



Illustration of Miguel Barnet (left) and Oscar Lewis by Karl Litz.

## Rewriting *La vida*: Miguel Barnet and Oscar Lewis on the Culture of Poverty

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**Abstract:** This analysis explores a literary and cultural tug-of-war between Cuban writer Miguel Barnet—one of the founding fathers of *testimonio*, the Latin American form of literary journalism—and U.S. anthropologist Oscar Lewis. By the late 1960s, Lewis was already a well-known authority, most famous for developing the *culture of poverty* theory based on his ethnographic family studies in Mexico and Puerto Rico. Lewis's work was controversial in both the United States and abroad, and Latin American responses to it deserve consideration for the ways in which they questioned the role of narrative in nonfiction depictions of poverty. In his 1986 book *La vida real (A True Story)*—the title of which playfully responds to Lewis's 1965 *La vida*—Barnet resituates the émigré population in the United States as intricately bound to historical processes and distinctively tied to the construction of national identity. The narrative styles of each text create different relationships between poverty and historical progress. In explicitly invoking Lewis's work, Barnet recapitulates Cold War-era antagonisms surrounding U.S. efforts to gain knowledge about the Third World in order to develop it according to capitalist principles and to thus halt the spread of Communism. By doing so, Barnet reminds readers that his own method of writing is indeed reactionary, and in self-consciously formulating a new literary nonfiction genre he contributes to the construction of Caribbean history on its own terms.

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Beginning in the late 1940s, the United States government invested millions of dollars to develop Puerto Rico's economy from an agricultural economy based on sugarcane production into an industrial system. This process—known as Operation Bootstrap<sup>1</sup>—ultimately resulted in skyrocketing unemployment rates and the destruction of the agricultural economy, leading to a massive migration of workers to the United States, primarily New York City. As historian Laura Briggs puts it, “Puerto Rican migrants were the casualties of this process, unwilling and unwelcome expatriates.”<sup>2</sup> Beginning in 1947, U.S. media coverage of New York's “Puerto Rican problem”<sup>3</sup> spiked sharply. Despite the popularity of the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story* and its 1961 film adaptation,<sup>4</sup> media representations in the decades following World War II illustrated national anxiety about how to incorporate this largely impoverished, ethnically, and linguistically diverse population. According to Briggs, “For the newspapers and magazines—and hence a significant number of New Yorkers and other readers—Puerto Rican migrants were always already inserted into the idiom of policy, problems, and poverty.”<sup>5</sup> The focus on Puerto Rican poverty—whether in New York or on the island—reflected a national crisis about how to study and represent domestic poverty while still maintaining the media image of American prosperity central to U.S. national identity.

The Cold War—era United States, while strongly committed to a capitalist economy, nonetheless found it necessary to address the presence of persistent inequality on its own soil. Rather than turning their gaze inward to their own economy, policy makers instead looked outward to the Third World as a way to externalize the problem. By describing poverty as a result of underdevelopment rather than a feature inherent in capitalism, the federal government could fund social scientific research into the problem of inequality without compromising its commitment to maintaining a capitalist economic structure. Puerto Rico's status as a commonwealth territory—not fully incorporated into statehood, yet still offering U.S. citizenship for its residents—offered a perfect location for such inquiry. In the 1940s and early 1950s, social scientists worked to counteract the sensationalistic depictions of Puerto Ricans promulgated by the media, defending the reputation of workers and families and insisting upon their assimilability to mainstream U.S. society. However, a shift occurred in the early 1960s, when social scientists more broadly began to locate poverty as a central problem and to more thoroughly racialize it. As Briggs notes: “It is in the sixties, really, that one encounters a fully developed, productive, and culturally saturating *social science* of Puerto Rican difference, specifically the culture of poverty.”<sup>6</sup> The pinnacle of this trend is inarguably the publication of anthropologist Oscar Lewis's *La vida: A Puerto Rican Fam-*

*ily in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*, recipient of the National Book award for nonfiction.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the people of Puerto Rico are not simply symbols, objects upon which the U.S. public projected their own anxieties about the contradictions of the capitalist economy. Scholars in Puerto Rico actively debated the claims made in *La vida*—some criticizing Lewis for his emphasis on the most sordid qualities of poverty, others praising him for exposing the ravages of inequality that were often whitewashed in contemporary politics.<sup>8</sup> Lewis's claims were also challenged by Caribbean and Latin American writers who crafted their own body of nonfiction literature, often grappling with similar themes of poverty and inequality. While Puerto Rico was unique in its political status as a territory, the implications of Lewis's narrative strategies in *La vida* drew a line in the sand between the United States and other nations of the Americas. This study focuses on how Cuban ethnographer Miguel Barnet's testimonial novel *La vida real (A True Story)* offers a literary approach capable of countering Lewis and the U.S., state-funded scholarly community he purported to represent. In *La vida real*, Barnet resituates the émigré population in the United States as intricately bound to historical processes and distinctively tied to the construction of national identity.<sup>9</sup>

At first blush, pairing Lewis with Barnet seems an incongruous move. While Lewis is often cast as an enemy of the impoverished and a scholar who was instrumental in blaming poverty on the poor, Barnet is widely acknowledged by literary scholars to be one of the foundational authors of the *testimonio* genre, a form that includes works such as Rigoberta Menchú's 1969 *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala)*, and Elena Poniatowska's 1983 *Hasta no verte Jesús mío (Here's to You, Jesusa!)*.<sup>10</sup> In their influential framing of the genre, John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman write:

The general form of the *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode. . . . Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist.<sup>11</sup>

A socially conscious form of literary journalism, *testimonio* is defined by its commitment to uncovering silenced and marginalized voices in history, be they Indigenous farmworkers, rural immigrants to the city, or former runaway slaves, as in Barnet's first and most famous testimonial novel,<sup>12</sup> *Biografía*

*de un cimarrón* (*Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, also published as *Biography of a Runaway Slave*), first published in 1966.<sup>13</sup> Barnet's corpus of four testimonial novels<sup>14</sup> focuses on documenting Cuban national history through individual life stories of those who have witnessed and participated in key events. While his subjects are often poor, their poverty is not the subject of these books per se.

Despite these differences, the comparison of Barnet and Lewis is not incidental: Their work has often been linked in critical and popular reception. In a 2007 interview, Barnet asserts that he has read Lewis's books closely, including his work on Cuba, and while Barnet admires Lewis's contribution, he does not completely agree with his approach or support all aspects of the culture of poverty theory.<sup>15</sup> Although Barnet said in an interview that it bothers him that others say he is an heir of Lewis, he nonetheless reinforces this connection by repeatedly referring to Lewis's work.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the title of his testimonial novel, the 1986 *La vida real*—translated by Regina Galasso into English and published in 2010 as *A True Story*—playfully responds to Lewis's *La vida*.<sup>17</sup>

The following analysis explores how the narrative styles of each text, including the interplay between informant and ethnographer, create a different relationship between poverty and historical progress. By bringing a testimonial novel and a literary ethnography together under the rubric of literary journalism studies, this study contributes to a growing body of research on the intersection between literary journalism and the social sciences. The fields of literary journalism, anthropology, and sociology commonly use similar methods, including ethnography, immersive reportage, and life history. Isabel Soares has insightfully explored the shared origins of both the New Journalism of the nineteenth century and the field of sociology, arguing that both grew out of a response to “the perils of a society at grips with the finding of symbols and meanings to give it a sense of order and purpose.”<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the present research explores literary journalism's connection to mid-twentieth century ethnography, responding to Bruce Gillespie's call for increased attention to the overlap between literary journalism and ethnographic forms such as autoethnography and public ethnography.<sup>19</sup>

An outline of the influential culture of poverty theory, and critical responses to it, follows. Next, a comparison of Lewis's *La vida* and Barnet's *La vida real* focuses on narrative strategy and the thematic treatment of two topics: history and family studies. This study concludes with reflections on how this comparison illustrates the challenges facing poverty reporting and research in an international context.

### The Culture of Poverty

By the time *La vida* was published, Lewis was already a well-known authority on poverty studies, most famous for developing the notion of the “culture of poverty,” which he first outlined in his 1959 ethnography *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*.<sup>20</sup> In the introduction to *La vida*, Lewis explains that the culture of poverty is an adaptation to exploitative living conditions—in many ways, the only method the desperately poor have to survive.

The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individuated, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society.<sup>21</sup>

Traits of the culture of poverty include a lack of engagement in institutions of the larger society; a lack of organization beyond the nuclear family (in fact, Lewis remarks that the formation of gangs are an improvement in these terms); and the absence of childhood as it is understood by the middle and upper classes. Lewis views the culture of poverty as largely self-perpetuating. He writes: “By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunity which may occur in their lifetime.”<sup>22</sup> According to Lewis, although the poor cannot be blamed for this “culture,” it is ultimately what keeps them mired in poverty even when they are afforded opportunities to better their lot.

His concept was later popularized by Michael Harrington's influential *The Other America*, published in 1962.<sup>23</sup> The theory achieved notoriety as a tagline in Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, eventually serving the interests of neoconservatives who wished to claim that government intervention could not solve poverty and the welfare system should be dismantled. In a review of *La vida* that appeared on the first page of the *New York Times Book Review*, Harrington proclaimed the book to be “unquestionably one of the most important books published in the United States this year.”<sup>24</sup> Another reviewer, Madeline Engel, described *La vida* as “one of the most significant books published in 1966—and one of the most controversial.”<sup>25</sup> Even in the midst of its great success, *La vida* was met with debate and considerable scholarly reservations, both in the United States and in Puerto Rico.

And, indeed, without exaggeration one could say that Oscar Lewis's culture of poverty theory was one of the most widely maligned ideas about the poor of the twentieth century. While Lewis coined the *culture of poverty* term,

his ideas were not completely novel. In fact, his invocation of intergenerational culture connected his theory to well-worn tropes in poverty representation. As Edwin Eames and Judith Granich Goode note:

In using the word culture, Lewis was claiming that the behavioral responses of the poor were systematically related and passed down from generation to generation. . . . This view can easily be misread to reinforce the already strong American belief that the poor are to blame for their own poverty because of their impulsive, immoral and indolent behavior.<sup>26</sup>

This idea echoed social Darwinism, which holds that poverty results from hereditary traits and that, through competition, these traits will eventually be weeded out. Thus, the suffering of the poor is a natural part of the improvement of the human race and requires no intervention.<sup>27</sup> Even then-contemporary reviewers of *La vida*, including Jack Roach, expressed worry that its theory and contents would be used against Lewis's aims of assuaging poverty.<sup>28</sup> Frank Cordasco, in his review, prophetically remarked that *La vida* would be "widely read, misinterpreted and misused."<sup>29</sup>

This anxiety stems in part from the fact—openly acknowledged by reviewers of the period—that the academic framing of the culture of poverty contained in Lewis's introduction carried a far different message than the subsequent 660 pages of life history. In his introduction Lewis points more toward structural inequality, implying a Marxist critique. However, the bulk of *La vida* contains material that contradicts and often simply overpowers the claims made in the introduction.<sup>30</sup> Susan M. Rigdon points out the fact that the innovative family studies Lewis was conducting did not provide materials to support the theory.<sup>31</sup> She notes, "The validity of the culture of poverty thesis depended on establishing cause-and-effect relationships between economic, cultural, and personality processes. But Lewis's research was not designed to explore these relationships, and the family study method as he employed it was inadequate to explain them."<sup>32</sup> Rather, it fit within larger trends of pathologizing traits associated with poverty, making them more psychologically based and capable of being transmitted through dysfunctional family dynamics.

Understanding this disjuncture between Lewis's theory and practice is essential for pinpointing the precise nature of Barnet's critique. At face value, it seems as if Barnet sets up the culture of poverty theory as a straw-man argument. In the introduction to *A True Story*, Barnet writes: "I hope this book illustrates that the lives of men of the so-called culture of poverty don't always lack a will to live, a historical consciousness. Even when they are anchored in a feeling of marginality, the flame of life flickers toward the future."<sup>33</sup> But, in all fairness, the characters that Barnet chooses to document would be ex-

cluded from Lewis's formulation of the culture of poverty. In his introduction to *La vida*, Lewis writes: "When the poor become class-conscious or active members of trade-union 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."<sup>34</sup> As depicted in *La vida real (A True Story)*, protagonist Julián Mesa is such a figure. In the later years of his life, he becomes increasingly active politically, even forming his own activist group to address the problems facing other immigrants in New York. He helps form a committee to "stop people from getting evicted or having their electricity and telephone service cut off" when they lose their jobs.<sup>35</sup> Rather than claiming that poverty leads to political disengagement, Mesa describes how it has contributed to his political involvement: "I didn't come from a very politically active family, but I do come from a very poor background and that's something you don't forget. I can't overlook injustices."<sup>36</sup> In this example, poverty is a condition of social activism, rather an impediment to it.

Rather than critiquing Barnet's understanding of Lewis's theory, this study highlights this rupture in logic to suggest that Barnet reacts to Lewis's literary construction of poverty in *La vida* instead of to the culture of poverty theory per se. Exploring how social scientific family studies as a genre—to which the last, roughly six hundred pages of *La vida* belong—are imbedded within a Cold War–U.S. expansionist context makes it possible to better understand how Barnet's testimonial novel *La vida real (A True Story)* critiques Lewis's representative strategies.

### Narrative Strategies for Representing the Poor

This study argues that Lewis purposefully arranges the text so as to highlight discordant views and dysfunctional relationships; however, his own description of his methods differs greatly. He writes that *La vida*:

is the much broader canvas of the family portrait, the intensification of the technique whereby individuals and incidents are seen from multiple points of view, and the combination of multiple biographies with observed typical days. The biographies provide a subjective view of each of the characters, whereas the days give us a more objective account of their actual behavior. The two types of data supplement each other and set up a counterpoint which makes for a more balanced picture. On the whole, the observed days give a greater sense of vividness and warmer glimpses of these people than do their own autobiographies. And because the days include a description not only of the people but also of the setting, of the domestic routines and material possessions, the reader gets a more integrated view of their lives.<sup>37</sup>

The vocabulary of Lewis's description—"objective," "balanced," and "integrated"—implies a greater sense of cohesion than his text really offers. This

passage especially masks the power relationships at play when juxtaposing “objective” accounts from a field worker with first-hand autobiographical accounts from marginalized subjects. Even though the first-person, tape-recorded autobiographies of Fernanda Ríos and her four children—Soledad, Felícita, Simplicio, and Cruz—are the focus of the book, Lewis introduces them through an “observed typical day,” a reconstruction of a day or several days in the life of the family member compiled by field workers. In the first chapter of each of the book’s five parts,<sup>38</sup> which are purported to be the most objective depiction of the family within the book, the presence of the field-worker Rosa is described in ways that enhance her ethnographic authority.

Each sketch includes moments that illustrate how open the family is with Rosa: They ask her to watch their children, they sleep in her presence, and they make frank sexual advances in front of her, among other things. Following each of these “slice-of-life” sketches is a collection of tape-recorded autobiography, highly edited by Lewis and organized into chapters according to family or sexual relationships. The autobiographical narratives are overwhelmingly preoccupied with their romantic entanglements, children, and perspectives on prostitution. For example, the titles include “I’ll Do Anything for My Children,” “My Husbands Fidel and Erasmo,” and “My Mother Was a Prostitute.”<sup>39</sup> Between these chapters, Lewis interjects shorter accounts from children, aunts, and ex-spouses, among others, containing information that often contradicts the autobiography of the principal characters, revealing them to be unreliable narrators. On the whole, rather than creating an “integrated view” as Lewis claims, this narrative structure systematically erodes the authority of the Ríos family to narrate their own life experiences.

This structure, rather than creating a polyphonic depiction of culture, makes the Ríos family appear more inwardly focused than they perhaps really were. In a revealing review of *La vida*, Gary Schwartz points out that:

. . . this social universe lacks one of the conventional elements of fiction: a plot. In this community, social experience and action are unrelentingly episodic. . . . Moreover, the members of this community do not share sustaining images of the future. The absence of ideologies and organizations which promise to transform or transcend the present adds to the despair which often afflicts their lives.<sup>40</sup>

Rather than reading the chaotic nature of the book as a plotting device, Schwartz uses the notion of plot as a metaphor to illustrate the deviant nature of informants’ lives. For Schwartz, and likely many other readers of the text, representation is indicative of the factual content, not the other way around.

In Barnet’s three single-protagonist testimonial novels<sup>41</sup>—and in the genre of testimonio in general—the focus shifts away from the family, to the

point that most informants live without family (many of whom have died or live elsewhere). This is an important feature of the genre because it implies that the informant speaks for the collective.<sup>42</sup> This also serves the important function of breaking away from traditional expectations of autobiographical writing. In this respect, Fredric Jameson’s observation about the difference between testimonio and its bourgeois counterpart, autobiography, is instructive. The autobiography—which bears close likeness to Lewis’s approach to the family study—is absorbed with the childhood as the site of the formation of the individual. Testimonio writes against this tendency by focusing on the individual as representative of the collective and placing the narrative within a moment of historical rupture.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Beverley and Zimmerman point to the contrast between testimonio and autobiography as key to understanding how testimonio challenges unspoken norms: “Testimonio, by contrast, always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability and complacency of the reader’s world must be brought into question.”<sup>44</sup> Both interpretations assume that autobiography supports the status quo by idealizing apolitical aspects of life such as the development of the individual personality. In contrast to Barnet, Lewis focuses on the traditional stumping grounds of autobiography—childhood, love, family relationships—invoking an accepted bourgeois norm of family structure and thus making the Ríos family seem all the more dysfunctional in their deviation from this norm.

The family study and the autobiography are so ideologically charged that representing the poor within them inevitably makes them appear deviant through difference from the norms implicit in each genre. The scholarly reception surrounding testimonio, on the other hand, insists on reading these texts as part of a new literary movement. Through self-conscious genre fashioning, writers of Latin American testimonial literature thus shook off some of the shackles of the autobiographical form. Barnet accomplishes this by taking literary license in retelling his informant’s stories. In an article describing his approach to testimonial novels, Barnet explains that the narrative:

. . . must be a recreated spoken language, not a mere reproduction of what was on tape. From the recording I take the tone, the anecdotes, the inflexions; the rest, the style and fine points, I add myself. A book like Oscar Lewis’ *La vida* is a great contribution to the psychology and sociology of the marginalized masses. It is, simply and plainly: *I write what you tell me and in the way you tell me*. Lewis’ approach has little to do with the documentary novels I write. To my way of thinking, literary imagination should go hand in hand with sociological imagination. A documentary novelist should give free rein to his or her imagination, so long as it does not distort the protagonist’s character or betray his or her language. Imagination, invention

within a realistic essence, is the only way a writer can get the most out of a given phenomenon.<sup>45</sup>

In actively mediating his informants' histories, Barnet's main goal is to bolster their credibility and to articulate clearly their position within a changing national history. While it is impossible to precisely ascertain the degree to which Barnet and Lewis edited the autobiographical material in their respective texts, their goals when doing so were quite different. Barnet purposely reshaped the narratives to reflect a coherent image of history and character; Lewis, on the other hand, emphasized conflicting elements of the text.

### History and the Poor

While Barnet sought to thoroughly research the historical context of his protagonists' autobiographies, Lewis showed less compunction about accurately representing Puerto Rican history. In fact, the ideas Lewis expressed in the introduction to *La vida* reflect skewed notions about Puerto Rican nationalism in comparison to his more thorough understanding of Mexican history. As historian Steven Dike points out, even despite objections to Lewis's view of Puerto Rican history by Muna Muñoz Lee (the daughter of Luis Muñoz Marín, the first governor of Puerto Rico), Lewis included misrepresentations of Puerto Rican history in his introduction to *La vida*, including an insistence that Puerto Rico's history of slavery was proof that Puerto Ricans were "gradualists rather than revolutionaries."<sup>46</sup> Lewis interpreted this lack of revolutionary spirit as evidence that they had been severed from their Indigenous and African roots and subsequently damaged by colonialism.

Although Muñoz Lee challenged Lewis's grasp of Puerto Rican history—especially through her own knowledgeable comparisons to U.S. history—Lewis printed his ideas largely unchanged in the book.<sup>47</sup> As Dike puts it, Lewis "saw Puerto Rico as having a failed nationalism, and Puerto Ricans as having a flawed historical consciousness," which was both a cause and a result of the culture of poverty.<sup>48</sup> Focusing on one of the features of Lewis's culture of poverty, namely a lack of participation "in the major institutions of the larger society"<sup>49</sup> will illustrate this point. Lewis writes: "People with a culture of poverty are provincially and locally oriented and have very little sense of history."<sup>50</sup> Emphasizing the insularity of the Ríos family has political implications. In many ways, Lewis's thinking on the relationship between revolution and the culture of poverty was tautological. In the introduction to *La vida*, he points to a lack of revolutionary involvement as one of the necessary conditions for the development of the culture of poverty. However, after meeting with Fidel Castro after the Cuban Revolution, Lewis "theorized that personality traits, such as those identified by his case studies of families, might

determine the formation of revolutionary potential in individuals."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, we might surmise that *La vida* sets out to explore not only a facet of impoverished existence, but also the capacity for revolutionary change itself. To a Latin American readership dedicated to the possibility of revolutionary potential, the focus on family and personality traits served as a blinder to the role of the poor in enacting historical change.

In contrast, Barnet's *La vida real* actively incorporates the protagonists' life stories into a historical framework. In fact, a large part of Barnet's role as mediator is smoothing away the contradictions in narrative and articulating the connection between his protagonists' experience and the national history with which they are engaging. About his approach to the testimonial novel, Barnet writes:

One should first know the period well, its critical moments, its changes, and atmosphere so that one can analyze its actors. Otherwise there will be a sharp contradiction between what the protagonist says, the way he or she says it, and the fact or event itself. The reciprocal play of language between period and protagonist must be faithful and accurate. It must never betray.<sup>52</sup>

Barnet believes that the contradictions inherent in oral autobiography are ultimately damaging for the final product. In a move very different from Lewis's, Barnet seeks to erase these contradictory moments—whether historical or stylistic—that may ultimately compromise his informants' ability to serve as authoritative witnesses to the events their life histories illuminate.

Throughout *La vida real* there are consistent references to prominent political events, which serve to unite Mesa's life story with larger historical processes. For example, when Mesa is describing and showing a picture of his and Celia's wedding: "We were both so happy! It's obvious in the pictures that we took at Battery Place, with all those little flowers in the background. Especially in this one, the date's on the back: March 12, 1953. Batista was already doing his thing." And earlier in the narrative: "I promised Emerlina I'd marry her on the same day the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor."<sup>53</sup> The fact that both of these events are deeply personal and familial can be seen as a challenge to Lewis's emphasis on dysfunctional families divorced from their historical context.

### *La vida* as a Family Study

Although the culture of poverty became a catchphrase in U.S. discussions of inequality, the most damaging effects of *La vida* have less to do with Lewis's theory itself, but rather his engagement with the family study, a subject fraught with controversy in the mid-1960s. In the year preceding publication of *La vida*, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, *The*

*Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, was leaked to the public, sparking vociferous debate about the nature of urban poverty.<sup>54</sup> The document was meant to address how to move forward after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Instead of engaging with the ensuing discussions about ensuring equal economic opportunity regardless of race, the report shifted attention to the “tangle of pathology” of the Black family.<sup>55</sup> The report focused on the prevalence of matriarchal family structures, which Moynihan argued was a vestige of the ravages of slavery.<sup>56</sup> Like Lewis, Moynihan argued that simply changing economic conditions would not solve alienation and underachievement without a change of culture and values. Despite being refuted by social scientists and scholars alike, the Moynihan Report, as it came to be known, would leave an indelible impression on the U.S. public’s perception of the Black family.

Both the Moynihan Report and *La vida* were situated within a nationwide discourse that emphasized the norm of a two-parent family. During the 1950s and 1960s, when Lewis was conducting his research, the middle-class family was an ideologically infused unit of study.<sup>57</sup> Within the United States, middle-class values were equated with national character and more specifically, anti-communism.<sup>58</sup> During this period, state-funded anthropological missions that were meant to further development in areas of U.S. interest, including Latin America, had the unspoken goal of promoting middle-class values as well.<sup>59</sup> The popularity of this kind of behavioral science coincided with massive funding given to Cold War-era projects that offered the promise of helping to understand the lack of modernization in the Third World, a sphere in which the United States had a vested interest in establishing a capitalist market economy.

In terms of social scientific frameworks for understanding the poor, family studies served to shift attention away from the economic and political causes of poverty in both the United States and Puerto Rico. Even while Lewis posited a structural explanation for poverty in the introduction to his *La vida*, his depiction of a dysfunctional, matrilineal family and nearly exclusive focus on women’s reproductive roles offered “a distorting framework for understanding the nature of poverty and the lives of the poor.”<sup>60</sup> This reflects the broader debate on Puerto Rico that was occurring across media outlets. As Briggs notes: “In multiple kinds of sources, from newspapers to activist writings to social science works, one can find a coherently articulated dispute over whether a narrative of bad mothering and disorderly sexuality can be made to stand in for the problem of Puerto Rican poverty, or whether it of necessity had to be construed in relation to social structural causes.”<sup>61</sup> By positing a normative, middle-class family unit as the center of democracy, Lewis was

part of a social scientific movement that focused on behavior and psychology as the fundamental causes of poverty; an underlying premise that shifted reform strategies away from drastic economic restructuring.<sup>62</sup>

This alone, however, cannot account for the remarkable resilience of the stereotypes that family studies like *La vida* and the Moynihan Report inspired. For example, Briggs tellingly refers to the Moynihan Report as having become a “Ur-text of gender, race, and poverty.”<sup>63</sup> Despite the efforts of many social scientists, the persistence of the myth of dysfunctional families can be attributed in part to its literary appeal. Reviewer Madeline Engel describes this as one of *La vida*’s greatest dangers, noting that “the style of writing employed in the case history, the artful blend of science and literature which has made Lewis famous, makes it probable that many readers will either skip the introduction entirely or read it and forget about it.”<sup>64</sup> And it is easy to see how, in creating an award-winning ethnography, the very factors that make for an interesting narrative conspire to yoke poverty to timeless literary themes of family dysfunction, sexual relationships, violence, and jealousy. These elements have been a part of storytelling for millennia; in creating such a readable text, Lewis slips into exaggerating them. In fact, Laura Briggs argues that Lewis appears to have chosen “the most chaotic family of those he studied to portray at any length in the book.”<sup>65</sup>

At other points in *La vida*, Lewis inserts authorial notes to contradict the testimony of members of the Ríos family. For example, Fernanda describes her relationship with the eighteen-year-old Pedro, whom she marries. She says: “I was embarrassed because he was so young and I was about twenty-five or twenty-six.” Lewis inserts an asterisk after this statement with the note: “Actually, Fernanda was about thirty-three.”<sup>66</sup> This note casts doubt on Fernanda’s reliability as a narrator, and also delegitimizes her marriage to Pedro, which, despite their age difference, led her to give up prostitution and was one of the more stable unions in the book, as the marriage lasted for several years.

The text of *La vida* contains occasionally graphic accounts that contribute to the image of dysfunctional motherhood typical of family studies. Soledad, for example, uses her reproductive capacities to mete out revenge on her boyfriend Benedicto rather than to build a family:

When I started living with Benedicto he told me that he didn’t want to have any children with me. Now he says he wants a child. So now I’m taking revenge on him. I tell him I’m pregnant and he believes it. Then when he comes back from a trip I say, “Oh, I had an abortion. I stuck the rubber tube in me and that did it.” I really have had three abortions and he knows it, so he believes that too. . . . I never told him about my operation. He

thinks the scar is from something else. That just goes to show you that men aren't nearly as clever as they think they are.<sup>67</sup>

Soledad's fertility becomes a battleground with which to create more relationship dysfunction. Her complacent attitude about sterilization and abortion both support the dominant image of matrifocal families as dysfunctional, but also seems to justify policies imposing curtailment of reproductive freedom. The fact that Soledad reduces her reproductive capabilities to nothing more than a tool to attract attention or to cause anger or jealousy helps to justify such medical intervention.

This emphasis on Soledad's reproduction is further complicated by Lewis's organization of testimonies. Benedicto's commentary follows directly after Soledad's, and in it he confirms the fact that her body is a battlefield on which she enacts jealousy. His words, however, cast doubt on whether Soledad is actually capable of bearing children, or whether she was ever sterilized at all. Benedicto asserts that when he returned from a trip, Soledad fell ill after an attempted abortion and had to go to the hospital for treatment. Despite this, Benedicto remarks: "I look at it this way, where six can eat, so can seven, and where seven eat, eight can eat. The doctor told Soledad she couldn't have any more children. But I think she's about three months pregnant right now. I surely would like to have a child with Soledad."<sup>68</sup>

It is important to note that this narrative discrepancy is not addressed or corrected by Lewis. Although it is much more important to the narrative than his correction about Fernanda's age, Lewis offers no clues as to the nature of Soledad's hospitalization—whether it was true that she was sick because of a botched abortion and whether she had actually been sterilized. By keeping Soledad's reproductive capacities shrouded in mystery, Lewis manages to make them seem almost mythical. Despite sterilization, numerous successful abortions, and a (possible) botched abortion with a prognosis of infertility, Soledad still appears to be capable of producing children ad infinitum. Her body thus becomes symbolic of the mystery of poverty: scientific intervention has failed to stop her from reproducing, and the reason for this senseless reproduction stems from dysfunctional interpersonal interactions.

Benedicto's response to this behavior would be equally alarming to Lewis's middle-class U.S. readers. He imagines a family growing incrementally: first six, then seven, then eight. By his logic, the number of children a family could support is infinite. And, despite Soledad's behavior and lack of regard for the lives of her children, Benedicto still wishes to have a child with her. Lewis-as-compiler ends the chapter on this note and thereby leaves readers with the impression that Soledad and Benedicto—and by assumption, all of the other members of the culture of poverty which Lewis purports they

represent—use reproduction as part of a vicious cycle, learning nothing from previous mistakes and simply repeating, beyond what should even be medically possible or even knowable through scientific knowledge.

Moments in Barnet's *La vida real* can be read as direct responses to the relationship between family and poverty in Lewis's *La vida*, in which Barnet's protagonist Julián Mesa, whose wife is Puerto Rican, frequently compares the Puerto Rican community to the Cuban community in New York. Mesa directly acknowledges the fact that far more Puerto Ricans are mired in poverty, and he attributes this to discrimination rather than cultural characteristics:

There was a time during the 50s, when they were treated worse than any other national group even though they were [U.S.] citizens. When an American from Oklahoma got to New York, he was well received; but when a Boricua got there, they slammed the door in his face. They could only get jobs as servants, and that was only in some places. It was like a big filter and very few made it through.<sup>69</sup>

While condemning discrimination, Mesa also calls attention to the salutary forms of family support, rather than placing blame on unstable family structures. The narrative reads: "What saves Puerto Ricans is the support from their families, solidarity. My wife taught me that. . . . Puerto Rican families are like Cuban families and then some. The most distant cousin is considered a relative, and if they can, they'll help you out."<sup>70</sup> He even goes so far as to praise the matriarchal nature of these families:

A Puerto Rican grandmother is a saint. The world could end, but they still respect her. That's why in El Barrio, despite everything, it's pretty safe for Boricuas. Who's going to rob your house if your grandmother lives there? Who's going to get your grandmother involved with drugs or a crime? No one. Grandmothers are like fortresses.<sup>71</sup>

This description is worlds away from the assumption promulgated by Lewis and Moynihan that matrifocal families are the ultimate cause of violence, poverty, and underachievement in Black and Puerto Rican communities. It bears closer resemblance to ethnographies written in opposition to Lewis's work, such as Carol Stack's *All Our Kin*, which documents "extensive networks of kin and friends supporting, reinforcing each other—devising schemes for self-help, strategies for survival in a community of severe economic deprivation."<sup>72</sup>

### Conclusion

Widespread fascination with Puerto Rican poverty reflects the ambiguous status of the territory within the U.S. imaginary. Amy Kaplan's analysis of the 1901 Insular Cases—in which Supreme Court justices grappled with whether



to treat Puerto Rico as a foreign or domestic territory for taxation purposes—is illuminating here. In their influential decision, the justices named Puerto Rico an unincorporated territory, “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense.”<sup>73</sup> As Kaplan argues, this seemingly contradictory statement reflects anxieties about incorporating a racially and ethnically diverse territory within the United States, threatening the dominant image of the United States as a white nation. In addition, this cultural anxiety was mixed with an ideological one: the status of Puerto Rico as a territory challenged U.S. identity as a republic rather than an imperial power.<sup>74</sup>

Kaplan’s analysis of the Insular Cases helps to clarify contradictory impulses in Lewis’s attitudes toward persistent poverty in the U.S. and abroad. On the surface, Lewis claims that the culture of poverty does not apply to the U.S. context, for reasons that bolster U.S. national identity as a developed nation: “Because of the advanced technology, high level of literacy, the development of mass media and the relatively high aspiration level of all sectors of the population, especially when compared with underdeveloped nations, I believe that although there is still a great deal of poverty in the United States . . . there is relatively little of what I would call the culture of poverty.”<sup>75</sup> However, at the end of his introduction, Lewis still asserts that his analysis helps us to understand the problem of poverty within the United States. He writes:

The concept of a cross-societal subculture of poverty enables us to see that many of the problems we think of as distinctively our own or distinctively Negro problems (or that of any other special racial or ethnic group), also exist in countries where there are no distinct ethnic minority groups. This suggests that the elimination of physical poverty *per se* may not be enough to eliminate the culture of poverty which is a whole way of life.<sup>76</sup>

The contrast between these two statements—that poverty is both a foreign problem and an internal, though racialized, one—illustrates the ambivalence about representations of poverty during the Cold War. The United States was obliged to address poverty and racial inequality in its midst; however, radical economic restructuring was not an option. Puerto Rico’s status as a commonwealth, “foreign . . . in a domestic sense” thus makes the territory the perfect vehicle to express these ambivalent attitudes. Alice O’Connor notes that *La vida* “reflected an important recent shift in social scientific thinking about postwar Puerto Rico. Rather than an exciting ‘social laboratory’ for economic planning and modernization, the island was increasingly seen as a laboratory for studying the social pathologies associated with ‘underdevelopment,’ and for understanding why social intervention had not worked.”<sup>77</sup> The conclusions gleaned from this laboratory—though fraught with contradic-

tion—were then applied to the United States, often in dissimilar contexts such as rural Appalachia.<sup>78</sup>

This context helps clarify how Lewis’s depiction of poor people in the Caribbean was refracted through the lens of U.S. ideology. It also clarifies the stakes of Caribbean engagement with Lewis’s legacy. The incorporation and disavowal of Lewis’s work by scholars within the United States speak to its divisive claims and subject matter, but these scholarly responses are ultimately half measures when compared to the ways in which Barnet rebuts Lewis’s claims. By naming his testimonial novel *La vida real*, Miguel Barnet invokes this epistemological framework that disempowers poor people and families. His book offers an alternate narrative strategy for representing the poor, not as an “other,” but as an integral and integrated actor in their history.

This literary tug-of-war offers several important lessons for the field of literary journalism studies. First, it contributes to scholarship that explores the relationship between two genres adjacent to literary journalism: testimonio and literary ethnography. Second, it contributes to international literature on the continuing relevance of poverty as a subject of interest to both scholars and practitioners of literary journalism. Third, by focusing on the political implications of knowledge construction through nonfiction narrative, it illuminates the ideological nature of different methods of reporting and narrating. Barnet’s playful invocation of Lewis’s text exposes structures of power inherent in the narrative construction of life histories and points the way toward opportunities for resistance and empowerment of marginalized groups.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 77.
- <sup>2</sup> Briggs, 79.
- <sup>3</sup> Briggs, 77.
- <sup>4</sup> *West Side Story* [musical], music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, Jerome Robbins, dir., Winter Garden and Broadway Theatres, New York, NY, September 26, 1957 through June 27, 1959. <https://www.ibdb.com/broadway-production/west-side-story-2639>; *West Side Story*, 1961 [film], Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, dirs. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0055614/>
- <sup>5</sup> Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 80.
- <sup>6</sup> Briggs, 78 (emphasis in original).
- <sup>7</sup> Lewis, *La vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*. See also, National Book Awards. Science, Philosophy and Religion, 1967. Lewis’s *La vida* is an atypical anthropological text because of its accessibility and literary style, its marketing to a popular audience, and its social impact on policy and popular culture. The present analysis does not, therefore, take it to be emblematic of all ethnography or social scientific family studies, but rather as a genre-crossing text that can benefit from comparative analysis with other works of literary journalism.
- <sup>8</sup> For a detailed description of the political and scholarly reception of *La vida* in Puerto Rico, see Dike, “*La vida* en La Colonia,” 172–91.
- <sup>9</sup> Barnet, *La vida real*.
- <sup>10</sup> Menchú, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*; Poniatowska, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío*.
- <sup>11</sup> Beverley and Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics*, 173.
- <sup>12</sup> In this article, the term “testimonial novel” is used to refer to novel-like works within the testimonio tradition. The term “novel” refers to aspects of plotting and characterization rather than fictional/nonfictional status.
- <sup>13</sup> Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*. See Segura-Rico, “*Biografía de un cimarrón*,” 161n1. Georg Gugelberger, a foundational critic of testimonial literature, singles out Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* as the first testimonio, emphasizing its connection to the Cuban Revolution, and going so far as to claim that “The genre came into existence due to the Cuban Revolution.” Gugelberger, “Introduction: Institutionalization of Transgression,” 8.
- <sup>14</sup> Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*; Barnet, *Canción de Rachel*; Barnet, *Gallego*; Barnet, *La vida real*.
- <sup>15</sup> Barnet, “Ni epígono de Oscar Lewis ni de Truman Capote,” interview by González, 99.
- <sup>16</sup> “*Así que me molesta mucho que me digan que soy un seguidor de Oscar Lewis o de Truman Capote* [So it bothers me a lot that they tell me that I’m a follower of Oscar Lewis or Truman Capote.]” Barnet, “Ni epígono,” 102. The triangulation of Oscar Lewis (literary ethnographer), Truman Capote (novelist turned investigative reporter best known for his foundational work of literary journalism, *In Cold Blood*), and Miguel Barnet (poet-ethnographer) speaks to the ways in which the literary establishment insists on making ties between authors that employ the techniques of literature in their nonfiction writing.

- <sup>17</sup> Barnet, *A True Story*. All subsequent quotations from *La vida real* are taken from the 2010 English translation, *A True Story*.
- <sup>18</sup> Soares, “At the Intersection of Risk,” 67.
- <sup>19</sup> Gillespie, “Building Bridges,” 67–79.
- <sup>20</sup> Lewis, *Five Families*.
- <sup>21</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, xlv.
- <sup>22</sup> Lewis, xlv.
- <sup>23</sup> Harrington, *The Other America*.
- <sup>24</sup> Harrington, “Everyday Hell,” 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Engel, Review of *La vida*, 69.
- <sup>26</sup> Eames and Goode, *Urban Poverty*, 9.
- <sup>27</sup> Eames and Goode, 73.
- <sup>28</sup> Roach, “*La vida*: A Chronicle of Misery,” 108–11. From the perspective of social work, reviewer Jack Roach warns that *La vida* might contribute to a growing trend of uncritically applying social scientific research to the field. He argues that, although the culture of poverty as conceived by Lewis cannot be adequately addressed through social work, the presentation of material invites treating it as a casebook of sorts.
- <sup>29</sup> Cordasco, “Review Article: The Puerto Rican Family and the Anthropologist,” 37.
- <sup>30</sup> In his review of *La vida*, David Caplovitz notes the discrepancy between Lewis’s theoretical aims and the ability of the evidence to support them. Caplovitz, Review of *La vida*, 141. See also O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 119.
- <sup>31</sup> Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 110. In fact, by his own admission, the culture of poverty theory was inadequate to express the tremendous diversity of experience among the urban poor. Lewis was fonder of fieldwork than theory, and he only offered the theory of poverty as an organizing trope—a hypothesis in its purest sense. Toward the end of his career, Lewis would express frustration that critics focused exclusively on his theory of poverty rather than the content of his ethnographies. For example, in a letter to Todd Gitlin, he writes: “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. I am sure that if we had a sufficient number of detailed studies . . . we could classify this range. However, to condense it all within a single abstract model like the subculture of poverty is inevitably to distort the lives of these people. Incidentally, I never intended the model of a subculture of poverty as a summary of the substantive data presented in my recent books. If only commentators would go to the trouble of doing their own homework and analyzing the biographies instead of relying upon my theoretical model, a great deal of misunderstanding would be avoided and a great deal of light would be shed,” Oscar Lewis in letter to Todd Gitlin, August 8, 1968, quoted in Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 94; 106n13.
- <sup>32</sup> Rigdon, 110.
- <sup>33</sup> Barnet, *A True Story*, xx.
- <sup>34</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, xlvi. Although he claims little experience on the subject—

just his work in Cuba—Lewis offers a tentative hypothesis that “the culture of poverty does not exist in the socialist countries.” After Castro’s revolution, Lewis observed: “The slum itself was now highly organized, with block committees, educational committees, party committees. The people had a new sense of power and importance. They were armed and were given a doctrine which glorified the lower class as the hope of humanity,” Lewis, *La vida*, xlix.

<sup>35</sup> Barnet, *A True Story*, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Barnet, 210–11.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, xxv.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, “A Day with Fernanda in San Juan,” 3–25, “Days with Soledad in New York,” 127–46, “A Day with Felicita in San Juan,” 271–98, “Days with Simplicio in New York,” 413–43, “A Day with Cruz in San Juan,” 533–68.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, 350–60, 60–72, 299–308.

<sup>40</sup> Schwartz, Review of *La vida*, 358.

<sup>41</sup> Barnet, *Biografía de un cimarrón*; Barnet, *Gallego*; Barnet, *La vida real*.

<sup>42</sup> The most paradigmatic example of this is the opening lines of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* [*Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*]: “My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. . . . my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.” Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Jameson, “On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World,” 185, 187.

<sup>44</sup> Beverley and Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics*, 178.

<sup>45</sup> Barnet, “The Documentary Novel,” 25 (emphasis in original).

<sup>46</sup> Dike, “*La vida en La Colonia*,” 176.

<sup>47</sup> Dike, 177.

<sup>48</sup> Dike, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, xlv.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, xlv, xlviii. There are moments in the text that contradict this broad statement—showing that the Ríos women do engage with history in their own manner. Soledad, for example, describes her response to John F. Kennedy’s assassination. She spent thirty-five dollars to travel to Washington, D.C. with a co-worker to attend the funeral. She responds: “I 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 which neither President Eisenhower nor Roosevelt was able to do. He helped Puerto Rico get ahead and he helped us *hispanos* get the same minimum wage as other workers. So far, this Johnson doesn’t make a good impression on me.” Lewis’s multivocal ethnography is rich enough to incorporate moments like this—showing that members of the Ríos family do indeed feel connected to national politics. However, the vast majority of the text is designed to support the contention that the Ríos family cares little for political or institutional involvement. Lewis, *La vida*, 237.

<sup>51</sup> Dike, “*La vida en La Colonia*,” 179–80.

<sup>52</sup> Barnet, “Documentary Novel,” 24.

<sup>53</sup> Barnet, *A True Story*, 171, 64.

<sup>54</sup> [Moynihan], *The Negro Family*.

<sup>55</sup> [Moynihan], 29–30.

<sup>56</sup> [Moynihan], 15–17.

<sup>57</sup> Susan Rigdon points out that Lewis often relied on an unspoken idealization of middle-class life—rather than national values specific to Puerto Rico or Mexico—as a foil to the culture of poverty. Rigdon, *Culture Facade*, 120.

<sup>58</sup> Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Erik Erickson wrote works on the “national character,” arguing that a bi-parent, middle-class, nuclear family was at the heart of the U.S. national character. Lower classes were seen as un-American, racist, and the source of fascist ideals. O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 105–106.

<sup>59</sup> O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 113–17.

<sup>60</sup> O’Connor, 121.

<sup>61</sup> Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 76.

<sup>62</sup> O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 122.

<sup>63</sup> Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 87.

<sup>64</sup> Engel, “Review,” 70.

<sup>65</sup> Briggs, “*La vida*, Moynihan, and Other Libels,” 90.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, 87.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis, 217.

<sup>68</sup> Lewis, 234.

<sup>69</sup> Barnet, *A True Story*, 164.

<sup>70</sup> Barnet, 184.

<sup>71</sup> Barnet, 174.

<sup>72</sup> Stack, *All Our Kin*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> Kaplan, 1–12.

<sup>75</sup> Lewis, *La vida*, li.

<sup>76</sup> Lewis, lii.

<sup>77</sup> O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 120.

<sup>78</sup> O’Connor, 121–22.

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