

Chiu, Fred Y. L., Academia Sinica, Taiwan

What a story tells and what it doesn't — Myths around the Silenced Life of Ruth and Oscar Lewis and the Resounding Tales they've being telling !

“Listen to the frightening thunder in the space of dead silence !” —— Lu Xun

In the autumn of 1977 in Urbana-Champaign, I met with Mrs. Ruth Lewis. In an extremely noisy student café, we chatted from evening until midnight. When she told me her husband Prof. Oscar Lewis, who had died seven years before, was buried in upstate New York, she advised me not to go to pay homage. Over many hours she updated me on the situations of the people Oscar wrote about. Most of them were still in poverty and marginalized, yet stubbornly striving for a livelihood. There was not a single word on herself or her husband. Finally, after learning who I was and what I was up to, she granted me the permission to publish my Chinese translation of *Five Families*. On departing, she looked into my eyes and told me I was the only one she encountered who requested to go pay homage to her late husband. In the past 40 years, my translation was reissued and I re-read all the works of Oscar Lewis. I am more and more convinced that that Ruth played a tremendously important role in their fieldwork as well as writing; at the same time, she has been even more ignored due to the absolute silence regarding their own lives. It was not until 2004, when David H. Price published *Threatening Anthropology*, that the myth was unwrapped. From 1943, when Ruth and Oscar drove across the U.S./Mexico border at Laredo, Texas and U.S. Customs found “two booklets concerning Communism,” Ruth and Oscar were tailed and under surveillance by secret service forces until Oscar's death in 1970. It started ten years before the rise of McCarthyism in America! Against the backdrop of both Ruth and Oscar's unswerving efforts in voicing for the subalterns, this paper tries to unravel the vexing dialectics (or lack thereof) among Storytelling, Performance and Self-narrative, as well as between the silenced life of the storytellers vis-à-vis those vocal tales they have narrated.