
Foreword

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Lucia's Testimony

LUCIA IS A RESIDENT of Jakeira, one of the many *favelas* or shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil, the fifth most populous country in the world. Robert Gay, a sociologist from Connecticut College and experienced researcher on Brazil, pieced together this account of her life in a series of interviews conducted between 1999 and 2002. A woman of color now in her early thirties, Lucia is a survivor, her story a harrowing one. Her testimony offers, as Gay affirms, the “detailed and intensely personal perspective” of a woman struggling each day in a “male-centered and male-dominated world” of violence, fear, and economic hardship. In human terms, it brings to the reader one version of the precarious circumstances facing millions of poor people in the world’s most rapidly growing large cities, the urban centers of the Third World.

Lucia’s childhood was a short one. Her father failed to provide for the members of the family, and her mother could not lift them above poverty, despite her constant labors as a domestic for wealthy people. During her early to mid-teens, Lucia lost interest in school. By then, she had already entered the world of men, gangs, and narcotics that increasingly dominated

existence in the favela as she grew up. Determined not to be a woman confined to housekeeping, she dreamed of a comfortable future through marriage to a rich man. In the world of the favela, however, drugs were the only route to quick and substantial money, and her life as a “drug dealer’s woman” would prove anything but comfortable.

Rogério, a *dono* or drug lord, took the youthful Lucia as one of his women, eventually fathering her daughter Amanda in 1994. This liaison commences Lucia’s narrative of several sexual alliances with *bandidos* or drug dealers that she maintained over succeeding years as her principal means of survival. “I hate being alone,” she would confide to Gay in one of their interviews. Being alone meant total vulnerability—no income, no physical protection against the violence of the favela, no means of helping either her mother or her young daughter, no recognized place within the environment of drug-gang society. A successful *bandido*—and especially a successful *dono*—could provide in a day what it would have taken her a month or more to earn. Over the years of her life that she recounts to Gay, Lucia did find a series of short-term, low-wage jobs working for a neighborhood association, a supermarket, a Laundromat, a beauty salon, and stores that sold plastic items or clothing. Exploitation, ill treatment, boredom, and meager pay characterized every one of these jobs. All proved unsatisfactory in comparison to the income and protections afforded by intimate connections to a powerful man in the local drug trade. A life built around narcotics trafficking proved a hard one to leave.

Nevertheless, existence as a drug dealer’s woman remained fraught with danger and hardship for Lucia. *Bandidos* and *donos* were violent men who required total submission from their women, regardless of their own faithlessness and unreliability. Straying from that norm could mean death. Marcos, a powerful *dono* who occupies an important part of Lucia’s narrative, several times threatened to kill her out of jealousy, once cut her with a knife, and on another occasion punished her by shooting her in the leg. For a dependent woman like Lucia, the insecurities of trafficker life meant sleeping in different locations night after night, threats from the gunslingers of rival factions, and abusive treatment from the police, all the while fearing the loss of her man’s affections to another of “his women” and wondering when he would meet his inevitable violent end. Lucia’s experiences taught her the seeming truth of Rogério’s grim worldview—“there are two paths in this life: death or prison.”

A strong-minded person, Lucia proved skillful in navigating through the perils of the world of narcotics trafficking. Nevertheless, once her brother Diago was imprisoned for drugs, she determined to get out of “that life.” Her narrative moves from its focus on drug lords to her efforts to sustain her new life with her interest in Pentecostalism and with her new man Bruno, a well-educated former soldier who seeks to provide for Lucia and their new daughter. She sees the tribulations of the previous ten years as a form of destiny that she had to experience in order to “start over,” one that taught her a great deal and ultimately gave her a new outlook. “I didn’t study, and I’m here . . . unemployed,” she tells Gay in a mixture of guilt and hope. “But I know that all is not lost . . . all is not lost. Because I have the will to learn everything . . . I will do better.”

But real life is not a soap opera, and Lucia’s story encounters formidable—perhaps insuperable—barriers to the achievement of a happy ending. Making a living outside the drug economy remains excruciatingly difficult. The burden on the female leaders of the household is enormous. Lucia’s father is disabled, while her mother was dismissed from her last job as a domestic. Neither her sister’s income as a waitress nor her brother-in-law’s earnings from part-time employment provide enough. Diago’s continued addiction to drugs renders him an emotional and economic burden. Lucia’s work in a beauty salon suffers from low pay, barriers to advancement, and mistreatment by the owner. Bruno’s past prison sentence for a narcotics offense continues to deny him any employment commensurate with his education, and he seems reluctant to accept anything less. Despite Lucia’s determination that Amanda will study hard and lay the foundations for a different future, she has failed the fifth grade. As the story concludes, Bruno finds himself in jail in Brasília for driving a car he claims not to have known was stolen, Lucia is working part time as a maid, and a substantially completed three-room addition has appeared on the house. Sadly, Gay finds himself convinced that the family has gone back to the drug life. “I became angry and upset,” he says. “But then, sitting in the comfort of my air-conditioned hotel room, I thought, who am I to judge? How could I possibly know what it was they were going through?”

Nevertheless, readers ought to form a judgment about Lucia’s story, not a moral evaluation of her behavior, but rather an informed appraisal of her circumstances. Personal testimony has become a major means of documenting the lives of Latin American women in recent decades. “Testimonial

literature can be compelling and immediate,” notes one analyst, “allowing the reader the sense of hearing directly the voices of those recounting their lives. Because testimonies are the words of real individuals, they possess a flesh-and-blood authenticity lacking in the more abstract data of statistics and surveys.”¹ The compelling quality of personal testimony with its apparent moral authority has raised serious questions about how readers should evaluate such texts. What should readers in the United States make of Lucia’s testimony? Gay notes that her personal story is one of enduring conditions that most readers will find “simply unimaginable.” It certainly contrasts with the images of Rio de Janeiro that those at a distance might derive from tourist brochures, imported Bossa Nova music, or films such as *Copacabana* (1947), *Blame It on Rio* (1984), or *Live from Rio* (2002). Yet, even then, aspects of Lucia’s story may be “imaginable” to readers from afar. Viewers of *Black Orpheus* (1959) may remember the principal protagonist’s ultimately futile struggle against an adverse fate. A verse from one of the film’s songs laments that “Sadness has no end, happiness does.” Those familiar with urban drug trafficking in the United States or with the impact of racial segregation upon American inner-city neighborhoods will find points of contact with Lucia’s testimony.²

The authenticity of testimonial literature has remained subject to controversy, most particularly in the case of Rigoberta Menchú, the winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. Anthropologist David Stoll documented serious misrepresentations in the autobiography of this Guatemalan Mayan woman, setting off debates about testimonial truth that still continue.³ Readers may ask how much of Lucia’s presentation of her own life is true. Matters of gender and setting certainly raise questions about the completeness of her testimony. As Daphne Patai, a Professor of Brazilian Literature at the University of Massachusetts, notes, testimonial interviews require from people “the kind of revelation of their inner life that normally occurs in situations of great intimacy and within the private realm.”⁴ Could Lucia express deeply personal matters freely to a male interviewer? In an atmosphere of potential danger from other *favelados* and from the police, how forthcoming could she be? Gay considers that his long friendship with Lucia, her strong motivation at a time in which she was striving to “go straight,” and various aspects of his interview methodology offer assurance as to the basic veracity of her story. At the same time, he recognizes the possibilities of distortion that exist, including deception on the part of Lucia to keep

him “off track” on particularly sensitive matters. Oral history remains full of pitfalls. Readers should view Lucia’s story as a self-portrait, important to her as she “started over.” As Patai notes, “memory itself is no doubt generated and structured in specific ways by the opportunity to tell one’s life story and the circumstances of the situation in which this occurs. At another moment in one’s life, or faced with a different interlocutor, quite a different story, with different emphases, is likely to emerge.” Given these complexities of substance and method, personal testimony does not “exclude the possibility of intentional misrepresentation, self-censorship, or unintentional replication of a given society’s myths and cherished beliefs about the world, itself, or the roles that distinctive individuals or groups play.”⁵

Readers with long memories will note that many of these issues over oral history testimony emerged in Brazil a generation ago in the case of Carolina Maria de Jesus, “a fiercely proud black Brazilian woman who lived in a São Paulo favela with her three illegitimate children (each with a different father).”⁶ The publication of her diaries in 1960 with the assistance of a São Paulo reporter transformed her overnight into a literary sensation, one of international proportions as *Quarto de Despejo. Diário de uma Favelada* soon found its way into translation into thirteen different languages in forty countries.⁷ Although her fame proved fleeting, controversies stemming from readers’ a priori expectations of Carolina swirled around her until her death in 1977.⁸ Many who first read Carolina’s account wished to see in her an ideal representation of the world’s urban poor. Critics found themselves offended when she exhibited intolerance for the behavior of her neighbors or when she failed to “lend her voice to calls for massive social change” in a “society that tolerates the most glaring maldistribution of wealth in the world.”⁹ Carolina, like Lucia, simply wished to escape a world of poverty and insecurity. Readers should be wary of casting their own expectations upon Lucia. Her story is an individual one, at once both ordinary and extraordinary in all its dimensions—and far from insignificant. At the very least, it should elicit empathy from those in more comfortable circumstances, underscoring the words of Nigerian author Chinua Achebe that “the world is not well arranged, and therefore there is no way we can be happy with it.”¹⁰ Lucia’s testimony opens for its readers one window into the traumatic violence that surrounds the lives of the poor in many of the world’s largest cities.

Latin American Urban Violence

Throughout their history, cities in Latin America have acted as the agents of change. For those who sought opportunity there, “the problem was to get to the city and immediately thereafter to integrate oneself into the mysterious social fabric of the city.”¹¹ Today, however, endemic violence weaves itself through the “social fabric,” making poor migrants and their immediate descendents “citizens of fear” within the enormous urban concentrations that have developed over the last several decades. “Imagine,” asks urbanologist Jorge Balán, “cities of a similar size, but with a median income per capita as low as one-tenth that of Los Angeles, such as Mexico City, Bogotá, Caracas, or Rio de Janeiro.”¹² The Latin American super-metropolis is a relatively new historical phenomenon. In 1950, barely one Latin American in four lived in a city of 20,000 people or more. Since then, as the population of Latin America and the Caribbean has tripled to more than 500 million, industrialization, rural-urban migration, and government policies have made the region ever more urban. Today, in the seven largest Latin American countries, at least 60 percent of the national population resides in localities of 20,000 or more people, at least half in cities of 100,000 or more inhabitants.¹³ Brazil alone currently has twenty-three cities possessing approximately a million or more in their metropolitan areas, while São Paulo (18.5 million) and Rio de Janeiro (11.2 million) rank among the very largest urban concentrations in the world.¹⁴

The gigantic scale of contemporary metropolitan existence should not trigger any romanticizing of the past. Earlier generations of common city folk in Brazil experienced the burdens of racism and miserable living conditions. They suffered predatory public authorities dedicated chiefly to advancing the interests of the privileged. Nineteenth-century Rio’s “modern police institutions buttressed and ensured the continuity of traditional hierarchical social relations, extending them into impersonal public space,” argues historian Thomas Holloway. “The apparent contradiction is one example of the incomplete or discontinuous historical processes that help account for many of the characteristics of contemporary Brazil, including the divergence between formal law and the institutions ostensibly charged with enforcing it and socio-cultural norms guiding individual behavior.”¹⁵ Throughout the nineteenth century, servants and slaves in Rio engaged in a constant struggle with their masters of “street” versus “household.” At the dawn of the twentieth century, the city’s urban renewal brought an

“explicit attack” upon the spaces inhabited and used by the lower classes, as the country’s elite sought “to put an end to that old Brazil, that ‘African’ Brazil that threatened their claims to Civilization.”¹⁶

Rio de Janeiro’s first favelas appeared in 1898 when military veterans returning from northeastern Brazil constructed their own wooden shanties on the hillsides overlooking the city. Nevertheless, favelas did not surpass inner-city slums as the chief form of urban housing for the poor in Rio de Janeiro until the 1940s.¹⁷ Despite considerable hardships, rural-urban migrants in Latin America after World War II generally fared better in the city than in their places of origin. “If far too many newcomers were required to work for very low pay, few were unemployed and even fewer were worse off than if they had stayed in the countryside.”¹⁸ Rates of formal employment growth in Rio de Janeiro and in other Latin American big cities did not keep up with the expansion of the urban labor force. Nevertheless, the city afforded unique opportunities for earning income in the informal economy, a grab-bag category of survival pursuits that includes small-scale workshops, nonprofessional self-employment, casual trade such as street vending, domestic service, and even illegal activities.¹⁹ Studies over the years showed that favela residents labored in a range of occupations in both the formal and informal economies. Early impressions that favelados constituted marginal elements in urban life—variously depicted as either dangerous or apathetic—gave way to a more accurate appreciation of their existence. As urban expert Janice Perlman wrote in a famous 1976 study:

Socially, they are well organized and cohesive and make wide use of the urban milieu and its institutions. Culturally, they are highly optimistic and aspire to better education for their children and to improving the condition of their houses. The small piles of bricks purchased one by one and stored in backyards for the day they can be used is eloquent testimony to how favelados strive to fulfill their goals. Economically, they work hard, they consume their share of the products of others . . . and they build—not only their own houses but also much of the overall community and urban infrastructure.²⁰

Echoing this view, Gay notes that favela inhabitants were politically well organized and constituted a backbone of civil society efforts to bring to an end the military rule that governed Brazil between 1964 and 1985.²¹

But as is evident in Lucia's life, little seems to have gone well for Rio's favelados over the last two decades. In Brazil, as in much of the rest of Latin America, the advent of electoral democracy took the wind out of the sails of much of the popular movement, but it failed to provide effective representative institutions and services. Despite something as remarkable as the election of the former worker Luiz Inácio da Silva (Lula) as president in late 2002, the transition to electoral democracy in Brazil has done little to better the lives of favelados. Brazil's conditions echo those of the rest of Latin America—the irony of the establishment of formal democratic institutions accompanied by the negation of the benefits of citizenship for much of the lower ranks of society. In the words of a recent report by the Inter-American Dialogue, an “enlightened establishment” institution that brings together prominent figures from across the Americas: “Public opinion surveys consistently reveal disappointment with the performance of democratic institutions and elected leaders. Simply put, democratic politics are not delivering satisfactory results on a variety of fronts, including justice, personal security, and economic needs.”²² Present-day analyses of current public life in Latin America emphasize public distrust, weak governmental service institutions, corruption, and growing violence. “Common crime has become a nightmare for most Latin Americans, overwhelming the region's mostly under-financed, poorly trained, and often corrupt police and judicial systems,” notes another Inter-American Dialogue report.²³ In Brazil, homicide has become the leading cause of death for persons between the ages of fifteen and forty-four.²⁴

Residents of poor urban areas throughout Latin America, such as the favelados of Lucia's Jakeira, suffer an existence “embedded in structures of power that are often unpredictable and beyond their immediate control.”²⁵ Extralegal violence, whether at the hands of gangs or police, holds sway over their lives. Latin America's transition to electoral democracy has taken place simultaneously with two other phenomena that have exercised negative social repercussions in the region, vastly amplifying its susceptibility to constant violence: the adoption of neoliberal economic reforms and the vertiginous rise in drug trafficking. The adoption of neoliberalism (often loosely referred to as “free market economics”) originated in the debt crisis of the early 1980s when Latin America's post–World War II reliance upon inwardly oriented national industrialization reached a dead end. Pushed heavily by the United States and by multilateral agencies such as the

International Monetary Fund, neoliberal policies have emphasized stricter public finances, privatization of state firms, and a reduction in government programs of social assistance. Under neoliberalism, reduced state regulation has left labor, trade, and financial matters increasingly in the hands of unfettered market forces.²⁶ While these economic reforms brought international capital investment back to the region and reinitiated growth after the regression of the “lost decade” of the 1980s, they have achieved nothing that would remotely resemble prosperity or even stability. Economic expansion has proven both meager and unsteady. In Brazil’s case, the per-person output has remained virtually stagnant over the last decade. The unsuccessful struggles of Lucia’s family to gain an economic base outside the world of narcotics constitute a microcosm of Latin America’s contemporary economic condition. While in some cases modest alleviation of poverty has taken place, as a whole neoliberalism has generated even greater social inequality and malaise than existed previously. As a recent study summarizes the matter:

A shrinking formal working class and a stagnant or rising informal proletariat negate predictions about the capacity of the new economic model to absorb labor and reduce poverty. With the exception of Chile, most working persons in the region, regardless of where they are employed, receive wages that are insufficient by themselves to lift them out of poverty. The contraction of the state sector and of formal private employment has compelled substantial numbers of the intermediate and subordinate classes to search for alternative economic strategies. The new regime of open markets has, by and large, favored those with the resources to succeed in them, leaving the rest to fend for themselves. Micro-entrepreneurialism, marginal self-employment, violent crime, and accelerating emigration have accompanied the new model as adaptive strategies to its economic consequences.²⁷

Over the same time period that neoliberal economic changes have exercised this devastating social impact in Latin America, the consumption of illicit drugs has become a truly “global habit,” one that has multiplied the opportunities for quick if dangerous wealth.²⁸ Beginning in the mid-1980s, narcotics trafficking began its “incremental and destructive ‘invasion’ of

Brazil and the Southern Cone” of Latin America. “US-sponsored anti-drug enforcement operations [in the Andes] during the 1980s and 1990s unwittingly pushed the drug trade—its operations and consequences—further into the region, penetrating and undermining already fragile and vulnerable political, social, and economic conditions and institutions.”²⁹ Rio de Janeiro became both a transshipment point for new markets in Europe as well as a market for local consumption. Lucia’s testimony depicts in human terms the consequences of these changes for life in the favela. Gangs fill the void left by weak state institutions and insufficient economic opportunity, providing their “rule of law” in place of the independent community associations that earlier generations of favelados had constructed. The police, continuing their already established pattern of treating the poor as criminals, prey upon the favela and extort their profits from the narcotics traffickers. Permanent stories of rags to riches are hard to come by. Drug gang leaders—the donos—may be community heroes for a time, but their violent lives usually come to a premature end. Those engaged in the lower levels of drug trafficking—the bandidos—live no more well off than their neighbors—and even more insecurely.³⁰

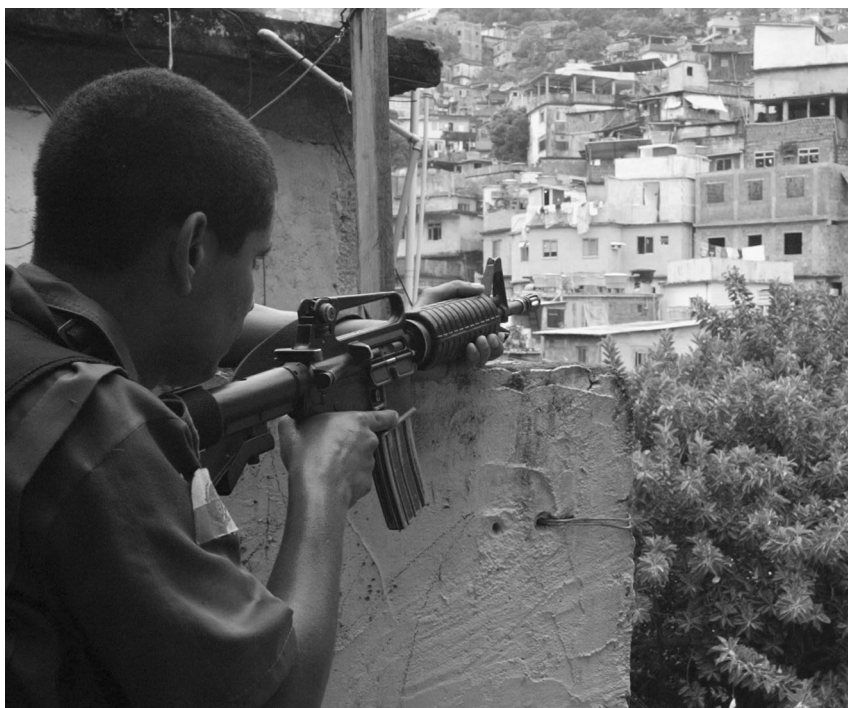
In the midst of this violent, male-dominated world, evangelical protestantism has exercised a significant and growing appeal. One well-regarded recent anthropological study suggests that “women are choosing religious conversion as a form of oppositional culture, one that resists male oppositional culture, namely, gang membership and participation in urban violence.”³¹ While Lucia has struggled with this question, her mother fully converted to a Pentecostal sect that exercised strict norms over personal behavior including drinking, dress, and dancing. Such conversions offer the possibility of some small measure of control over the terms of one’s existence in a world of fear and violence that lacks any broader social or institutional alternative. Given the prevalence of these desperate sorts of conditions in large, rapidly growing urban concentrations of the Third World, mainstream multilateral agencies such as the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank have begun to redefine poverty. Their new research recognizes the significance of deep social inequalities of the sort that prevail in Brazil. It stresses that “social exclusion” underlies contemporary urban problems in the Third World. Income poverty, health and education poverty, personal and asset insecurity, and disempowerment constitute interactive elements that lock people like Lucia into an existence

without exit.³² As her case shows, barriers of class, skin color, and gender can frustrate the efforts at advancement of even the strongest-willed persons. Questions of social exclusion particularly affect women even as they have become a larger part of the urban labor force in Latin America and as the share of female-headed households has risen.³³ It remains to be seen, however, whether these new views of urban poverty will produce effective global and domestic policies capable of improving life prospects in large Third World cities, including those of Latin America.

Meantime, in the midst of the bleak conditions of Lucia's testimony, some analysts have begun to argue that

[T]he evidence shows that local civic groups and social movements, networking with state actors, [can] play a crucial role in stimulating police reform and controlling violence. . . . In Rio's favelas, where criminal groups are strongly connected to some civic leaders and governmental agents, networks provide the most effective way to extend democratic governance and protect citizens' rights.³⁴

Active networks among cooperative politicians, police, domestic and international nongovernmental organizations, local community associations, and the press have proven effective in some cases in reducing violence. Particularly significant in this regard has been the ten-year-old nongovernmental organization Viva Rio that Gay mentions in his Epilogue. Viva Rio has constructed important networks in its campaigns for human rights, public security, community development, education, and the environment. Its programs have included reducing the supply of firearms, creating sports activities for youth, promoting job training, providing microcredit, setting up community computer centers, offering legal aid, and a variety of other activities.³⁵ Clearly, Viva Rio has not brought an end to the killing or solved matters of chronic unemployment, but it has enjoyed a measure of success, created innovative methods that others can adopt, and generated hope. Its incomplete victories parallel Lucia's longing to "start over."



INTRODUCTION

IT WAS JUST PAST FIVE O'CLOCK on an oppressively hot and humid afternoon in mid-January. Lucia was perched beside me at the top of the concrete staircase that led from her mother's porch below to the living quarters that were being built for Lucia's sisters and their families. I remember sitting there, taking it all in, and thinking that it was a far cry from the cramped and makeshift three-room house that Lucia's grandmother, mother, father, two sisters, and brother lived in when I first made their acquaintances. It was still, however, a typical family arrangement in Jakeira, a typical shantytown, or *favela*, in the troubled and increasingly violent city of Rio de Janeiro.

I first got to know Lucia while conducting field research in 1989. I had spent the previous three years documenting and writing about the different

organizational types and strategies of favela neighborhood associations. I was introduced to Lucia by a mutual friend who worked for a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Rio that funded programs for street children. Back then, I would run into Lucia once every two weeks or so when she poked her head in at the NGO's offices downtown or when I accompanied my friend to his house, which was also in Jakeira, a few miles from the city center. Then, a few years later, Lucia suddenly disappeared. I heard through my friend that she had taken up with a drug dealer and that she had also had a child. That was all I knew at the time and, understandably, her family was reluctant to talk about her, let alone admit publicly that she had chosen a life of crime.

About four years after her disappearance, Lucia suddenly reappeared. She had indeed been involved with what turned out to be a string of drug dealers, most of who were gunned down by rivals or by the police. And yes, it was true that she had a child, a beautiful and distracted young daughter who, according to those who knew him, was the spitting image of her long-since-dead father. But all that was behind her now. Lucia told me that she had grown tired of drug gang life and that she had decided to start over, to begin again. Returning to her home in Jakeira, she worked hard at restoring her relationships with her friends and her family and took her place at her long-suffering but forever-loyal mother's side.

Lucia's mother, Conceição, was seated in the front row of the congregation of fifteen or so people gathered on the porch beneath us. She too had gone through changes in her life. When I first met Conceição, she was a fun-loving, outgoing woman who smoked cigarettes and always had a glass of something in her hand. A few years ago, however, she converted to Pentecostalism. Now she no longer swore, smoked, or drank. And instead of tight-fitting spandex shorts and halter tops, she now wore the dark and somber below-the-knee-length skirts and outfits that are the trademark of members of the Pentecostal Church of God Is Love.¹ In fact, she credited her newfound faith for turning Lucia's life around and prayed constantly for the salvation of her only son, Diago, who was still heavily involved with the drug gang in Jakeira.

Diago had recently been released from prison where he served three years for illegal possession of drugs and firearms. It did not take him long to slip back into his old ways. In a matter of days, he was spending his nights with his fellow drug gang members mixing, weighing, repackaging, and

selling cocaine and marijuana from the various selling points, or *bocas de fumo*, in the favela. Like many of his friends, Diago was also an addict, and working for the drug gang paid for his addiction. In the morning, I would stumble across him sleeping off his inevitable hangover on a mattress on the living room floor. Or, I would see him stretched out in front of the television in his sisters' bedroom. Everyone liked Diago, and everyone got on well with him. He was always quick to greet me with a handshake, a welcoming gesture, or a smile. He said nothing, however, of his life in the drug gang. It was his family's dirty secret.

During the last two years that Diago was in prison, Lucia made the one-hour plus bus trip from Jaqueira each week to visit him. It was during one of these visits that she met and eventually fell in love with Bruno. At the time, Bruno was serving a seven-year sentence for smuggling drugs to Rio from a small town on the Bolivian border. Unlike Diago, however, Bruno was now attempting to turn his life around and, more immediately, to provide for Lucia and their daughter, whose birth was just a few months away. Things were not easy, however, as work was hard to come by and the ghosts of his recent past lingered close behind. Bruno knew full well that if he accepted the frequent invitations to become involved with drugs again, he would already have the house, the car, and the cash that he coveted, and that he had possessed before his incarceration.

Bruno was sitting opposite me in the far corner, his hands on his bible and his eyes fixed firmly on the pastor who was leading the prayer meeting, or *culto*, which was held at Lucia's house each Sunday afternoon. The pastor, himself a former drug dealer, was imploring his small but attentive congregation to resist the temptations of the devil and to devote their lives to the Lord. As the pastor's high-pitched voice reached a crescendo, a round of firecrackers announced the arrival of a police patrol car at one of the entrances to the favela. As the smoke rings from the firecrackers drifted slowly into the air, I watched as Bruno turned his head toward the neighborhood association building two hundred yards away on the side of the main road. "It's the struggle between good and evil," whispered Lucia in my ear.

What you are about to read is the product of a series of short but intensive visits to the field between the summer of 1999 and the spring of 2002. I first came up with the idea of the project following conversations I had with Lucia on her return home some eight years ago. As I sat

listening, enthralled but at the same time horrified by what she was telling me, I could not help thinking that in light of all the changes I had witnessed over the past two decades, and all the killing and the violence that was going on around us, her story should be told.²

Since its transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Brazil has experienced a sudden and dramatic increase in the level of violent crime.³ Between 1980 and 2000, for example, the number of homicides in Brazil rose steadily from ten thousand to forty thousand per year.⁴ The majority of these homicides took place in and around Brazil's major cities and metropolitan areas, involved the use of firearms, and cut short the lives of predominantly young, male, poor, uneducated, and dark-skinned victims from the literally thousands of low-income neighborhoods, public housing projects, and favelas.⁵

Explanations for the increase in violent crime in Brazil run the gamut from the impact of globalization to changing attitudes toward work and leisure and the emergence—among the young—of a fetishism for high-priced articles of “style” that confer status and power. Three factors, however, stand out. The first is inequality. Since the 1960s, Brazil has become one of the world's largest industrial economies, and yet it competes with a handful of much poorer nations for the dubious distinction of being the most unequal place on earth. In terms of per capita income, Brazil is in the same league as countries such as Costa Rica, Malaysia, Bulgaria, and Chile. In terms of poverty rates, however, Brazil is much more like Panama, Botswana, Mauritania, and Guinea.⁶ More significantly, perhaps, the past two decades of economic stagnation and recession have meant that the abyss that separates rich and poor in Brazil shows few signs of closing.⁷

The second factor has to do with what are often referred to as the “authoritarian legacies” of the previous regime. Under military rule, the Brazilian police acted with impunity to hunt down, torture, and, in some cases, execute political dissidents. In postauthoritarian Brazil, the police operate in much the same way, but with a different and much larger population in mind. Since the mid-to-late 1970s, the police have been engaged in the extermination of what are widely considered marginal, and therefore expendable, elements of Brazilian society. The brutal and cold-blooded murders of 111 inmates in Carandiru prison in São Paulo in 1992, eight street children outside Candelária Cathedral, and twenty-one inhabitants of the favela of Vigário Geral—the latter incidents both in Rio de

Janeiro in 1993—are but more heinous and well-known examples of what is standard police procedure. Protected, until recently, by military tribunals that dealt with complaints of human rights abuse, and since then, by an overburdened and ineffective civil judiciary, police involvement in crime, in general, and the summary execution of civilians, in particular, continues both unchecked and unpunished.

The third and by far most important factor in the increase in violent crime is drugs. Brazil is not a major producer of illegal drugs,⁸ but over the past two decades or so the country has become an important transshipment point for cocaine that is cultivated and processed in the neighboring countries of Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru and exported to the United States and, more recently, expanding markets in Europe and the states that emerged from the breakup of the former Soviet Union.⁹ A sizable portion of the cocaine that enters Brazil is, however, sold locally.¹⁰ In fact, it is now estimated that Brazil is the second largest consumer of cocaine in the world.

In Rio, the majority of the distribution and selling points for cocaine—and, for that matter, marijuana—are located in the city's 600 or so favelas. Since the early to mid-1980s, whole areas of Rio and its hinterland have been controlled not by public authorities but by well-organized and heavily armed drug gangs.¹¹ These gangs purchase cocaine from intermediaries, or *matutos*, who bring it in from neighboring countries and states. The gangs then mix, repackage, and sell the cocaine to wealthy clients in surrounding neighborhoods and, increasingly, to users and addicts in their own communities. The struggle for control of the massive profits to be made from the cocaine trade has been, since the early 1980s, the basis for what are violent and deadly confrontations between rival drug gangs and between drug gangs and the police.¹² Indeed, as Lucia's testimony clearly shows, it is this combination of drugs, police violence and corruption, and savage and increasingly visible inequality that has transformed, not just a few select neighborhoods, but almost an entire city into what is effectively a war zone.¹³

In Rio, the increase in violence has seriously compromised, if not washed away, the foundations of what was an emerging and vibrant civil society. And violence—and, more to the point, the widespread fear of violence—represents, today, a significant threat to democracy.¹⁴ When I first began doing research in Rio, I was acutely aware of the increasing availability of drugs and, more significantly, the growing presence of drug

gangs in the favelas.¹⁵ At the time, however, their influence was minor compared to that of neighborhood associations and other recently organized civic groups. And to be quite honest, like many of my colleagues, I was too busy imagining civil society to pay them much attention. With each subsequent visit, however, I noticed that the situation had changed. Fifteen years ago my friends in various favelas talked enthusiastically about organizing and attending meetings and their newly established democratic rights. Now all they talk about—in hushed voices and behind closed doors—is their reluctance to participate in public life and their strategies for surviving the undeclared civil war between increasingly violent drug gangs and the police.

Understandably, there are few accounts of what it is like to endure such conditions. Our knowledge of drug gangs and drug gang life is primarily through the grim reports and statistics that appear daily in the newspapers. Or, it is through the eyes and ears of ethnographers who have watched helplessly as communities they were intimately involved with have collapsed and disappeared.¹⁶ However, Lucia's testimony provides something very different. First, it offers a detailed and intensely personal perspective on what it is like to lead such a life that is, by its very nature, far richer and more compelling than the occasional snapshot or secondhand account.¹⁷ And, as a result, it forces us to deal with violence as she experiences and remembers it, as something that is not unusual or exotic, but very much a part of her everyday existence and humanity.¹⁸ Second, Lucia's testimony offers a much-needed woman's perspective on what is, without a doubt, a male-centered and male-dominated world.¹⁹ Women's roles and participation in drug gang life continue to be treated as sidelines and curiosities and, in this sense, Lucia gives voice to those who are rarely, if ever, heard and provides insight as to the ways in which women like her become involved.²⁰

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Lucia's testimony forces us to ask the question: "Who are the victims and the victimizers in this situation?" On the one hand, Lucia is an unusual and—some might say—unfortunate choice for a testimonial. After all, she is not an activist or a spokesperson for a protest movement or NGO.²¹ Moreover, she has witnessed and, by nature of association, participated in what can only be described as a series of cruel and unusual acts. On the other hand, Lucia's story is about a young woman who has suffered conditions that, for most of us, are simply unimaginable, and who has struggled mightily, her entire life, to be treated

with the minimum of dignity and respect. Unfortunately, like millions of other Brazilians, Lucia is a second-class citizen, if she can be considered a citizen at all. Laws, rights, privileges, and guarantees do not apply to her because, in truth, Lucia exists in a country, within another county, that we call Brazil.²²

As you can imagine, this was never an easy research project to conduct. First, there were very real dangers involved. In most favelas there is a strict code of silence, or *lei de silêncio*, which prohibits anyone from talking about drug gang activities. It exists, primarily, to discourage local residents from passing information to rival drug gangs, or worse still, the police. The punishment for being an informant is usually a slow and painful process of torture, followed by execution. Because I was aware of this, my initial plan was to interview Lucia in the relative comfort and safety of my hotel room. Two or three hours of interviews each day would be sufficient, I thought, to cover the bases. It soon became apparent, however, that I was asking too much of Lucia who, at the beginning of the interview process, was responsible for managing her mother's household and, by the time I had finished, was looking after her two-year-old daughter and various other neighborhood children. More importantly, it became clear to me that Lucia's story only made sense in the context of her surroundings and her relationship with her friends, family, and neighborhood. Therefore, I spent most of my time shuttling back and forth from my hotel room and simply hanging out, observing and listening, and waiting patiently for the opportunity to tape-record interviews. On the rare occasion, we were able to steal away to Lucia and Bruno's makeshift bedroom in her sister's apartment for an hour or two. For the most part, however, the interviews were conducted in her living room in full view of everyone and anyone who cared to listen.

Lucia's family was more or less informed about what it was we were doing. Lucia's mother often joined in the conversation, or shouted comments from the kitchen, when she disagreed with something Lucia said or with her recollection of a sequence of events. Conceição herself was extremely forthcoming about aspects of her own life and, in particular, the hardships associated with the family's move from the Northeast of Brazil to Rio in the early 1960s. Bruno was also a willing participant, although I did not get to record interviews with him as often as I would have liked. I first met him a week after his release from prison. At the time, he seemed genuinely

pleased that I was interested in what had happened to him, despite the fact that he didn't know me at all and the extremely sensitive nature of what it was we talked about. In fact, one of the most vivid memories of my fieldwork is sitting on the roof of Lucia's house, in plain view of everyone, tape-recording conversations about the seven long years he had spent in various state penitentiaries.

The only person I wasn't sure about was Diago. I believe he had a vague notion of what it was we were up to. But as long as I didn't bother him, he didn't seem to mind. There was always a pause in the conversation, however, when he emerged from his sisters' bedroom in the afternoon. On such occasions I would look across at Lucia as if to say, "Are you sure this is okay?" And Lucia would nod her head reassuringly and we'd continue. Lucia's friends and neighbors certainly knew what was going on, including one of the drug gang leader's women. We were sitting in a friend's house one day, watching over the kids, when this woman who I'd never seen before said, "Who's he? And what's he doing here?" Much to my surprise—and dismay—Lucia went ahead and told her. "He's an old friend of mine," she said, "and he's writing a book about my life." I expected the woman to, I don't know, get upset or something, but she said to Lucia, "Well, you make sure he gets it right. Make sure you tell him everything." Needless to say, I was a little nervous for the next couple of days.²³

Whether it was because I was protected, or because I was just plain lucky, I never ran into any trouble, but things were not the way they used to be. A few years earlier, I could come and go whenever and wherever I pleased. Now, I made sure to call Lucia each morning before setting out from my hotel, just in case anything had happened overnight. And neither Lucia nor my other friends in Jakeira could be persuaded to take me to the places we used to hang out.²⁴ To be perfectly honest, however, I was far more afraid of the police. My greatest fear was that they would mistake me for a buyer from downtown or that they would get their hands on the tapes and transcripts that told of the innumerable instances of police violence and corruption. I felt a sensation of intense anxiety and then relief each time I passed a patrol car at the entrance to the favela on my way out.

The only time that I was really worried was in June 2002 when a well-known and respected journalist for the newspaper *O Globo* was kidnapped, tortured, and killed by a drug gang reportedly because of an article he had published on open-air drug fairs and research he was doing on

public sex acts involving teenagers.²⁵ The reporter's brutal murder shocked even Lucia, who was otherwise unconcerned about the ramifications of our project.²⁶ I assured her that all the places, names, and identifiable subjects and objects of her testimony would be changed. And it was clear that my status as an outsider, who would eventually pack up and leave, was crucial to the project's success in that Lucia felt she could tell me things she had never even told her family. Lucia, in turn, assured me that the characters we were talking about were no longer around—that they were either serving time or buried in cemeteries and unmarked graves that were scattered around the state.²⁷ The way she saw it, if she were going to be killed, it would have happened by now. And as if to prove her point, she proudly displayed the scars from the bullet that shattered her left shinbone and the bullet that—to this day—remains firmly lodged at the base of her left buttock.

There is no doubt that the fact that I knew Lucia, and had gained her trust over the years, made the interview process easier. This does not mean, however, that it was easy.²⁸ As you will see, the initial conversations were hard work. This was primarily because neither of us knew where the interviews were going. In fact, I began this project with only a vague idea of what I would learn or how it would turn out. On the positive side, this meant that, at least initially, it was difficult for me to overdetermine the interviews. On the negative side, it meant that our early conversations edged, stuttered, and stumbled along. Eventually, however, Lucia grew more comfortable with her role and let her voice and her emotions take over, such that, by the end, I was acting primarily as a prompt.

The fact that I knew Lucia did not prevent her from employing what others have described as security measures and ethnographic seduction to keep me off track.²⁹ This was particularly true of our conversations about Bruno. I suspected, early on, that Lucia was reluctant to tell me exactly what it was he was doing. At one point, I even convinced myself that perhaps she didn't know. This was a critical issue for me because, in my own mind, it was because Lucia was "going straight" that the project was at all possible. In other words, it was Lucia's decision to turn her back on her past that provided me with the moral justification to continue. After all, this was no randomly chosen subject. I really liked Lucia and considered her my friend. And I believed in my heart that she was a good person. I had to be careful of these emotions, however, and had to constantly remind myself not to let my relationship with Lucia interfere with what I was doing.³⁰

Fortunately, when it came to figuring out what was going on in her life, I held certain advantages. First of all, I had known Lucia for a long, long time, so it was much more difficult for her to conceal things from me. I had seen her when she was happy, and I had seen her when she was sad. And I had been present at all sorts of family events, celebrations, and crises. My second advantage was that Lucia wanted her story to be told. First, she was clearly interested in the money, and I had told her, in the very beginning, that if there were money to be made, it would be hers.³¹ But more importantly, the interviews gave her an opportunity to relive and talk about things she had buried deep in her past. This was clearly important to her, and it provided her with a measure of relief.³² There were times, however, when this was extremely difficult and painful for her to do. Her account of Rogério's death, for example, was followed by a flood of anguish and tears that left everyone in the room in a state of stunned silence.

My final advantage was that the interviews themselves were conducted over a long period. Between the summer of 1999 and the spring of 2001 we tape-recorded interviews about how she first got involved with drug dealers in Jakeira and about her relationships with the three most important men in her life: Rogério, Marcos, and, finally, Bruno. Then, between the spring and fall of 2001, Lucia and I read through each of the interview transcripts. This provided me with the opportunity to ask Lucia questions I had not thought of at the time, to clarify things that I had initially misunderstood, and to revisit certain issues.³³

This second set of interviews also provided me with the opportunity to interview Lucia about her experiences at school and at work, her family's religious beliefs and practices, and her and Bruno's attempts at "getting out." In fact, the final tape-recorded interviews were conducted in somewhat surreal circumstances in the days immediately following September 11, 2001. I had flown out of LaGuardia on September 10, but because of bad weather, had missed my connection in Atlanta. I spent the next four days—like everyone else—glued to the television set, thinking the world was coming to an end. Four days later, however, I was back at Lucia's house in Jakeira amidst the violence and the squalor. It was, for me, a tremendously sobering experience. And I will never forget Bruno's comment to me. He said, "What did you Americans expect?"

The book is organized in the following way. Each of my conversations with Lucia is framed and linked to the next by a short discussion of issues as they are raised in the text. These discussions introduce the reader to the universe of the favelas, the emergence of drug gangs, issues of police violence and corruption, the prison system, education, the world of work and, finally, religion. These intermediary chapters were researched and written after the initial interviews were completed and represent my attempt to situate Lucia's testimony in its broader context without disrupting the flow and integrity of our conversations.³⁴ It was always my intent to tell Lucia's story from her perspective, but in a way that is, at the same time, much more than a story; in a way that attempts to bring faceless economic and political institutions and practices to life.³⁵ The book ends with an account of my last research trip to Lucia's house in March 2002 and an Epilogue that discusses what has happened in Rio since then.

I have attempted, throughout the book, to stay as faithful as possible to Lucia's own words. Inevitably, however, there are things that are lost in translation and in the process of transcription from the spoken to the written word.³⁶ I have also moved sentences from one part of the manuscript to another, in places, to ensure thematic consistency, and have edited, or edited out, a good many of the prompts and reiterative figures of speech that are an essential aspect of depth interviewing.³⁷ Also, as you will see, I have left my own voice in. Interviews are, by nature, conversational and involve a special form of collaboration and partnership between interviewer and interviewee. In other words, whether I like it or not, I was and still am very much a part of the production process.³⁸

Finally, I have tried to make this book as accessible and readable as possible. There are two reasons for this. First, fifteen years of teaching have convinced me that when it comes to writing, it pays to be as simple and as direct as possible. Second, and more importantly, when we think about drugs and drug-related violence in Latin America, we do not tend to think of Brazil, and yet, the story you are about to be told is a direct consequence of more than three decades of U.S. foreign policy in the region. Since the 1970s, the U.S. government has been waging a "war on drugs" that has failed to stem the flow of narcotics and has succeeded, instead, in spreading the cultivation, production, sale, and consumption of drugs.³⁹ The war on drugs has also led to a militarization of conflicts that

have cost the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of defenseless and innocent people and has generated billions of dollars in profits that have sustained guerilla, paramilitary, and criminal organizations and corrupted public authorities.⁴⁰

In Rio, government officials continue to talk about their war on drugs in terms of “good versus evil” and the threat posed by a so-called “parallel state.”⁴¹ And they continue to favor heavy-handed, extralegal measures that threaten what is an already weak system of human rights. If Lucia’s testimony tells us anything, it is that the authorities in Brazil are intimately involved with and, to a large extent, responsible for the drug trade at every level, just as they are for a system of exclusion and social and economic apartheid that has been in place for centuries.