, an apprehension that receives its social science apotheosis in the notion of the culture of poverty.⁵⁵

The problem with this description is that Lewis's statements that the culture of poverty had certain redeeming qualities were always overshadowed by his belief that it was ultimately a thin culture that produced unhappiness; hence the "poverty of culture" inversion that Lewis also sometimes used. Lewis did not claim that the poor enjoyed their material poverty.

Beeghley's analysis of the psychology of poverty resembled Lewis's:

The issue for many impoverished persons is not adherence to nonconformist values but their vulnerability and limited choices...frustration is pervasive in every facet of poor people's lives and they adopt a variety of analgesic behaviors designed to blunt awareness of their situation and avoid pain. Thus the need for social and psychological (and sometimes medicinal) analgesia reflects the salience rather than the absence of dominant values in the lives of impoverished persons. Over the long run, such behavior becomes rewarding...because what poor people learn is that the problems they have cannot be solved.

The poor became fatalistic, withdrawn, frustrated, and prone to addiction. The primary difference between Beeghley's and Lewis's analyses was that Beeghley believed that the poor held the same values as the dominant classes in society, but could not act upon them because of limited horizons, while Lewis believed that the poor professed those values for posterity but lived otherwise.

This tradition of misusing Lewis has intensified over time. Sociologist Nancy Ortiz's work, "Disrupting the Colonial Gaze: A Critical Analysis of the Discourses on Puerto Ricans in the United States," argues that "Puerto Ricans have been discursively invented as

⁵⁵ Leonard Beeghley, *Living Poorly in America* (New York: Praeger, 1983), 120-121.

opposition, inferiority, negation, and as a threat to the North American imaginary. Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects in the course of this history have been constructed as the Other.” Ortiz claims that the mainland discourse on Puerto Ricans has been marked by the “anthropologization of Puerto Ricans,” driven by the “historical need and the authority to speak, describe, study, and treat Puerto Ricans as subject-objects.” *La Vida* takes center stage in her analysis.⁵⁶

Some of Ortiz’s attempt to discredit Lewis and *La Vida* takes Lewis so far out of context that it borders on absurdity. In a section titled *Exotism: Twenty-Two Panties and other Exotica*, she claims that Lewis “exoticizes” the poor, as a means of the “working out of the epistemological requirements of science.” To buttress her claim that Lewis has exoticized the Puerto Rican poor, she draws attention to Lewis’s supposed astonishment (“striking data,” Ortiz quotes Lewis) that Felícita owned twenty-two pairs of panties. Lewis’s fascination with the undergarments of his female subjects is an example to Ortiz of “an irrational-exotic” fact. By studying these irrational-exotics, the social scientist injects his subjective moral judgment into what is supposedly an objective scientific discourse.

That the poor would buy, or obtain, certain consumer items that are deemed by an authority, such as the anthropologist, as extravagant or unessential constitutes an irrational act. In this instance, the possession of twenty-two panties by a poor Puerto Rican woman serves to establish a link between aberrant spending with aberrant sexuality.⁵⁷

All of this sounds damning. Who would not suspect this man of conducting a panty-raid under the guise of science? Ortiz even goes one better on Lewis, claiming that Lewis was both a Puritan and a pervert, engaged in “moralizing eroticization.” Lewis’s research was

⁵⁶ Laura Ortiz, “Disrupting the Colonial Gaze: A Critical Analysis of the Discourses on Puerto Ricans in the United States.” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Center, City University of New York, 1998), 1-3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 281-283.

groundless, asserts Ortiz: “How did Felícita’s twenty-two panties become ‘data’? What is the epistemological basis for Lewis counting the panties...? How does this data become a proposition or an axiom of a conceptual model? Lewis does not offer a theoretical elaboration which would offer answers to these questions.”⁵⁸

As a part of his method, Lewis conducted extensive material analyses, not only on the Ríos family, but upon a large sample of Puerto Rican families in New York and San Juan. Lewis lamented that anthropology had not made greater use of quantitative data to study its subjects. He hoped to observe the changes in consumption patterns as families moved from Puerto Rico to New York City. He also believed that patterns of consumption might show the values of a people. For instance, how much did they spend on “religious items versus modern appliances?” Lewis’s team surveyed clothing along with appliances, luxuries, alcohol, and utilities.⁵⁹

The twenty-two panties line comes from this research, but Ortiz has pulled it hopelessly out of context. A more complete quotation reads:

One of the more striking data to come out of our study is the disproportionately large amounts spent on clothing by low-income Puerto Rican families. Felícita, for example, spent over three times more (\$496.36) on clothing than on household goods...At the time of our inventory Felícita had twenty-five dresses, seven skirts and seven blouses, twelve pairs of shoes, seven brassieres, twenty-two panties and three gold rings, in addition to other items. Nine months later she had bought twenty new dresses at a cost of \$188!”

Notice that it was actually the purchase of twenty dresses that raised Lewis’s disbelief.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 282-283.

⁵⁹ “[Cruz and Felícita Ríos] comparisons based on questionnaires by Douglas Butterworth,” Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 34. Lewis, *La Vida*, xxii-xxiii.

Lewis wrote about Felícita's clothing purchases: "The emphasis on clothing and appearance was too widespread a pattern to be explained by the occupational requirements of a prostitute. In part it may have also been caused by inferiority feelings and reparative needs and by imitation of the Puerto Rican middle class, which stressed the importance of clothing."⁶⁰ Lewis looked at the twenty-two panties (which we now have seen were originally an unremarkable item in a long list), and saw Felícita's clothing consumption as being not about sexuality, but rather about class envy.

Lewis's research here may have been tedious, and his conclusions unremarkable and speculative. Maybe it is unusual, no matter what the rationale, to inventory the undergarments of one's research subjects. But to take the presentation of the research out of context, and to pretend that it has no theoretical underpinnings is unfair. To return to Ortiz's assertion, was the whole panties presentation about the establishment of an "irrational exotic fact?" No. It was rational in the context of the class system of Puerto Rican and American society.

Ortiz sees *La Vida* as the logical end of a teleology of the invention of Puerto Rican otherness by American observers. It represents an "epistemological threshold" that seeks to "produce the 'Puerto Rican ethos.'" For Ortiz, Lewis incorporated certain ideas from previous discourses about a "Puerto Rican problem," and "the Assimilation Problem," into a new "episteme" that finally allowed Puerto Ricans to become "theorizable," using the culture of poverty as a conceptual model. Ortiz then describes the content of this Puerto Rican ethos. She cleverly mixes in Lewis's sparse and mostly harmless essentialist proclamations, such as that Puerto Ricans "enjoy parties, dance, and music," with the biographical information about the characters in the text. Through this sleight of hand, she

⁶⁰ Lewis, *La Vida*, xxxvii.

makes it seem that Lewis held harmful essential notions of Puerto Ricans. “Criminal activity is also featured in this profile,” Ortiz informs us, and then quotes one character describing another as “a real hooligan,” alongside Lewis’s factual statement that one of the men in the extended Ríos family had spent six months in jail.⁶¹ But Lewis did not claim that Puerto Ricans were criminal in nature. In fact, his description of the Ríos family took pains to show the opposite: “None of the major characters are drug addicts, alcoholics, professional thieves or criminal types. Most of them work for a living and are self-supporting...On the whole, there is remarkably little delinquency and relatively little involvement with gangs or gangsters.”⁶²

The book contained literally dozens of people. Given the economic pressures of poverty and the class oppression of the criminal justice system, it is hardly surprising that a few of the characters, amongst the dozens, had been under arrest or in jail. But Ortiz scarcely deals with class in her entire dissertation. That there may have been real differences in class consciousness or in lifestyles between social classes seems to not occur to her. Thus Lewis, since he investigated the Puerto Rican poor, must have been creating an epistemological threshold that would describe all Puerto Ricans. Ortiz relates the world described by Lewis in *La Vida*: “Lewis finds: unskilled workers, some on relief, unsanitary conditions, crowded apartments, unmarried couples, divorced or abandoned women, low-income families, low educational levels, a high incidence of mental disability and a high rate of tuberculosis.”⁶³ In other words, Lewis found and described a social world similar to that of other poor immigrant communities throughout American history. But according to

⁶¹ Ortiz, *Disrupting the Colonial Gaze*, 274-277.

⁶² Lewis, *La Vida...*, xxix.

⁶³ Ortiz, *Disrupting the Colonial Gaze*, 276.

Ortiz, for Lewis to describe this social reality was to engage in the construction of an epistemological threshold about the essential and depraved nature of Puerto Ricans.

Ortiz describes the description of the world of the Puerto Rican poor in the early 1960s as a pattern that she describes as “Rosary #2” in a series of “Rosaries,” these Rosaries being stories that are told about Puerto Ricans whose “repetition transform them into a mode of enunciation of being Other.” Rosary #2 is represented by statements in which:

Puerto Ricans are enunciated as ghetto or slum dwellers, criminals, gang members, garbage throwers, knife wielders, and prostitutes. Puerto Ricans are poor, dirty, noisy, violent and foul-mouthed. They practice *primitive* rites, live in conditions of overcrowding, are welfare dependent, lack English language proficiency and have inadequate knowledge of modern health and hygiene practices.⁶⁴

For Ortiz, any mention that there were poor Puerto Ricans who lived in crowded tenements, who received welfare, or who were ill, confirms stereotypes of Puerto Ricans. Whether any of this was true or not, even about a limited segment of the Puerto Rican population of 1960, does not seem to matter to Ortiz.

Ortiz cites the practice of spiritism in *La Vida* as an example of Rosary #2: “Spiritism and sorcery are described by Lewis as characteristic of the Puerto Rican poor.” Ortiz quotes Fernanda: “Because, you see, his trouble was due to a spell a woman had cast on him to make him go mad.”⁶⁵ Lewis did not claim that the practice of Spiritism was characteristic of Puerto Ricans as a whole, or even of the poor. The page in *La Vida* that Ortiz cites as evidence for this belief contains no reference to Spiritism. The Ríos family, though, evidently did practice Spiritism. Felícita, for instance, owned the book *The Gospels*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 35-36. Italics in original.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 277.

According to Spiritism by Allan Kardec, founder of Spiritism, and read from it to her husband.⁶⁶ There are several other mentions of rituals, spells, and spirits in the book.

But why should it matter that the Ríos family believed in Spiritism? Would Ortiz have complained if the Ríos family had been Catholics or Protestants? For Lewis to have even described—accurately, unless he went to the trouble to fabricate evidence such as Felicita’s copy of the Kardec book—that the Ríos family engaged in Spiritism, is evidence to Ortiz of his nefarious intent. Lewis, as a cultural anthropologist influenced by Marxism and as a non-believer, would probably have held a relativistic view of religion. These were only sets of myths, after all, and Spiritism was not any more or less legitimate than Catholicism, Hinduism, or even than a Sun Cult, for that matter.⁶⁷

Another postmodern author, Laura Briggs, also attacks *La Vida*, seeing it as a Puerto Rican sequel to “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” or “Moynihan Report.” Briggs writes: “Lewis’s notion of the culture of poverty, located in [*La Vida*] was not the relatively innocuous paradigm that liberal anthropologists usually frame it as, and was in fact just as scurrilous and libelous as anything Moynihan ever wrote.”⁶⁸ First,

⁶⁶ Lewis, *La Vida*, 297.

⁶⁷ Spiritism was actually a popular religious movement amongst Puerto Ricans in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly amongst the poor. It had begun in the nineteenth century as a middle class movement with nationalist overtones. Puerto Ricans who were dissatisfied with the Roman Catholic hierarchy, which was associated with Spanish rule, turned to Spiritism as an alternative. Puerto Rican *Espiritismo* initially was concerned with progressive ideals—moral and social improvement fit with Spiritism’s stress on justice and science (or pseudoscience). Reformers aligned with Spiritism worked to establish children’s centers, hospitals, and libraries. But the Puerto Rican poor took Spiritism and bent it to their own uses. They adopted a more mystical brand of Spiritism, concentrating on communion with the dead and spells and charms as a way of healing physical, mental, and spiritual illness. Mediums trained in Spiritism claimed to interact with the spirit world to cure the ills of customers. See Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 185-191. This was admittedly published after Ortiz’s dissertation. But still, why castigate Lewis for this in the first place?

⁶⁸ Laura Briggs, “La Vida, Moynihan, and Other Libels: Migration, Social Science, and the Making of the Puerto Rican Welfare Queen.” *El Centro Journal* XIV, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 75-101. Quote from 75.

liberal anthropologists hardly frame the culture of poverty as a “relatively innocuous paradigm,” as this chapter has amply demonstrated.

Both Lewis and Moynihan saw female-centered households with absent fathers as a prominent manifestation of intergenerational poverty. But Lewis never argued (as did Moynihan regarding the black poor) that fixing the family of the poor was an easy and clearcut solution to the culture of poverty. There were other differences as well. Lewis, for instance, used the word “matrifocal” in describing the structure of families within the culture of poverty, while Moynihan used “matriarchy” to describe black family life in America. There is a critical distinction between the two words. Matrifocality implies only a mother-centered household. It does not necessarily imply that women hold a dominant role in a culture or that a culture holds men to be inferior. Moynihan argued that the black man in America had been emasculated: “The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed in 19th century America, a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male. The ‘sassy nigger’ was lynched.”⁶⁹ The destruction of the black man’s masculinity was a critical step in forming the matriarchy that defined the “tangle of pathology” that Moynihan claimed defined poor black family life in America. Lewis’s formulation of the culture of poverty claimed that the men were macho and women played the role of martyrs. Moynihan argued the opposite: matriarchy existed in part because men were insufficiently macho.

Finally, although Moynihan became famous for his cultural/historical interpretation of black poverty, a good deal of his report was given over to structural explanations for poverty. Unemployment was critical, and Moynihan analyzed how black men’s limited

⁶⁹ United States Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC.: GPO, 1965), 16.

employment opportunities had impacted their family lives.⁷⁰ Moynihan's report never used the phrase "culture of poverty," although it has frequently been attached to his report in the popular mind. But Briggs does not problematize the differences between the analyses of Lewis and Moynihan.

Briggs's argument is that *La Vida*, more so than the Moynihan Report, helped to create the myth of the "welfare queen," of the lazy and promiscuous mother living off of the largesse of the American welfare state: "This was *La Vida*'s chief legacy: the widespread availability—for popular, policy, and academic audiences—of the notion of the 'culture of poverty,' one as wedded to a sexualized, dark-skinned woman as Moynihan's 'matriarch.'"⁷¹ Race, however, did not figure prominently in Lewis's analysis in *La Vida*. Fernanda and Soledad were described as black in short blocks of text, which Briggs highlights, but Lewis did not dwell on this. Briggs also engages in error by omission when she does not mention that Lewis repudiated the most [in]famous conclusion of the Moynihan report in the Introduction to *La Vida*, that the black family had been damaged by the legacy of slavery.

Briggs claims:

the 'culture of poverty' as applied to Puerto Ricans in the states was a social science solution to a political problem...the 'culture of poverty' produced a terrain on which to debate policy related to working class people that was based on ideologies of gender, insulated from economy, and tremendously productive of difference, race, class, liberal discourses of rescue, and conservative demonization of the poor.

Briggs acknowledges Lewis's sympathy for the poor, support for public policies to benefit the poor, and radical politics, but she believes that Lewis betrayed himself:

The text itself, however, told a sordid story of endless sex, neglect of children, and failed love relationships. By focusing on family relations as the significant unit of analysis, the book located itself in the tradition of the social science of the island,

⁷⁰ Ibid., 19-25.

⁷¹ Briggs, "La Vida, Moynihan, and Other Libels...," 92.

which throughout the Fifties and Sixties was concerned with how to forge modern, small families in order to overcome “overpopulation”—or we could say more cynically, how to deliver a young, female workforce to the US corporations that were being recruited to relocate to the island....⁷²

First, one must pause to wonder how overpopulation could be at odds with creating an abundant and cheap workforce. Beyond that, Briggs provides little evidence that the social science research she cites was connected to Operation Bootstrap. She shows that the works carried “the imprimatur” of the Social Science Research Center at the University of Puerto Rico, which she claims “was functioning in a strong advisory role to Puerto Rican government,” but many of the faculty members at the University of Puerto Rico were not *autonomista*, and were, in fact, dedicated *independentistas*.⁷³

Lewis did not even rely on this scholarship in *La Vida*. He did list two of these studies in his bibliography, but his analysis went in a different direction. Lewis studied families, but not with the understanding that overpopulation was the cause of poverty in Puerto Rico. Briggs overlooks his numerous statements on the universality of the culture of poverty in industrial societies. Lewis’s statements about the specific nature of the Puerto Rican culture of poverty, statements that were dubious at best, blamed the Puerto Rican colonial historical consciousness.

How does Briggs deal with this? Through a clever sleight of hand, she claims that the introduction to *La Vida*, where Lewis made all of his definitive statements about the culture of poverty, was invalidated by the body of the book. “Lewis’s editing produces it as a story that is intensely scatological, sexual, and violent.” “The book is obsessed with sex, but not love.” “The book left little doubt that this was a depraved, unhappy existence.”⁷⁴

⁷² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 88

These are value judgments of the book, not definitive interpretations, which run directly against Lewis's own analyses of the happiness and morality of the Ríos family.

Briggs states:

Many decisions seem inexplicable, if not downright self-destructive. Fernanda and her daughters reported shame and self-loathing associated with prostitution, but persisted in that work even when they had other options. Women end perfectly good relationships and persist in violent and degrading ones."⁷⁵

The problem with this statement is that *La Vida* dealt with human subjects who did not always make decisions that were in accord with popular, middle-class notions of virtue, morality, or good judgment. Fernanda and her daughters were real people who worked as prostitutes, in some cases for years on end. The story was not "edited" to produce these details. To understand that people sometimes do make these choices, and that making these choices does not render them inhuman, is to begin to understand the whole point of Lewis's body of work. Briggs, though, will not accept that the Ríos women might have made the choice to become prostitutes, or to stay in relationships with exploitative men. She assumes that since the text of *La Vida* claimed that the women had other options but continued to work as prostitutes, then the story must have been wrong.

Briggs also dwells on the extensive depiction of sexuality in the book. She asserts that the story was "produced" by Lewis's editing process as "intensely sexual, scatological, and violent."⁷⁶ On the one hand, it is legitimate to question the creation of a story—how could one book ever completely and accurately capture the essence of every member of an extended family? It is another thing altogether to posit that since the story was "produced" that it is not only flawed, but almost certainly a complete contrivance. Briggs does not cite Lewis's papers. Instead, she relies upon the judgment of Lewis's biographer, Susan Rigdon,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 88

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

that Lewis, by the time of the *La Vida* project, was in poor health and starting to fail in memory and judgment. Such an *argumentum ad hominem* is, in this author's opinion, totally untenable. Briggs also cites Rigdon's criticism that *La Vida* is flawed because "Lewis essentially processed all the data in his head. No attempt was made to do a content analysis of the interviews—more than 30,000 transcribed pages—even though they contained the great bulk of the data."⁷⁷ This statement is true, but also misleading. The Puerto Rico study included data gathered from many research subjects, including those who formed the basis for *Six Women*. The "30,000 transcribed pages" refers to the interviews taken from these subjects as well, not to the far more limited number from interviews with the Ríos family.

The postmodern critique of Lewis has not been without critics. In an intriguing article, anthropologists David Harvey and Michael Reed argue that Lewis's work is relevant still because "the subculture of poverty concept taps into a social reality that has not been articulated by other poverty theories." Harvey and Reed see the work of Lewis as a celebration of the resilience of the poor, stressing the "adaptive mechanisms" that allow the poor "to survive in otherwise impossible material and social conditions." Harvey and Reed also claim that Lewis explicitly laid out the structural bases for poverty, pointing to Lewis's repeated claim that the culture of poverty appeared only in "class-stratified capitalist economies." For Harvey and Reed, poverty researchers have dismissed Lewis's work to their own detriment: the denial of the scars of poverty and the adaptive mechanisms of the poor tend to further rather than reduce the dehumanization of the poor. Harvey and Reed argue that Lewis was a "Marxist humanist," who documented the class oppression of a capitalist society but who did not in turn demonize the victims, as many Marxists have done to the "lumpenproletariat." The culture of poverty has been "walled off"

⁷⁷ As cited in *Ibid.*, 90.

from discussion in the modern poverty debate, write Harvey and Reed, because post-modern intellectuals avoid class-oriented explanations for poverty, as these would threaten their own privileged explanations of gender, race, and ethnicity.⁷⁸ Harvey and Reed's article is important but also problematic. Like authors critical of Lewis, they do not make use of Lewis's correspondence or research files. They do not trace the history of the culture of poverty idea within the larger discourse on poverty. They also ignore the serious contradictions and problems in Lewis's work.

The best of the later works on Lewis comes from Susan Rigdon. Rigdon is firm in her rejection of the culture of poverty. She claims that it belongs in a "journal of failed hypotheses" in the social sciences, fascinating for the concept and the research and debates it produced, but ultimately wrong.⁷⁹ Rigdon also points out that Lewis did not conduct any longitudinal studies of the culture of poverty. People in the culture of poverty, argued Lewis, absorbed its values at a young age, lived their lives within the culture of poverty, and passed it along to their children. But excepting the Sanchez family, Lewis did not form relationships with any of his subjects that spanned more than a few years. Lewis's argument that the culture of poverty was transmitted from parents to children was based solely on observations of the young children in the families he studied. Lewis's real contribution, argues Rigdon, was his methodology. Lewis family studies have become a model for other anthropologists. Indeed, Lewis himself saw his intimate portraits of the poor, rather than the culture of poverty, as his great contribution to anthropology.

⁷⁸ David Harvey and Michael Reed, "The Culture of Poverty: An Ideological Analysis," *Sociological Perspectives* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 465-495.

⁷⁹ Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), ix.

Lewis has long been overdue for a reconsideration, and this may be occurring. Stephen Pimpare, in a recent work aimed at a popular audience, *A People's History of Poverty in America*, gives Lewis prominent attention. Pimpare tries to dispel the pervasive notion in America that the poor are to blame for their own poverty. In a chapter titled "Surrender: A Culture of Poverty?" Pimpare analyzes Lewis and the culture of poverty:

Throughout our history, poverty has usually been understood to be rooted in personal, moral failure: weakness of character, the absence of a work ethic, and disdain for the norms of society at large spread like a disease from person to person, from family to family, and produce entire communities beset with vice and despair. Some even suggest that poor Americans inhabit an entirely separate culture, a 'culture of poverty,' one that manifests itself, according to anthropologist Oscar Lewis, in seventy-five distinct traits.⁸⁰

In some ways Lewis belongs, according to Pimpare, with those who blame the poor for their own poverty. Later, however, he gives a more nuanced reading:

Oscar Lewis is often misread and misused; even if we can identify behaviors and attitudes particular to those who live in concentrated poverty...that is not a condemnation of them. He wrote of the culture of poverty that "there is nothing in the concept that puts the onus of poverty on the character of the poor," for it is the effects of poverty that he has documented, not the causes. The diminished expectations, the refusal to participate in mainstream institutions, the cynicism and other characteristics we might indeed find among very poor people—these are not marks of moral failure, he insists, but complicated (if unconscious) strategies used by those with little discernible power and little cause for hope to protect themselves from disappointment.⁸¹

Pimpare then documents cases of many people who have "given up" or surrendered. It is a defensive reaction, he argues, and at times a realistic one. Failure is a real prospect for many of the poor. Most of Lewis's traits of the culture of poverty are, Pimpare acknowledges, sometimes true. But he is ambivalent about whether they are cultural.

⁸⁰ Stephen Pimpare, *A People's History of Poverty in America* (New York: New Press, 2008), 192.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 195-196.

By the end of the 1960s, Lewis's reputation as a scientific thinker on poverty was effectively destroyed. Valentine, Leacock, Hylan Lewis, Leeds, Montserrat, and others had severely criticized the argument that there was a "culture" of poverty, at least in any sense that could be associated with traditional uses of the culture concept. In the main, their criticisms were on-target, but they failed to replace the culture of poverty with anything useful of their own. If the culture of poverty did not meet the anthropological definition of a culture, or even of a subculture, there was still, as even his critics admitted, something there in Lewis's descriptions of the lifestyles of the poor. Lewis, given the chance to reply to Valentine in a *Current Anthropology* forum on *Culture and Poverty*, ruefully quoted Valentine allowing near the end of his book:

...there is certainly empirical evidence of pathology, incompetence, and other kinds of inadequacy among the people of the ghettos and slums, as there is in the rest of society. There can be no doubt that living in poverty has its own destructive effect on human capacities and that these impairments become part of the whole process perpetuating deprivation.

Valentine, after barbecuing Lewis for nearly a hundred pages in his book, essentially had admitted what Lewis had been arguing all along.

Lewis then acknowledged that the "perpetuating factors are relatively minor and unimportant as compared to the basic structure of the larger society."⁸² This was an important, albeit belated, recognition by Lewis that he had neglected to discuss these structural factors as much as he should have. Lewis did not explicate the relationship between structure and culture in an economic system, and absent this, he could never define what was cause and effect. The list of traits was overly simplistic, and Lewis did not

⁸² "A CA Book Review: *Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals by Charles A Valentine*," *Current Anthropology* 10, no. 2-3 (April-June 1969): 181-201. Quote from 192.

establish any effective diagnostic tool to separate out those who were in a culture of poverty from those who were merely poor. Yet critics did not reevaluate and reformulate Lewis's real contributions. They merely launched a vitriolic attack on Lewis.

The post-modern evaluation of Lewis has been less useful still, relying upon unfounded conclusions and deceptive language to twist Lewis's thought into something it never really was. This post-modern criticism has enhanced the pattern, begun by modernists in the 1960s, of implying that Lewis was not only wrong, but unethical. This criticism of Lewis, especially the cruel tendency to imply that he was a bigot, helps to prevent any real and objective analysis of the problem of poverty. To speak matter-of-factly about the lives of some poor people is to risk suffering the same fate as Oscar Lewis.

Conclusion

In 1967, Oscar Lewis began to articulate a new vision of the culture of poverty. At a conference sponsored by the Department of Sociology at the University of California-Davis on the theme of “Loneliness and Alienation,” Lewis delivered a paper that revealed where his writing might have turned had he lived longer.¹ At the University of California-Davis conference, Lewis criticized the middle class American lifestyle and explored more of the beneficial aspects of the culture of poverty.

The differences between the poor and the rest of society had much to do with modernity, claimed Lewis:

...modern man is ideally represented as highly educated, organized, responsible, disciplined, well informed, worldly, well traveled—the individual who enjoys almost unlimited horizons as well as the material fruits of modern life – the person who is acutely aware of the social and economic problems past, present, and future not only of his own country, but of the entire world. The man who’s aware of the widest range of alternatives that exist and of the choices that have to be made, of the human and subhuman and natural forces involved and especially of the great constructive as well as destructive potentialities of modern science.²

There was a darker side as well. If modern man had all of the blessings of civilization at his fingertips, he also had an omnipresent sense of the danger of technology run amok:

¹ Two publications came later. *A Study of Slum Cultures: Backgrounds for La Vida*, consisted mostly of additional statistical detail from the Puerto Rico project, along with a rehashing of the culture of poverty. Oscar Lewis, *A Study of Slum Cultures: Backgrounds for La Vida* (New York: Random House, 1968). *A Death in the Sanchez Family* revisited the Sanchez family, but there was no new analysis of the culture of poverty in the book. Oscar Lewis, *A Death in the Sanchez Family* (New York: Random House, 1969).

² Oscar Lewis, untitled paper from “The Anatomy of Loneliness” panel, Loneliness and Alienation Conference, Department of Sociology, University of California-Davis, 1967, pg.1 Preserved in Oscar Lewis Papers, Box 63.

Modern man knows of the dangers of living in a push button age where total destruction may occur within minutes as a result of accident, miscalculation, or malevolence. He contemplates all of this standing alone, usually without real faith or belief in God, looking alternately into the mouth of hell and into the garden of Eden and finding it too big and too much to handle. So as a result, modern man feels small, helpless, unhappy, lonely, and alienated.³

In many ways this reads like the writings of the French existentialists, and Lewis can be read here as articulating a sort of anthropological existentialism. Much as Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that modern man was “forlorn” because he was “condemned to be free” in an age when man had rejected the moral authority of religion⁴, so too in Lewis’s analysis, modern man was caught between paradise and perdition. Technology had brought material abundance, but also the possibility of atomic destruction. Educated man had moved past religion, but had failed to find any substantial cultural replacement. From an anthropological standpoint, parts of the culture of modern Western man had fractured, and man suffered isolation, helplessness, and loneliness as a result. If Lewis proclaimed the culture of poverty to be a flawed culture, by the end of his life, Lewis was judging modern mainstream Western culture as even more flawed.

The culture of poverty, continued Lewis, helped to ameliorate the malaise of modernism: “although the people within the culture of poverty suffer from a great many things, they have developed a way of life which tends to protect them from some of the worst aspects of loneliness and alienation.” Lewis gave examples of how the culture of poverty prevented loneliness. The “primitive territoriality” of the slum, for instance, produced an identity that “tends to reduce loneliness and alienation.” Crowding in the

³ *Ibid.*, 1

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism* (Citadel Press, Carol Publishing Group, New York: 1965), 40-41.

slums had some positive functions; living in crowds produced people who “become socialized very, very early,” and who by necessity “learn how to get along with other people.”⁵

Building upon the existentialist theme, Lewis argued that the “present time orientation” of the people of a culture of poverty helped to prevent alienation. “The reality of the moment which the middle class existentialist writers are so desperately trying to recapture is experienced as natural every day phenomena. The emphasis upon impulse life means that these people are not really alienated from themselves.” People in the culture of poverty had a healthier knowledge of and awareness of sexuality. Young people were “very early introduced into the facts of bodily functions. They know all about sex. A six year old can tell you more about sex than a lot of our adolescents.” This led in some ways to better mental health for the poor. Felícita Ríos’s child, Gabi, served as evidence that the introduction of sexuality into the lives of young children of the poor helped to protect them from some of the things that they experienced: “If any of you read what little Gaby (sic) has experienced by age seven, you realize this would probably be highly traumatic for middle class children. It would take five years of psychoanalysis before they could even talk about it.” Yet Gabi, because of his experiences, had “excellent mental health. He manages to cope very well with very threatening situations.”⁶

Harkening back to his analysis of Pedro Martínez and the culture of poverty in Tezpotlán, Lewis argued that the culture of poverty was, in some ways, a peasant outlook on a modern world: “People with a culture of poverty live in cities, but they’re not really modern men. They’re really very provincial...They have not really shared in some of the

⁵ Oscar Lewis, untitled paper, “The Anatomy of Loneliness” panel, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

basic processes of civilization itself...They are surely not cosmopolitan.”⁷ Similarly, Lewis described a person living in the culture of poverty as a sort of pre-modern anti-proletarian:

These are essentially unskilled people. The culture of poverty person resists alienation by not falling into line and submissively punching a time clock every day. He does not, for the most part, work in factories. He will not sell his soul and freedom for a paycheck. He refuses to be a mechanical robot and will not and cannot submit to much regularity or discipline. He avoids promotions and responsibility. When he does have a job, he avoids overtime. He takes voluntary leaves, quits frequently, changes jobs, seeks work which does not cut down too much on his freedom...He prefers unskilled or service jobs that are physically demanding but are not otherwise demanding. He seeks a kindly paternalistic employer who takes a personal interest in him, who's helpful, tolerant, and not too demanding. He does not want to be in a managerial position. He doesn't want to be a boss. He doesn't want to go into business for himself.⁸

The culture of poverty in Lewis's new formulation had become an anti-modern shield against the alienation and time discipline of modern capitalism. This alienation was partially caused by a failure of “will expression.” So machismo became “a way of fighting alienation.” Poor men's “self realization was asserted by sex, by seduction, by wife beating, by drinking, by violence, by defending one's honor, by not showing cowardice, by aggression, and by practicing all the vices.” Middle class men could not act similarly. They had “strong super egos” that would inflict guilt upon them for acting out. Their will expression came differently, though it was still part of the same struggle: “Their method of fighting on this level is to aim for success, for skill, for money, and for power, all delayed rewards.”⁹

In America, the existentialist movement had taken a sharp turn from Sartre and the French existentialists. Sartre had placed upon the human race the awesome responsibility

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

of creating ethics and meaning in the absence of God. Even if this was a redemptive vision, where man could liberate himself from oppression and superstition, it was also forboding and alienating. American existentialism, although it built upon French roots, evolved into a different vision of liberation through experience, of a search for authenticity, unencumbered by traditional morality or societal expectations of proper behavior.

Transgression became a form of liberation. George Cotkin, historian of existentialism in America, identifies Norman Mailer as the author *par excellence* of this reconfiguration of existentialism. Cotkin describes the principal features of Mailer's existentialism: "the fascination with death and transcendence, the notion of living without bad faith, the cathartic aspects of violence, and the liberating world of pimping, drugs, and sexual license."¹⁰ Lewis, as he described a person in the culture of poverty person as a pre-modern who refused to subject himself to modern discipline and whose violent and sexual machismo fulfilled the will expression of the poor, registered this new American existentialism as well. If the alienated and superego-ruled middle class lived an illegitimate and alienated existence, the poor might show the way to something better.

This existentialist turn in Lewis's work was a manifestation of what Micaela di Leonardo has identified as the anthropologist's role in Western society: the bringer of the anti-modern foreign culture to alienated moderns seeking authenticity in a pre-modern worldview. Di Leonardo identifies a paradox: the anti-modernist actually remains, at heart, a believer in modernism who believes that modernity can save the primitive. In their quest for authenticity, anti-moderns miss the real lessons that pre-modern

¹⁰ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 199.

civilizations and people have to offer.¹¹ Thus Lewis could proclaim the Ríos family as more authentic than middle class Americans, and yet at the same time try to help them.

What followed in Lewis's conference paper was something that had been missing in his books: the connection of his overarching analysis to the concrete lives and statements of his informants. Lewis had written analytical introductions to his books that he followed with hundreds of pages of narrative, without comment. This method was innovative stylistically, but over time it had not served him well. Now, Lewis made connections between his argument and his evidence. He described territoriality in slums, the intense identification that the residents of the slums felt with their neighborhoods, even as the middle class shunned and avoided them. Lewis quoted as evidence Manuel's haunting and poetic description from *The Children of Sanchez* of his return to Casa Grande after a trip to the United States. Reading this, it is easy to see why Lewis's books were bestsellers:

In the afternoon I went out to look for my friends. I felt good walking the streets of my colonia again. I had lived here all my life, and it was my whole world. Every street had a meaning for me. The street of the plumbers where I was born and where I had still enjoyed my mother's caresses. The street of the bakers where the three kings had brought me my first toys and made my childhood golden. Tenoche Bland street always reminded me of the song "Lost Love" which a neighbor happened to be singing while my mother was carried out in her coffin. The streets were where each of my relatives, friends and novias (sweethearts) lived. These streets were my school of suffering, where I learned what was dangerous and what was safe, when to be sincere and when to dissimilate.¹²

Turning to *La Vida*, Lewis invoked Cruz on her move away from *La Perla* to a public housing project. This did not alleviate her poverty; it only added loneliness and isolation to

¹¹ Micaela Di Leonardo, *Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), *passim*.

¹² Oscar Lewis, untitled paper, "The Anatomy of Loneliness" panel, 14.

it. Although her apartment was larger and her rent cheaper, Cruz felt isolated from her neighbors and her world:

This place isn't like Esmerelda you know where there's so much liveliness and noise and something is always going on. Here you never see any movement on the street—not one little domino or card game or anything. The place is dead...It's true what the proverb says: "May God deliver me from quiet places, I can defend myself in the wild ones."

Lewis commented: "I think this suggests that there's an increase in loneliness and alienation as you move from the slums to a new housing project. I don't claim that this is an inevitable consequence, but it is a very frequent one because of the silly notion that giving people a better place will take care of all of their problems."¹³ Lewis's commentary was incisive, but this came late in his career and before a small forum. In *La Vida*, for instance, the book closed with Cruz's move to the housing project, and this passage appeared in that chapter. There was a message, but Lewis did not make it explicit. An excerpt from the book appeared in a journal as "Even the Saints Cry" after Cruz's comments about her religious figurines: "Here even my saints cry. They look so sad. They think I am punishing them." Lewis made some brief comments there as well about the simplistic notion that public housing would save the poor.¹⁴ But in *La Vida*, it was left to the reader to figure out what Cruz's story meant. Similarly, Lewis had spoken at great length to fellow academics about Gabi's significance. He had included some analysis in the *Harper's* article. But in the text of *La Vida* itself, there was no such discussion. Gabi's story was just another chapter.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁴ Oscar Lewis, "Even the Saints Cry," *Trans-action* 4, no.1 (November 1966): 18-23.

Susan Rigdon argues that Lewis was pulling back from the culture of poverty in the last years of his life. Citing a 1968 letter to Todd Gitlin, Rigdon argues that Lewis had conceded that there was little to the culture of poverty, that the concept inevitably served to obfuscate and oversimplify the diverse world of the poor: “The more urban slum families I study, the more I am convinced of the wide range of adaptations, reaction patterns, values, etc. that are found...however to condense it all within a single abstract model like the culture of poverty is inevitably to distort the lives of these people.”¹⁵ But Rigdon misreads this letter. What Lewis was claiming was that no sterile concept could ever capture the richness of human life in its totality.

Rather than rejecting the culture of poverty, Lewis was only backing away, as was the broader anthropological world, from the culture and personality school’s totalizing understanding of the manifestations of a broader culture within a single individual. Lewis’s paper at the 1967 conference demonstrates that he remained wedded as ever to his vision of the culture of poverty. He was making changes and exploring new ideas. It is up to the reader to decide whether his new existentialist description of the culture of poverty served to clarify and humanize it or to make it ever more nebulous and absurd.

In his work documenting the McCarthy Era surveillance and persecution of liberal and radical anthropologists, *Threatening Anthropology*, David Price claims that McCarthyism had real effects on the profession which have endured. Cultural anthropology, which once had been one of the most activist of academic disciplines, has, according to Price, retreated into postmodern deconstructions of narrative and discourse:

¹⁵ Oscar Lewis to Todd Gitlin, August 8, 1968. As cited in Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Façade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988),93- 94.

Historically there has been safety in the nonactivist stances promulgated by postmodern anthropologists. The safety of postmodernism's disarticulation of praxis through endless layers of reflections can be traced to the cardinal lesson of McCarthyism: that in a world where activism brings trouble, the inaction of unending deconstructions is a safe haven even if decisive inaction is a betrayal of anthropology's promise. Hoover's FBI knew that activism mattered and that action and advocacy threatened institutionalized inequality. Contemporary anthropologists need to relearn this lesson and anthropology must ethically recommit itself to serve those it studies.¹⁶

Lewis was evidently unaware that the FBI was monitoring him. But he was aware of the McCarthyist climate in which he worked. Still, Lewis was an activist anthropologist. His work amongst the poor was aimed at ameliorating their plight in life. Lewis never retreated into the deconstruction of narrative. Lewis's politics and career began in radicalism, and the culture of poverty began as a criticism not of the poor, but of a society that created inequality and division, and that designated those who did not succeed as failures of their own making. Lewis struggled, however, to connect his theoretical criticism to plausible plans for change.

If a reader in 1966 had opened *La Vida* and found a denunciation of American colonialism alongside a clarion call for independence in Puerto Rico and a social revolution in the United States, it would have been difficult to pass Lewis off as a reactionary acting from a confused Marxism and blaming the downtrodden of the world for their own problems. But over time, this is how he came to be perceived. Puerto Rican independence and radical social change in the United States may or may not have been good or valid ideas, and to publicly advocate for them and push them to the forefront of his analysis might have cost Lewis a National Book Award and bestseller status. But they certainly

¹⁶ David Price, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI's Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 350.

describe what Lewis privately believed. They were also the logical termini of Lewis's thought. If the culture of poverty was a way of describing the cultural world of a people who had been beaten down by an oppressive society, then changing that society was the logical solution. If Puerto Rican poverty was created by colonialism, then ending colonialism was the solution. This may or may not have been the case, and most Puerto Ricans have drifted away from political movements calling for outright independence.

As Lewis brought his research to the United States, the structural critique of society and the economy tended to fade from his analysis. It probably served to shield him from charges of radicalism. Lewis may have given lip service to Castro and the socialist nations. But revolutionary socialism was a dead-end, especially in the context of the developed world, and Lewis acknowledged in *La Vida* that it had little to offer in terms of a solution for poverty in the United States. What Lewis needed was to have offered a third way, a vision of a radically altered American nation that brought the poor and disenfranchised out of the shadows and into the broader nation, a vision that broke their sense of powerlessness and fatalism and that made them full and effective citizens. Instead, he offered up half-hearted suggestions about social work and welfare. As with his refusal to openly advocate for Puerto Rican independence, over time this left him with few defenders. He had failed his liberal/leftist vision by not arguing for a solution to poverty that did not come out seeming as though it blamed the poor, and what remained of his work—the character trait lists and commentary about the social limitations of the life of the poor—was manipulated into an attack on the poor.

But there remains much to admire about Lewis. In his relatively brief life, he produced an enormous body of scholarship, made a major contribution to ethnographic methodology, significantly advanced the social scientific study of poverty, and contributed mightily to the War on Poverty debates of the 1960s through his culture of poverty idea.

Lewis may have been limited in his political outlook, but he was working in an era that punished radical thought severely. Looking back almost fifty years later, it is easy to miss the fact that for Lewis to write admiringly of Fidel Castro at the height of the Cold War, a few years after the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis, was an act of considerable bravery, even if the coming decades would show the limitations of the Cuban Revolution.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I presented this work as a defense of Oscar Lewis. This defense is necessary because despite all of his contributions, Oscar Lewis fell into disrepute, and he has been vilified for reasons that have very little to do with what he wrote. Oscar Lewis's ethnographies remain some of the most penetrating records of the lives of the poor in the twentieth century in Latin America and in the United States. The culture of poverty is still an interesting analysis of the lives of the poor, and of the way that poverty can sometimes become a trap. It may be a flawed idea in many ways. But it describes a way of life that persists in many places. It is not nothing.

Although the culture of poverty had fallen out of favor amongst academics by the late 1960s, the phrase "culture of poverty" had passed into the American vernacular. Edward Abbey, the father of modern American radical environmentalism, in his first book, *Desert Solitaire*, described the "culture of poverty" of the Navajos:

Unequipped to hold their own in the ferociously competitive world of White America in which even the language is foreign to them, the Navajos sink ever deeper into the culture of poverty, exhibiting all of the usual and well-known symptoms: squalor, unemployment or irregular and ill-paid employment, broken families, disease, prostitution, crime, alcoholism, lack of education, too many children, apathy and demoralization, and

various forms of mental illness, including evangelical Protestantism.¹⁷

Excepting the connection of the culture of poverty with crime, which Lewis had always refused to make, Abbey's use of the culture of poverty was faithful to Lewis's formulation of it. Abbey did not cite Lewis, but the similarities make it reasonable to guess that he might have read him at some point. Beyond this, Abbey adopted the same description of the culture of poverty as an existential defense against modernism that Lewis was just beginning to broach in 1967:

Caught in a no-man's land between two worlds, the Navajo takes what advantage he can of the white man's system—the radio, the pickup truck, the welfare—while clinging to the liberty and dignity of his old way of life. Such a man would rather lie drunk in the gutters of Gallup, New Mexico, a disgrace to his tribe and his race, than button on a clean white shirt and spend the best part of his life inside an air-conditioned office building with windows that cannot be opened.¹⁸

This passage of the culture of poverty out of academia and into the broader world continues. Lewis's ideas figure prominently in the work of popular educational consultant Ruby Payne, who has been lecturing educators across the country for more than a decade about the gap in understanding across social classes. She has written a book which has purportedly sold more than a million copies. Payne quotes Lewis liberally in her book (which doubles as a workbook for her presentations), and presents her own list of the “characteristics of generational poverty” which reads much like Lewis's trait list. Amongst the twenty characteristics are matriarchy, oral-language tradition, machismo (which she describes as a “lover/fighter role”), female martyrdom, negativism, survival orientation (where “there is little room for the abstract”), a belief in fate and destiny, an understanding

¹⁷ Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968), 103.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

that “time occurs only in the present,” and a constellation of other traits that read like what Lewis described simply as gregariousness.¹⁹

As I write this, the culture of poverty is in the news again. The *New York Times* published as its lead story of its US news for October 18, 2010 an article that claims that cultural explanations for poverty are experiencing a resurgence. The article focuses mostly on Moynihan, makes the age-old connection of the culture of poverty to black poverty, and does not deal sufficiently with Lewis. Nevertheless, forty years after he died in intellectual disrepute, Oscar Lewis is back on the front page of the *New York Times*. The article claims that academics are abandoning “political correctness” and accepting the blunt reality that there are connections between culture and poverty. Some of what the *New York Times* proclaims as shocking new research sounds uncannily like Oscar Lewis circa 1966:

Their results have challenged some common assumptions, like the belief that poor mothers remain single because they don't value marriage. In Philadelphia, for example, low-income mothers told the sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas that they thought marriage was profoundly important, even sacred, but doubted that their partners were “marriage material.”²⁰

Compare that statement with Lewis's analysis in *La Vida* forty-four years earlier:

People with a culture of poverty are aware of middle-class values, talk about them, and even claim some of them as their own, but on the whole they do not live by them. Thus it is important to distinguish between what they say and what they do. For example, many will tell you that marriage by law, by the church, or by both, is the ideal form of marriage, but few will marry.²¹

¹⁹ Ruby Payne, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands: Aha Process, Inc., 1996, Fourth Revised Ed., 2005), 51-53, 58, 62, 140, 147, 184, 191. Claims on book sales and educational seminars at: <http://www.ahaprocess.com/> (accessed 8 November 2010).

²⁰ Patricia Cohen, “‘Culture of Poverty’ Makes a Comeback,” *New York Times*, October 18, 2010, A1. Retrieved online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/18/us/18poverty.html?ref=us>.

²¹ Lewis, *La Vida*, xlvi.

Much as was the case during the 1960s, it seems that poverty research is peaking as new alarms about poverty sound around the country. The *New York Times* notes that the number of Americans living in poverty has increased to nearly forty-four million, meaning that one in seven Americans is currently poor.²² It seems that Lewis and the culture of poverty idea are poised for a reemergence just as poverty becomes, once again, a pressing issue in America. This might prove to be a mixed blessing. It could be that American liberalism is facing up to some social realities. Lewis once described many people as holding a Rousseauan understanding of poverty, of poor people living a simple, serene, honest, and joyful existence. In this Rousseauan vision of the poor, if their victimization impacts them at all, it serves to make them noble.²³ This vision has not helped the poor, nor has it served American liberalism well. Nathan Glazer may have erred in claiming that the modern welfare state was to blame for creating cultural poverty, but he was right to point out the error that many were making in taking all of the tragic consequences of poverty and repackaging them as virtues.

But if this erroneous construction of the nobility of poverty is washed away, it must not be replaced with an opposing vision of the poor as vicious and ignoble. Consider a passage from a recent book by Saul Alinsky devotee Nicholas von Hoffman on why organizational efforts that begin with the “lumpen proletariat” are doomed:

The lumpen proletariat or the poorest of the poor are worthless for founding a functioning organization...They suffer from what some call social pathologies, meaning their lives are a chaotic sequence of emergencies, terrible coincidences and unforeseen disasters. The lumpens are accident prone and emotionally unstable. Their lives are a chain of bad news—gas

²² Patricia Cohen, “‘Culture of Poverty’ Makes a Comeback.”

²³ Oscar Lewis, “The Culture of Poverty,” *Scientific American* 215, no. 4 (October 1966): 19-25.

is cut off, electrical service terminated, the landlord is evicting them, a cousin is in jail, the baby has to be rushed to the emergency room, one of the kids sassed a social worker and the family is getting cut off, the reigning male came home and beat the hell out of the mother, Wilson stole the food money, Janice is pregnant, Mother missed her appointment with the vocational counselor because she was drunk...Dostoyevsky or Dickens described the lying, stealing, drunkenness, cruelty, cheating and betrayal of existence at the bottom of the heap.²⁴

When the phrase “culture of poverty,” or likeminded terms like lumpenproletariat have been deployed in the last several decades, this is the connotation they have usually carried: of families so disorganized, of people so pathological as to be beyond the pale and possibly beyond help. This is not the way that Lewis saw the poor. Lewis’s attempt to humanize the poor by letting them tell their own stories has somehow been lost.

The discourse surrounding the culture of poverty, with all of the very valid criticisms of the idea, must not be lost either. The idea that poverty is partially cultural, it must be remembered, was in its origins, a radical one. The recognition that poverty can cause real damage and pain to people does not bring along with it a condemnation of the poor. The recognition that there are cultural aspects to poverty does not suggest that nothing be done for the poor. Quite to the contrary, it demands even more clear and forceful action, even deeper and still more profound social and economic changes.

²⁴ Nicholas von Hoffman, *Radical: A Portrait of Saul Alinsky* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 75.

Appendix One: Traits of the culture of poverty, as defined by Oscar Lewis

Note: this does not come from a published list. Lewis claimed various numbers of traits of the culture of poverty, sometimes as high as seventy. It is not possible to give a definitive list of traits. This is an approximation culled from various articles and books. Some (such as herbalism) do not appear to have been a significant part of Lewis's thinking. Others, such as a matrifocal family structure, were there from the beginning, in *Five Families*, and were clearly a major part of what Lewis was proposing as a cultural pattern. The categorization of traits into categories was originally proposed by Lewis; I have used his four proposed categories with my own judgment as to where traits are best placed.

I: The relationship between the subculture and the larger society

- a) No involvement, or minimal involvement in labor unions, political parties
- b) Little use of banks, hospitals, department stores, museums
- c) Involvement in larger institutions is usually limited to negative experiences like jail, army, public welfare.
- d) Chronic unemployment and underemployment
- e) Low wages
- f) Lack of property
- g) Lack of savings
- h) Absence of food reserves
- i) Chronic shortage of cash
- j) Pawning of personal goods
- k) Usury
- l) Informal credit arrangements with friends and neighbors
- m) Secondhand clothing and furniture
- n) Awareness and avowal of middle class values, but don't live by them
- o) Hatred of the police
- p) Mistrust of government
- q) Cynicism towards religion

II: The nature of the slum community

- a) Gregarious
- b) No organization beyond nuclear and extended family
- c) Certain "esprit de corps" possible: gangs, etc., but not formal organization
- d) Local community acts as a shock absorber for rural migrants to city
- e) Stable residence
- f) Daily face to face relations with same people

III: The nature of the family

- a) Childhood not cherished as a specially prolonged and protected stage in the life cycle
- b) Early initiation into sex

- c) Matrifocal family structure
- d) Maternal extended family involved, not paternal
- e) Reliance on consensual rather than formal marriage
- f) Authoritarianism
- g) Intense sibling rivalry for material goods and maternal affection
- h) No privacy
- i) Physical discipline of children, often abusive
- j) Wife beating
- k) Abandonment of mother and children

IV: The attitudes, values, and character structure of the individual

- a) Fatalism
- b) Feelings of helplessness
- c) Dependence
- d) Feelings of marginality
- e) Inferiority complex, feeling of “personal unworthiness”
- f) High incidence of weak ego structure
- g) Orality (Lewis’s word - he may have been confusing it with oral fixation)
- h) Confusion of sexual identification
- i) Maternal deprivation
- j) Immediate gratification, doesn’t plan for the future
- k) High tolerance for psychological pathology
- l) Belief in male superiority
- m) Men concerned with machismo
- n) Corresponding martyr complex in women
- o) Provincial and local in outlook
- p) Little sense of history
- q) No identification with others like themselves elsewhere
- r) Not class conscious
- s) Status conscious
- t) Concrete rather than abstract thought
- u) Alcoholism, addiction
- v) Promiscuity (Lewis never listed this in any trait list, though he did imply it in the introduction to the *Harper’s* article about Gabi, one of the characters in *La Vida*).
- w) Low level of education and literacy

V: Others

- a) Relative higher death rate
- b) Lower life expectancy
- c) Higher proportion of individuals in the younger age group
- d) Higher proportion of gainfully employed
- e) Raising of animals
- f) Belief in sorcery and spiritualism
- g) Herbalism, alternative medical practices, distrust of traditional doctors

It is also worth noting things that Lewis never claimed as traits of the culture of poverty (and that he most certainly would have disavowed), but that were or are still popularly ascribed to the term:

Criminality

Juvenile delinquency

Laziness

Stupidity

Immorality

Race (importantly, Lewis never claimed any racial connection to the culture of poverty).

Lewis also ascribed some beneficial aspects of the culture of poverty. These might also be called traits, though they did not appear in any list of traits:

Capacity for spontaneity

Enjoyment of the sensual

Indulgence of impulse

Existential “reality of the moment”

Less repressed

Finally, Lewis argued that some people never developed a culture of poverty:

People in socialist countries

People in capitalist countries with a comprehensive welfare system

People imbued with a spirit of hope, who were involved in a bigger cause (e.g. activists in the American civil rights movement, Cuban revolutionaries)

Ashkenazi Jews (because of a strong sense of peoplehood and of hopefulness, and strong cultural values that stressed success and achievement, because of the Rabbinical tradition, and because of a religious belief system that held them up as God’s chosen people).

People in unilateral systems (e.g. Indian caste system, clan systems)

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