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A HIDDEN WINDOW INTO CUBAN HISTORY: THE CARL WITHERS MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This research note describes the Carl Withers Manuscript Collection (CWMC) held at the University Archives of New York University. A unique and rarely used collection, it includes the ethnographic materials and professional correspondence of U.S. anthropologist Carl Withers and his Cuban collaborator Juan Manuel Picabea. Withers did fieldwork in the rural town of Mayajigua, in central Cuba during the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the assistance of Picabea. The authors of the research note focus on three important components of the CWMC that are particularly relevant to Cuba, the Caribbean, and the intellectual history of anthropology in the region: 1) Withers' fieldnotes; 2) black and white photographs taken by Withers; and 3) the manuscript materials by Picabea. The authors provide some insights into each of these components with examples highlighting the potential of the collection for Cuban and Caribbean Studies.

Keywords: Carl Withers Manuscript Collection (NYU), Carl L. Withers, Juan Manuel Picabea, post-war Caribbean anthropology, rural Cuba, Mayajigua

RESUMEN

Esta nota de investigación describe la Colección Manuscrita de Carl Withers, depositada en los archivos universitarios de la Universidad de Nueva York. Una colección única y escasamente utilizada, la misma incluye los materiales etnográficos y la correspondencia profesional del antropólogo estadounidense Carl Withers y su colaborador en Cuba, Juan Manuel Picabea. Withers llevó a cabo un trabajo de campo en el pueblo rural de Mayajigua, en Cuba central, durante los años cuarenta y cincuenta, con la asistencia de Picabea. Los autores de la nota se enfocan en tres componentes importantes de la Colección que son particularmente relevantes para Cuba, el Caribe, y la historia intelectual de la antropología en la región: 1) las notas etnográficas de Withers; 2) fotografías en blanco y negro tomadas por Withers, y 3) materiales manuscritos de Picabea. Los autores proveen un vistazo a cada uno de estos componentes mediante ejemplos, llamando la atención al

potencial de la colección para los estudios cubanos y caribeños.

Palabras clave: Colección Manuscrita de Carl Withers (NYU), Carl L. Withers, Juan Manuel Picabea, antropología caribeña de la post-guerra, Cuba rural, Mayajigua

RÉSUMÉ

Cette note de recherche décrit la Collection des Manuscrits de Carl Withers, déposée aux archives universitaires de l'Université de New York. Cette collection unique et rarement utilisée contient des documents ethnographiques ainsi que la correspondance épistolaire entre l'ethnologue américain Carl Withers et son adjoint à Cuba Juan Manuel Picabea. Withers mena son travail sur le terrain au village de Mayajigua – dans la région centrale de Cuba – vers la fin des années 40 et le début des années 50, avec la collaboration de Picabea. Les auteurs de cette note mettent en relief trois composantes importantes de la Collection qui concernent particulièrement Cuba, les Antilles et l'histoire intellectuelle de l'ethnologie de la région, à savoir : 1) les écrits ethnographiques de Withers ; 2) des photographies en noir et blanc prises par ce dernier ; et 3) des manuscrits de Picabea. En effet, les auteurs proposent un aperçu complet de chacune de ces trois composantes, tout en faisant remarquer la richesse potentielle de cette collection pour les études cubaines et antillaises.

Mots-clés: Collection de manuscrits de Carl Withers (NYU), Carl L. Withers, Juan Manuel Picabea, anthropologie antillaise de l'après-guerre, Cuba rural, Mayajigua

Introduction

The distinctive architecture of East 78th Street—red brick Italianate row houses, elegant town houses, and modern high rises—is a constant visual reminder of New York City's wealth and power. Yet, the neighborhood's most notable asset may have gone unnoticed by most neighborhood residents during its 52-year history. In its heyday, countless visitors flocked to the well-tended town house at 162 East 78th Street, largely by word of mouth. Within its walls they experienced an entirely different kind of wealth in the form of special collections representing a unique “window” into Caribbean history.

Purchased in 1955 by Dr. Vera Dourmashkin Rubin (1911-1985), 162 East 78th street once served as headquarters for the Research Institute for the Study of Man (RISM); a non-profit organization that promoted social science research in the Caribbean.¹ RISM's crown jewel was the Library for Caribbean Research (LCR). Its comprehensive holdings

included published and unpublished monographs, archival collections, training materials, field research, and journals representing the English speaking and Franco-phone regions of the Caribbean.²

Over several decades, the LCR provided a wealth of information to generations of students, faculty and scholars in the U.S. and abroad, but following the death of Dr. Rubin in 1985, library patronage began to decline. Contributing factors included a failure to adopt technological systems which would have helped sustain and attract new generations of researchers. In 2007 RISM donated its holdings to the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library at New York University (NYU).³

The purpose of this essay is to share with the Caribbean scholarly community one of RISM's many "treasures." Specifically, our discussion will provide readers with highlights of the Carl Withers Manuscript Collection (CWMC), which includes subject matter specific to Carl Withers and his research in Cuba, but also lends itself to research on a wide range of topics, including cultural and visual anthropology, agrarian history, rural folklore, and religious and ethnic studies, to name but a few. By being the custodian of this collection, RISM also safeguarded a hidden window into Cuban history.

The CWMC consists of 16.4 linear feet and spans the years 1947 to 1984. The bulk of the collection covers the period of Withers' Cuba research in the late 1940s and early 1950s and has been organized as nine series: I. Correspondence; II. Notes on Cuba (Field Journals); III. Children's Artwork and Writings; IV. Folklore Collection; V. Photograph Collection; VI. Unpublished Manuscripts; VII. Studies in American Youth Culture; VIII. Personal Writings, and; IX. Oversized Materials. For practical purposes, we will not cover the contents of all nine series, but rather we will concentrate on what we consider to be the main components of the Collection for those interested in Cuba and the Caribbean: Withers' ethnographic field notes (Series II: Notes on Cuba), the albums of photographs taken by him (Series V: Photograph Collection), and what is known as the "Manolo Manuscript" (Series VI: Unpublished Manuscripts).

Our essay is divided into five parts. We will begin by providing some important background history and general description of the Collection that will allow researchers to understand its historical and archival context. We continue with three sections for each of the main components selected (namely, Series II, V, and VI), the field notes, the photographs, and the "Manolo Manuscript." Our concluding section will stress the unique value and potential of the CWMC for students of Cuban and Caribbean social science and history.

Background and Context

Born in 1900, Carl Withers grew up in a small rural community in Missouri. Despite economic hardships, he was admitted to Harvard University where he majored in English and graduated *magna cum laude* in 1922. Following his graduation, a peripatetic Withers held academic appointments at Northwestern University in Illinois, the College of William and Mary in Virginia, and the Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts. A fellowship at the Scandinavian-American Foundation enabled him to spend time at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. After studying and traveling in Europe, he returned to the U.S. in 1927 to teach at Washington Square College (a division of NYU) and Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute.

In 1929, he worked as an editor for the Grolier Society in Kansas City, and held several positions in this company. It was through his work at Grolier that Withers discovered anthropology, apparently by reading Alfred Kroeber, but also through his acquaintance with Charles Wagley who was a student at Columbia University (Jablow 1972:765; Hopkins 1972:22).⁴ It seems likely that Wagley introduced Withers to Vera Rubin who taught, mentored and sponsored numerous students.⁵

In 1934, Withers started postgraduate work in anthropology at Columbia (Columbia University 1935:273). Under the supervision of Ralph Linton, Withers and Wagley worked on a project on acculturation funded by Columbia's Council for Research in the Social Sciences. Wagley did his fieldwork in South America (Gran Chaco region), and Withers on the Ozark Mountaineers of Missouri, close to the place of his birth and upbringing (Linton 1938-1941).

Withers never finished the requirements for his doctorate and according to departmental records at Columbia University he was granted an ABD in 1941 (Sullivan 1964; Harris 1964). However, this did not deter him from his scholarly pursuits and anthropological interests. After 1941, under the pseudonym James West, he published *Plainville, U.S.A.*, a well-known community study based on fieldwork he did for the acculturation project at Columbia (West 1947 [1945]). He collaborated with Linton and other Columbia-affiliated scholars involved in research on culture and personality. Under a different pseudonym (Robert North), he published journal and magazine articles on children's folklore in the U.S. He served as editor of the *Penguin Book of Sonnets* (Withers 1943), published a book with Oxford University Press (Withers 1946), and a more renowned work entitled *A Rocket in My Pocket*, a book of children rhymes published in 1948 (Withers 1948).⁶

Around that time, Withers embarked on a journey that removed him from the cultural world he had studied and the familiar routines

of life in New York where he had settled. With the financial support of the Viking Fund and the American Philosophical Society, late in 1947 he traveled to Cuba to begin fieldwork in the town of Mayajigua, a rural community in the Province of Las Villas (currently Sancti Spíritus) in the north-central section of the island. His fieldwork lasted 10 months, ending in the fall of September 1948, with subsequent visits made in 1949 and 1950. During that time he (and his informants and collaborators) produced and collected the materials we will describe below.

Withers prepared a complete prospectus of a book that was tentatively entitled "The Green Island," yet he never produced a manuscript. Despite his notable publishing record and his experience in the field, he apparently had problems in producing his Cuban ethnography. After his last field notes of 1950, Withers apparently spent years struggling with writing "The Green Island," yet he continued to involve himself in other projects. Ironically for a person like him, writing his book on Cuba seems to have been a challenge, probably because he was a perfectionist, "a master of words," as a friend put it (Hopkins 1972:10).

Whatever the challenges were in the actual writing of his ethnography, they stood in sharp contrast to his explicit love for anthropological research. Withers' obituary, published in the *American Anthropologist*, shed some light on this, quoting him as having once written, "field research, anywhere in anthropology or folklore or both, is the greatest joy in life" (Jablow 1972:764). This quote, however, in the original version, was followed by a parenthesis stating: "Writing, alas, is something else!" (Hopkins 1972:26). The statement suggests his possible difficulties in digesting ethnographical material into a manuscript form.

Why he never produced the book, remains an unanswerable question, and speculation ranges from health complications, to his penchant for perfectionism in writing, to the effect that the publication of Lowry Nelson's *Rural Cuba* (Nelson [1950] 1970) might have had on his determination to write the book (Hopkins 1972:24).

Simultaneously, we will never know whether there were more Cuban materials, or indeed a "Green Island" manuscript. In a memoir written by a friend, Frank Snowden Hopkins, it is stated that "several times in his life," Withers "destroyed manuscripts in his periodic bursts of pessimism" (Hopkins 1972:10). From exchanges and conversations with historian John Dumoulin we confirmed that indeed Withers thought of destroying the Cuban ethnographic data. In a phone conversation with Withers around 1965, Dumoulin insisted that he should not destroy them (Dumoulin 2007).⁷ It may have been the result of conversations with Dumoulin, Vera Rubin, who provided encouragement and financial support, or his declining health that led to Withers' decision, a year before his death, to donate the materials to RISM (Withers 1969).

We may never know whether the CWMC was forgotten or overlooked due to its focus on Cuba, or RISM's preference for grant-funded projects. Stored in less than ideal conditions, the papers were loosely organized in a series of numbered manila envelopes and left in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet. These envelopes bore Withers' handwritten descriptions of the contents and more than a few included a substantial number of smaller envelopes containing photographs. Other photographs were unorganized and simply placed in manila envelopes without description. From 2005 to 2007, Emilyn Brown carefully and diligently processed the collection that we are now presenting. And whatever the reasons were for failing to publish "The Green Island," current and future generations are now fortunate that the raw materials Withers gathered are available for research. These materials are described below.

Withers' Fieldnotes⁸

Although the personal reasons that led Carl Withers to Cuba are unclear, once there, the choice of Mayajigua makes some sense. The selection of conducting research in a relatively isolated rural town was very much in line with the localized community studies that were becoming popular in the field of anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ Withers' book prospectus also highlights features of this town that may have influenced his selection. In the prospectus, he describes Mayajigua as being "*Cuba in parvo*" to the extent that the town was a small microcosm of Cuba's social and ethnic makeup, including Cubans of all shades and colors, Spaniards, Jamaicans, Haitians, and Chinese. And in fact, it is such ethnic and racial diversity (very much representative of Cuba as a whole) that emerges with some prominence in his ethnographic notes.¹⁰

For example, in his notes and jottings of December 1947, Withers wrote that discrimination occurs between blacks and whites, but points out: "White + negro cane workers talk amicabl[y] at bat[e]y." He also remarked on the distinctions between Spaniards and Cubans, stating that the latter group felt "'sorry' to admit they weren't born in Sp[ain]" (Withers 1947-48, p. 25). More than one year later, Withers turned his attention to the skin color of people at social activities, noting that there was a wedding in the afternoon in which the few attendees were "mostly of color" (Withers 1949:19). The fieldnotes register a variety of social exchanges among ethnic group, such as that between a Haitian and the Spanish shopkeeper (*bodegero*) Vicente Saenz haggling for the price of rice that the former was selling to the latter. A "Jamaican [that] was trying to sell 'coco' (<malangas) to Saenz,"¹¹ was another transaction

that Withers penned down (Withers 1948b:63; Withers 1948e: 14).

The prejudices among different groups also emerge in some of the notes, including statements from residents of Mayajigua about the dumbest Galician being “smarter than the smartest Cuban” (Withers 1947-48:33). Chinese and British Antillean migrants were compared, with Jamaicans being distinguished for having a better education. Haitians, on the other hand were considered “more backwards” and “rank[ed] the lowest of all people” (Withers 1948c:12-13; Withers 1948d:24). Moreover, a note specifies that an informant stated that there were “Carnivorous Haitians: They take the heart of small children to be eaten...” (Withers 1948d:39).

At another level, Withers’ notes reveal the often unspoken dilemmas and frustrations that almost every anthropologist experiences doing fieldwork in a foreign country and a different culture. In February 1948 he wrote: “I’m ‘blue’ re[:] problem of starting. It’s miserable not to understand the innuendos” (Withers 1948b:62). Withers was also uncertain about who he should hire as his assistant, and how he would be able to do it given the fact that likely male candidates were all either employed or were apprentices of a trade at a very young age. He also expressed concern about the difficulties of interviewing women, and whether these interviews should be conducted in public places, such as the porches of a home. “Did I choose wrong town?” Withers asked himself, “Could I rent house here?” (Withers 1948b:62).

Withers was also confronted by the typical challenges faced by any anthropologist: what to do and what not to do in the field. One of these points of concern was drinking in the field:

Sev[eral] Jamaican [&] Haitian there [in Saenz’s shop]. A Jam. offered [*insisted*] me a cerveza [beer] (to add to his acc’t). S. [Saenz] offered me one. Earlier, in Europa, the Trin. [Trinidadian] dependiente offered me one. * What shall I do about ‘*tomando*’ [drinking] w. local men? (Withers 1948c:34).

In that sense, Withers’ notes provide a glimpse into the private world of the anthropologist and his notes before they are properly turned into an ethnographic study. But they provide even more in terms of the academic experience of an anthropologist in the Caribbean at the time. Withers wrote of encounters that highlight the ways in which he was perceived in Cuba, which reveals something about the general understandings about social science disciplines, particularly anthropology. The fact that Withers carried a photographic camera exposed him to people asking constantly whether he was a journalist. He responded by saying he was a “scientific writer,” a label that generated even more interest (Withers 1948d:9). In a conversation with a judge, Withers self-identified

himself as an anthropologist, unleashing an argument on social science disciplines that apparently upset both parties. Withers described the judge's response to his self-identification as follows: "He said, no you're a sociologist, bec[ause] Anthro is [such-&-such: measuring head[s], & criminal anthro. which he studied in Havana U. law school]" (Withers 1948d:19-20).¹² The notes of the incident are followed by Withers' multiple concerns on his behavior as a researcher: "What does this mean? 1) My neglect of him? 2) Fact I'm talking to 'wrong' people? 3) Fear of 'exposure'? 4) Fear of 'slurs on Cuba'?" (Withers 1948d:20).

The three great and polemic topics of religion, sexuality, and politics were present in the rural world Withers documented. Regarding religion, his early notes of December 1947 state that there was "no church" in Mayajigua and that "Few had contact w. priest" (Withers 1947-48:25). Withers' commentary is in line with the judgment of rural sociologist Lowry Nelson who argued that in rural areas "the church [was] usually nonexistent as a regular functioning institution" (Nelson [1950] 1970:175). At different times of his stay, Withers commented on "ñañigismo" and "santerismo" and asked his informants about *brujería* (witchcraft). The feedback on the latter aspect was that there are "Haitian brujos (a few, more before)," and that these *brujos* could "be hired to make 'mágica' against people" (Withers 1948d:38).

Aspects of sexual life in rural Cuba very much resemble the findings of anthropologist Sidney Mintz in rural Puerto Rico at virtually the same time. Withers wrote about how the first sexual experience of young men was with prostitutes ("all without exception") and often using rum to deal with their nervousness. He also pointed out that because "all putas [prostitutes] are diseased," "boys always use condon," which was the "usual method of birth control" (Withers 1948e:14-15; See Mintz [1960] 1974:77-80).

In a fascinating look at the politics of pre-Revolutionary Cuba, the anthropologist wrote about the racial perception of dictator Fulgencio Batista, commenting that he "was the only President of Cuba of Negro blood; people criticized that fact, said a negro shouldn't be there [in the presidency]" (Withers 1948d:25). Yet, at the same time he noted that "Batista: people wld [*sic*] welcome him back; but Grau won't allow it" (Withers 1948d:53), because of some pending fraud cases.¹³ Indeed, Batista returned to the presidency only to be deposed by the "people" as part of the Cuban Revolution. Another political character of the 1940s that appears in the fieldnotes is the renowned labor leader Jesús Menéndez. Withers collected information on his political maneuvers and the way in which he was racialized. Based on his exchanges with informants he noted that Menéndez "was a smart [man]" that "knew how to handle every central-owner" and that while he "cld [*sic*] speak exc[ellent]

Sp[anish]” he also “spoke negro talk (‘comel’ vs. ‘comer’) at speeches.” Menéndez was recognized for seeking the “best deal for workers” while being “‘tactful’ (in smart sense) w[ith] all owners” apparently joking with some and threatening others (Withers 1948b:25-26)

Picturing Rural Cuba

Perhaps one of the most stunning features of Withers’ legacy is the more than one thousand black and white photographs taken from 1947 to 1950. It would be useless for us to try to describe the full contents and scope of this part of the CWMC, and in a sense it might be more appropriate to provide a visual sample of some of the images, however small. The sample here includes 7 photographs, accompanied by Withers’ description when available. The images speak for themselves, and we will only add that in the albums those taken in Mayajigua are the ones that are better described. There are other images from Havana, Baracoa (extreme eastern coast of Cuba) and Camagüey (center-east) with less information in terms of description and identification of people and sites. Although there is a broad range of topics represented in the images, some highlights include: identified people, including informants, of Mayajigua, rural landscapes, buildings, streets, and structures in the town



“[Train carrying sugar cane]”, undated, Group 13: Walk to tomato cannery with Manolo B., his C., bootblack, stealing cane, train, Box 6.



"M.P. [Manuel Picabea] + Luisito, sitting in front of Rancho Grande", 1948, Group 4, Box 5 [BN].



"[Woman holds two food items]", 1948, Group 10: A Trip with Marcelo to the Isleños, Box 6.



"M.P. [Manuel Picabea] passing parked station wagon", 1948, Group 4, Box 5.



"RR [station] [Carl Withers in center]", Group 7, Box 5.



“La Violeta and Colonia Española”, 1948, Group 5, Box 5.



[“The barracon: Nela”], 1948, Group 5, Box 5.

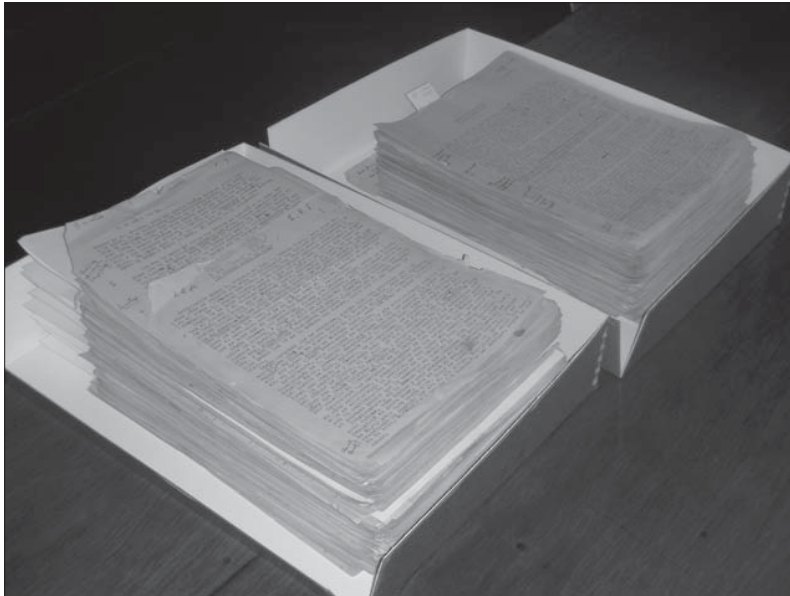
(from shops and hotels to the church), families and children, cane farms (*colonias*), railway stations, a “rich mulato doctor,” a “Spanish businessman, with fighting cocks,” the machinery of a sugar plantation, the house of a *Santera*, a meat-market in the town of Trinidad (south-central Cuba), and children playing in the square of that city. In summary, the photographic part of the CWMC is a treasure to be explored since with very few exceptions it has remained virtually unseen for many decades.

It is worth mentioning that in terms of the number of images and the fact that they come from a single source, the Withers’ photographs easily compare and complement many other photographic collections focused on Cuban history and culture. In the United States some of the most notable collections are the Cuban Revolution Collection held at Yale University Library (covering the 1950s and 1960s) and those at the University of Miami, with thousands of images from a variety of sources.¹⁴ In Havana, Cuba, large photographic collections include, of course, the “*Fototeca*” of the Cuban National Archive and those located at the Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez de la Naturaleza y el Hombre. The Withers images are a valued addition to these diverse holdings of the visual heritage of Cuba.

Although neither of us is a specialist in visual anthropology or visual history, photography, or art, we can envision how these photographs might offer multiple avenues of inquiry and research of Cuban history, politics or culture, but also specific images for more focused research projects relating to Caribbean rural sociology, Cuban regional history, early twentieth century architecture, life styles, and more.¹⁵

The “Manolo Manuscript”

Researchers may wonder if Withers never produced his book, as noted above, then what is the “Manolo Manuscript”? After careful review, we believe it was meant to become a version of “The Green Island” book. This manuscript is composed of 1,515 single-spaced typed pages of collated individual “reports” or “stories” written between 1948 and 1951. The author was not Withers, but Juan Manuel Picabea Niebla (or “Manolo”), a young Cuban man that lived in Mayajigua during the time of Withers’s visit. Each of these “reports” has a different title according to the topic, ranging from Picabea’s biographical information, Cuban national history and popular music, political and religious matters, and obviously aspects of rural life in Mayajigua, to mention just a few.¹⁶ For years, Picabea prepared these “reports” of a pre-established length, a method similar to what Withers appears to have used in his research for *Plainville, U.S.A.* (West 1945:xiv). Picabea’s written assignments represented an arrangement of mutual convenience through



The “Manolo Manuscript”.

which Withers would get his information while his collaborator obtained some financial assistance and training as an ethnographer and collector of folklore. The titles of some of the “reports” are indicative of the open and perhaps arbitrary choices of topics: “About various things,” “About a conversation,” “What happened,” “What I have done,” are some of the ambiguous titles, while “About witchcraft” and “About the trip we made yesterday to the Nela Sugar Mill” are more specific.

Evidently, the “Manolo Manuscript” is a unique document in many ways and its wealth of detail, depth of exploration and complexity are literally jaw-dropping (at least for anyone passionate about socio-historical and archival research or Cuban history). Two considerations are of critical importance. First, this document is basically a first-hand account of Cuban society, history, and culture “from below” and for a period of Cuban history that remains understudied. This is not to say that Manuel Picabea was representative (whatever that means) of, or managed to represent, the multiple views “from below” that existed in Cuba at the time. Yet, it is undeniable that he was not the kind of individual from whom scholars would have expected to receive a first-hand account. Secondly, in terms of methodology, researchers who will eventually use this material need to consider the nature and origin of the manuscript. The “Manolo Manuscript” emerged from a working relationship between an anthropologist and his informant and collabo-

rator; a relationship framed by power, and certainly, one that was built on trust. It involved a degree of confidentiality that was made explicit in the manuscript by both parties. In one of the autobiographical “reports” entitled “More on my history” (for September 14, 1948), Picabea became self-conscious as to how much he was reporting, concerned about the disclosure of names, and reserved about what he saw as “sad” experiences. But Picabea trusted that “his secrets” would be kept and asked for discretion, stating that from his story, Withers “could take data for his work,” a phrase that the anthropologist underlined in the manuscript (Picabea 1948-1951:430).¹⁷ This work of extracting data from the reports indicates another important feature of archival material, namely that what we now refer to as a “manuscript” was not intended as such, nor was it intended to be published as it was being produced, and certainly not by its author, Manolo. The narratives and reports that constitute the “manuscript” were commissioned and prepared individually as “raw material” from which Withers would eventually produce his ethnography. In fact, during a candid and generous interview in 2008, Picabea was literally speechless when he learned that he had produced over a thousand pages of individual reports (Giovannetti and Venegas 2008). His reaction illustrates the fragmented nature of his task, even though the result is now presented as a whole manuscript. Given the space limitations here we can only offer the scholarly community a glimpse of the contents of the “Manolo Manuscript” in hopes that it will encourage further use by social scientists.

The manuscript starts with biographical details of Picabea’s life, including his place of birth, Camagüey. His father was a merchant, owner of a *colonia* (small farm) and his grandfather—with whom he lived—was a *mayoral* in a plantation (pp. 1, 45). His parents were divorced and he regarded his mother as a hard-laboring person; she worked independently at the house but also held positions in different sugar mills. The divorce of Manolo’s parents, as well as the socioeconomic situation of his mother (regarding issues of respect and honor as well as life conditions) was a source of interminable concern for him (pp. 373-374, 826-834). Picabea’s biographic information and narrative should not be regarded simply as an individual’s story, because however personal, it provides (explicitly and implicitly) revealing insights into the customs, social conventionalisms, and the overall situation at the time he was writing.

Like in Withers’ notes, the “Manolo Manuscript” captures the ethnic diversity of Mayajigua with stories of Galicians, Chinese, North Americans, Haitians and Jamaicans residing in the town (pp. 11-13). Thus, the text provides insights on the ideas, divisions, perceptions, and indeed prejudices, over issues of race, ethnicity, and religion during post-war Cuban history. For example, in Picabea’s description of the town of Jigui

(in Camagüey) he mentions that the Club Jigui was for whites while the Club Union was for blacks (p. 7). The beliefs of the various ethnic groups also emerge when it was noted that “according to the majority,” the “isleños” (literally meaning islanders, the way Canary Islanders were referred to) are “stupid, but not enough to perpetrate bigger stupidities.” The writer continued: “Always there are very unfavourable comments in Cuba towards the islanders, the Galician, and the blacks because it is said that all are sufficiently stupid, but in all the stories of Galicians, many times there is a black and the beauty of it is that always in the stories, the black tries to know more than the Galician” (p. 261). In referring to the living conditions of his mother, the social perceptions of race and class became apparent as he noted that the “filthy house where my mother lived, was inhabited by blacks in the majority and by people of the lowest social sphere of La Esmera[l]da [the town], among which you find a Haitian marriage with two sons, that are of the best that is there” (p. 1,244).

Religious practices, along with their ethno-racial dimensions, emerged constantly throughout the text. “The *brujos*, usually, almost always are Haitians and they are many times captured by the authorities and condemned to jail, but not only there are Haitians, there are Cubans as well and this happens frequently, at any time you hear [people] say of a *brujo* and it results that many times is a black Cuban, and there are white Cuban *brujos* also, but less than blacks, always much less” (p. 281). To such elaborated and somehow qualified account you could add statements that the “*brujería*[.] according to the people, descends from Africa and the *Santerismo* also,” adding that the “*brujeros* employ their *brujería* as a revenge and the *Santeros* undo it, and leave everything to God” (p. 281). God, on the other hand, was the subject of discussion between a Spaniard and a Jamaican, with the latter stating that “God does not punish” and elaborating on God’s existence. For the Jamaican, some “powerful” hand must be “controlling” everything and the fact that people in pain did not say anything but “oh God” was enough evidence (p. 237).

But sacred and profane topics were obviously not the only ones to discuss in multicultural Mayajigua. The conflicts between a Jamaican and a Chinese shopkeeper named José Lan were of interest to Picabea who stated: “I have to inquire more on this matter, because it is of interest to know the motive of the incident, inquire something in relation with the Jamaican, that is, inquire if he has as a custom to get into fights, create discussions or if he is turbulent, or if it is the fault of the Chinese.” Yet, Picabea speculated that the whole thing must have been caused because of a debt of the Jamaican in the *bodega* (shop) of the Chinese and that the former became quarrelsome when the latter tried to collect his debt (p. 1,000).

The Potential of the Withers Collection

As has been evident throughout our exposition, the CWMC represents a vast universe of research material of varying latitudes. First and foremost, it provides the observations of Withers and his informants, as well as grassroots-level data about social and cultural life in rural Cuba, thus contributing to the ongoing scholarship of Cuban regional history (Venegas 2001). Both the regional dimension and the socio-cultural focus of the Withers' materials serve as a complement to Lowry Nelson's *Rural Cuba*, which many researchers have long regarded as the prime source for Cuban rural history (Nelson 1970 [1950]). Secondly, in this collection we have a major finding for the pre-Revolutionary history of Cuba, not only because it covers an understudied period, but because of the possible fruitful comparisons. For example, what we learn about the late 1940s and early 1950s through the Withers Collection could be contrasted with the changes of the post-Revolutionary period, including those related to the effects of agrarian reform on Cuban peasant and rural life. Moreover, this comparison could be further enriched with the findings of Oscar Lewis, a well-known U.S. anthropologist who did oral histories after the triumph of the Revolution (Lewis, Lewis, Rigdon 1977a, Lewis, Lewis, Rigdon 1977b).

Finally, there is another comparative dimension that is opened by the wider availability of the Withers Collection. It relates to the Caribbean region as a whole and to the intellectual history of anthropology. Considering that a number of ethnographic projects, conducted by foreign and local anthropologists, took place in the Caribbean after World War II, the findings and data collected by Withers and Picabea could provide a wider perspective of Caribbean rural life in that period, whether it's Jamaica (Clarke 1953, 1957; Comitas 1962), Haiti (Métraux 1951; 1960), or Puerto Rico (Steward et al. 1956; Mintz 1974 [1960]).¹⁸

More specifically in terms Puerto Rico, fruitful comparisons can emerge with the ethnographic work of Sidney W. Mintz (1974 [1960]) in the south (Santa Isabel), as well as with that of Morris Siegel (2005 [1948]) in the south east (Lajas). In fact, in his 1979 discussion of the anthropology of the post-war era and particularly the impact of *The People of Puerto Rico* project, led by Julian Steward, Mintz (who was part of the Steward project) called attention to the "achievements" of studies such as Steward's and his own, which paid attention to "living Caribbean peoples" (Mintz 1979:7).¹⁹ Mintz's article mentioned the research by Siegel and Withers which had not been published at the time he was writing. Gratefully, Siegel's manuscript was rescued by anthropologist Jorge Duany, translated and published in Spanish (Duany 2005; Siegel 2005 [1948]). As for Withers' work, Mintz knew then that it had "never reached print or even manuscript form" (that

is, assuming it was not destroyed by Withers). But it was in fact Mintz's article which initially led Jorge Giovannetti to inquire about the availability of Withers' materials for researchers wanting to inquire about the "living Caribbean people" of rural Cuba.²⁰

Mintz's 1979 assessment of *The People of Puerto Rico* project and its implications was self-critical, defensive concerning criticisms of the project, but also attempted to be constructive. With the benefit of hindsight, he highlighted what he saw as "positive gains" from Steward's anthropological effort which signalled (1) the way in which the Caribbean became "part of anthropological consciousness," (2) the "development of a *genre* of studies of lower-class rural people," (3) the analysis of variations in cultural institutions, (4) the importance of history for social science, and (5) advancing the life-history approach as a useful method for the study of "ordinary" people (Mintz 1979:7-11).

As if to prove those gains, one can say that the history of Carl Withers and the materials he left behind touch upon most of the aspects noted by the doyen of Caribbean anthropology. The fact that all of a sudden Withers detoured from his U.S. anthropological projects to work in Cuba may have been an indication of the growing interest in the Caribbean among anthropologists. That he focused his study in the folklore and culture of lower-class rural people is also in line with two of the aspects mentioned by Mintz (2 and 5). More importantly, the "Manolo Manuscript" provides a unique "voice" of an "ordinary" human being that lived the realities of lower-class rural people in the Caribbean, in his own terms and with limited mediation of the ethnographer. A more profound analysis of Withers' fieldwork may be needed to indicate how much he was inclined to take a historical approach and the absence of a formal manuscript does not help. Yet the fact that among his books one finds a number of recognizable histories of Cuba (Hubert Aimes [1907] and Irene Wright [1910]) and even nineteenth century books (Alexander Humbolt [1856] and Richard Henry Dana Jr. [1859]) indicates that he was not putting history aside. Finally, while no recordings of oral histories are part of his materials, he certainly encouraged his informants to put their histories in writing, and we know from other sources that he did take recording equipment to Cuba (Withers 1947).

The history of Carl Withers in Cuba opens a window, not only into Caribbean and Cuban history, but also into the ways anthropology was taking shape in the formative years of Caribbean studies as a field of inquiry. The materials he left are certainly central to the field today and it is hoped that the different bits and pieces of the legacy of Withers, and indeed of Picabea (be it in the form of fieldnotes, images, or reports), can make their way into a wide range of research that will continue to emerge in the fields of Cuban and Caribbean studies.

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Notes

- ¹ Vera D. Rubin studied anthropology at Columbia University during the post World War II era; a period when very few women were in the field. Her mentors included Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Julian Steward, who served as her graduate advisor. Unfortunately, there is no full length biography of Dr. Rubin. Her pioneering work in the Caribbean, critical scholarship and financial support assisted students in the U.S. and the Caribbean and paved the way for women to enter the profession in greater numbers. Some details concerning her life and accomplishments can be found at the RISM web site: www.thereedfoundation.com.
- ² The transferred RISM material is discussed in detail at New York University Web Site: The RISM collections at NYU: www.nyu.libguides.com/RISM.
- ³ While most of the archives at RISM were donated to NYU, some remain in the custody of the Reed Foundation in New York, which has maintained some of the anthropological fieldwork training projects that originated at RISM.
- ⁴ Most of the biographical information about Withers comes from Jablow (1972) and Hopkins (1972).
- ⁵ Correspondence between Withers and Rubin indicating her strong support and financial grants for several of his projects can be found in the Research Training Program for the Study of Man in the Tropics

(RTPSMT) collection. The RSMPT, a training program established by Rubin at Columbia University, was the precursor to subsequent research programs organized and conducted by Dr. Rubin after the purchase of the 78th Street townhouse.

- ⁶ For a full bibliography of Withers' work see Jablow (1972:769).
- ⁷ Jorge Giovannetti also talked about these issues with Dumoulin in 2008 when they coincided in Cuba. We are grateful for his kind knowledge-sharing spirit and the enthusiasm he showed about this project.
- ⁸ In this section we try to be faithful to Withers' fieldnotes, leaving them as they were, with the underlinings, and abbreviations he used, as well as with the combination of languages (Spanish and English) in the same sentence. Insertions in brackets and italics are Withers' in order to indicate his handwriting. Insertions in brackets and regular font are ours for clarification or translation when needed.
- ⁹ The obvious reference here is the work of Robert Redfield (1930), which was praised for having "launched a new *genre* of social investigations" (Cline 1952), including revisionist work by Oscar Lewis (1951). Both Redfield and Lewis are likely to have had a direct influence on Withers, either having known each other (or their works) or having common acquaintances (such as Sol Tax).
- ¹⁰ Spaniards, Jamaicans, Haitians, and Chinese were actually the most numerous immigrant groups in the decades of early twentieth century, during the decades before Withers research.
- ¹¹ "Coco" was the general term used in Jamaica for an edible tuber in many varieties, which may explain why it Withers equaled to the "malanga," which is the Cuban name.
- ¹² This description very much makes sense given the type of anthropology that had been practiced in previous decades in many places, but also in Cuba in particular. (See Bronfman 2004:1-35)
- ¹³ The reference is to Ramón Grau San Martín, Cuban president from 1944 to 1948. The fraud reference against Batista is typical of that time period in Cuban history, but interestingly, while Grau allegedly declined bribes, his government is regarded as "one of the most corrupt in Cuban history." (Argot-Freyre 2003:156)
- ¹⁴ Historian Lillian Guerra and Cuban archivist Jorge Macle Cruz have worked and processed the Yale Collection (Guerra and Macle Cruz 2009 [2006]), which is the subject of Guerra's current book project.

- ¹⁵ The potential of photographs for historical research in Latin America has been highlighted by Robert Levine (1990) and more recently in a special issue of *Hispanic American Historical Review* (Coronil, ed. 2004).
- ¹⁶ Some of the early pages, or reports, of the manuscript were prepared by Luis Rene Escobar, another informant with whom Withers seem to have worked briefly.
- ¹⁷ We interpret Withers' underlining here as an indication of his awareness of the confidentiality and trust in the handling of the material he was being given by Manolo. Since the organization of the "reports" as a "manuscript" was done by Withers, including pagination, and given the suggestion that he may have destroyed materials, it may be possible that reports which were considered sensitive or private did not become part of the "Manolo Manuscript."
- ¹⁸ See, also some of the essays edited by Lambros Comitas and David Lowenthal (1973).
- ¹⁹ As noted earlier, Steward was a mentor to Vera Rubin and Mintz and others involved in the fieldwork were her colleagues. This may explain how a portion of the fieldwork data for the published version of *The People of Puerto Rico* was also part of the RISM archives. This collection, known as the Puerto Rico Project, was also processed by Emilyn Brown in preparation for transfer to NYU.
- ²⁰ Jorge Giovannetti first learned about the Withers Collection in the late 1990s as he was starting a project on immigration to Cuba at the beginning of the twentieth century. In its initial incarnation as a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of North London, the project only covered the period up to 1938 (Giovannetti 2001), and he decided not to use the collection which was described as covering the 1940s in the RISM webpage. However, in its later and current book manuscript stage, the project expanded to cover the 1940s and it was then, during a visiting appointment at Princeton University, that Giovannetti decided to look at the Withers Collection, only to find the untouched treasure that we are describing here.

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