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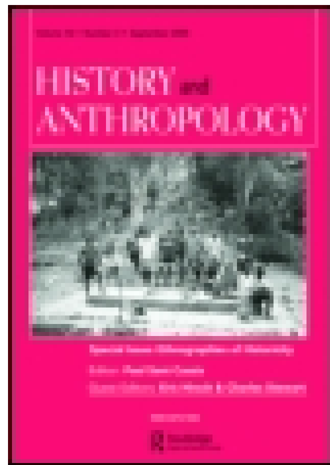

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Exactly As People Tell, or an Ethnography of the (In)Visible Things of Mayajigua

Olivia Maria Gomes da Cunha

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Exactly As People Tell, or an Ethnography of the (In)Visible Things of Mayajigua

Olivia Maria Gomes da Cunha

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This paper explores some of the consequences of using archival materials produced by an anthropologist's informants. What happens when a resident from a rural area of Cuba is hired to write about the "world", a term used by Carl L. Withers, in which he, his relatives and his neighbours live? By reading letters and other papers sent during the late 1940s, and kept by Withers for more than thirty years, my hypothesis is that his informants took seriously their capacity to create something other than a simple "testimony". Withers's principal informant, created himself, his neighbours, strange beings and the world in which they cohabited as a certain type of artefact, as "data".

Keywords: *Archives; Ethnography; Documents; Cuba; Caribbean*

> (…) Some days before proposing to buy this typewriter from Joselito Calvo, I was typing with it and thought to myself there was no way I could purchase it (…) afterwards, though, I realized that I could work with it just fine; I successfully managed to locate all the different keys. The keys gets stuck in capitals, it's slow-going because it always falls into capitals whenever you type too quickly (…) now I'm going to leave the paper here to go and see some *muchachos* who are playing outside, to tell you what's happening.[1]

What happens when a young resident of a small village in rural Cuba is hired to write about the "world"—the term used by Carl L. Withers—in which he, his relatives and his neighbours live? The author of these remarks was Manolo, a resident of Mayajigua, a small town in Cuba's central region. The excerpt comes from a series of letters and

Correspondence to: Olivia Maria Gomes da Cunha, National Museum, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Email: olivia.cunha@pq.cnpq.br

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texts written between 1947 and 1951 to a little-known American anthropologist. Over this period, Manolo and two more local residents sent *Mr. Withers*—or just *Senhor Carl*—hundreds of stories, cases and descriptions of the town, nearby sugar mills and workers colonies; comments, interviews, memoires, tongue-twisters, riddles, accusations, confessions and declarations of friendship. Stored for years by Carl L. Withers until their eventual donation to the Research Institute for the Study of Man (RISM), they form part of a personal archive including many other artefacts collected by the anthropologist over his lifetime.

Alongside the diaries, field notes and photos, the collection contains a small but revealing correspondence written by Withers during the final years of his life (1968–1970), where he describes his fraught attempts to write a book about Cuba and his concerns over preserving his informants' anonymity. Manolo was the pseudonym given to his main hired informant after he asked for his own name and those of his family and friends to be kept secret.[2] On donating his objects to the RISM, Withers recognized not only the "autobiographical" and "descriptive" quality of Manolo's narrative. As Withers later declared,

> although limited in formal education, [Manolo] wrote nearly correct Spanish, and was singularly gifted in intelligence and perception. In recounting many lives (for example of all his relatives and friends), many events, and countless cases of illustrative Cuban institutions and values, [Manolo's] document is an invaluable source of information for understanding pre-1962 rural Cuba.[3]

Manolo's writings survived among the Withers collection's papers as a set of materials kept separate from the notebooks and field notes written by the anthropologist. Withers never managed to transform Manolo's observations into the intended ethnography of a small rural Cuban community. Why remains something of a mystery, though.

So was the information gathered by Manolo and his neighbours too sparse, unreliable or insufficient? I do not think so. But not because Withers considered everything that Manolo and his neighbours said to be valid. The answer depends, I think, on asking another question: insufficient for what? My hypothesis is that the young Manolo took his capacity to create something more than a simple "testimony" very seriously. Manolo's "world" should certainly not be confused with the huge quantity of statistical data compiled by Withers, along with the interviews he conducted in Havana and Mayajigua. Manolo peopled his world with very differently situated beings in distinct relations.

However, the wealth of details produced by the informant-ethnographer cannot be grasped without considering the archival framing of the objects concerned. The manipulation of textual artefacts forces us to explore distinct types of temporality. Firstly, the temporality related to re-reading, re-writing and transforming these papers into archived documents after the fieldwork experience. Manolo's letters were reworked and connected to new problems, interests and questions unknown to their author. Secondly, the contact with the things created by Manolo affords us access to another kind of temporality involving the different relations between himself as

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author, the ethnographer Withers and other residents of Mayajigua, and between these people and innumerable objects, including texts. Here the artefacts produced by Manolo on his malfunctioning typewriter provide an insight into how things are created over the course of an ethnographic experience. This approach enables us to explore Manolo's "creations", and understand his contact with new technologies, and the invention of a particular way of knowing and describing what "he knew to exist". By reading Manolo's writings with an eye to these constant shifts in planes and perspectives—turning Manolo, his typewriter, and the human and non-human creatures he describes under different kinds of "subjects" and "objects"—we can avoid the demands for verification that sometimes limit our capacity to comprehend the relations between ethnographers, their interlocutors and the myriad of objects circulating in the field (Miyazaki 2006; Riles 2006).

In this article, therefore, the textual objects created by Withers, Manolo and his neighbours were described and analysed as artefacts. Various authors (Stocking 1988; Sanjek 1990; Jamin and Zonabend 2001–02) have explored the use of notebooks and field notes as artefacts filled with meaning, whether for their creators or for those who later turn them into objects in their construction of the discipline's histories. However, my interest has been to approach these textual objects in a different sense, since their creator was not a professionally trained ethnographer, but a resident of a rural village who transformed the creation of stories and observations into paid work. The notes produced by Manolo were creations, almost quotidian, fashioned from knowledge shared with his neighbours, family and ancestors. The notes written through the use of another artefact—a typewriter—were created through new interactions and later transformed into artefacts sold to the anthropologist. Over a roughly two-year period, Manolo made a living confecting stories about the people from Mayajigua and the local region. To achieve these aims, Manolo had to create new relations with his neighbours and kin, with the place where he lived and with the other places he had experienced, and, in this way, produce something different from a biographic piece of writing.

This mode of establishing relations with people and events remembered and recounted by others suggests another way for us to conceive Manolo's writings. The concept of artefact, as formulated by Marilyn Strathern, allows us to explore the events, experiences and people involved in producing the materials stored and protected by these containers we call archives and collections (1990, 40) as "creations" rather than evidence. Thus, for example, the constant transformation in the planes and relations that lead to non-human creatures either becoming the subjects of Manolo's affects—the fears and desires that inspire descriptive activity—or turning into the objects of his attention does not imply any alteration in their existential "states" or conditions. Treating textual objects as artefacts also allows us to recognize that distinct forms of creation made them into different "things". A place to remember sadness, the proof of a secret, remunerated work, the "ethnographic fact", the "testimony" of a resident of a small settlement from a world now vanished. The mere existence of these objects as "if" they were artefacts capable of preserving multiple *pasts* is irremediably conditioned by how we perceive and manipulate them. Not only are new

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uses invariably signified and evoked, they *are* different forms of the past and present. This entanglement dissolves the isolation apparently distancing us from these objects, while allowing us to imagine how certain plotlines traverse them, transforming them into multiple artefacts.[4]

Senhor Carl's Artefacts

The Withers collection contains a wide range of textual and iconographic artefacts. The anthropologist described the collection's contents and relevance in a letter to Vera Rubin, written in 1969, concerning his request for his personal archive to be donated to the RISM after his death. In this letter he mentions the "anthropological materials gathered by me during fieldwork in Cuba between November 1947, and August 1948, the summers of 1949 and 1950, and by correspondence with one excellent informant during many years ending in 1962". Alongside the objects produced and kept by himself, Withers noted the existence of "an invaluable source of information". This comprised an

> autobiographical and descriptive document, typed in Spanish and covering 1525 single-spaced pages, by a man who was 21 years old in late 1947 when he began writing it for me (and who also was an excellent oral informant during all the time I worked in Mayajigua).[5]

Withers left no other information on how his notes were produced and still less about his relations with informants. He never published anything on the topic, and the impact of his Cuban experience on his career as a writer and anthropologist remains murky.

Even when cross-referenced with two obituaries written by friends, the anthropologist's papers deposited at the RISM do little to fill the void concerning his training, research interests and field experiences before and after the trips to Mayajigua and the neighbouring region. Despite these gaps, Jablow (1972), Hopkins (1972), Brown (2007) and Giovannetti and Brown (2009) describe Withers' career largely on the basis of these records. Two years after the anthropologist's death in January 1970, assisted by other friends, Hopkins began to compile correspondence from different moments of the anthropologist's life. In an obituary published in *American Anthropologist*, Jablow (1972) recalls the anthropologist's professional experiences and academic relations, emphasizing his talent as an ethnographer. These biographical sketches by Hopkins and Jablow also provided the sources for the "finding aid" developed by Emily L. Brown, the researcher and archivist responsible for the Withers papers at the RISM, along with her own sensory experience acquired from daily contact with the fragments left by the anthropologist.

Undoubtedly the lack of studies on Withers and the relatively low-impact of his "work" even in the years when he was most productive lend the anthropologist an aura of obscurity. Born in 1900 in a small Missouri town to a modest family, Withers graduated from Harvard in English in 1922. After a period teaching in different educational institutions and a brief spell at the University of Copenhagen,

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funded by the Scandinavian American Foundation, he enrolled at Columbia in 1934 as a student of Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton. His first fieldwork was undertaken in Guatemala in 1938, followed by research in a small community in Missouri, close to his birthplace, as part of a project on acculturation run by Ralph Linton. His findings reached a wider audience in a book published almost ten years later called *Plainville, USA* (1945). Until then Withers had been described as a specialist in English and literature who had suddenly converted to anthropology at Columbia. As both Jablow (1972) and Hopkins (1972) emphasize, the end of the 1930s saw the formation of a circle of professors and colleagues—including Benedict, Linton, Charles Wagley, Sula Bennet, Cora Dubois, Abraham Kardiner and Oscar Lewis—connected to various areas of anthropological practice with whom Withers dialogued and shared his interests in psychology and psychiatry.[6]

Thanks to the correspondence between Withers and Oscar Lewis, we know that the decision to study a small community in Cuba's rural interior was encouraged by the latter. Lewis had first visited the country in 1947 and Withers used his friend's contacts in Havana to reach the rural areas. Lewis suggested:

> begin[ning] in a sugar area in Oriente in which there were both white and negro workers but then again anything you do will be work in the field so that you cannot possibly go wrong in your choice of community.[7]

Withers travelled to Cuba in October 1947 and spent several months in Havana. During his voyage to the island's south, Withers decided to stay in Las Villas province, in a small rural town known as Mayajigua (Jablow 1972, 766). One of his objectives was to study life in a small Cuban community, focusing on labour relations and, especially, how Cubans of various backgrounds, colours, classes and ages conceptualized the society in which they lived. Along with participant observation, interviews and studying local geography, Withers spent most of his time collecting "life histories". In fact, thanks to the relations he established with rural workers and his methods for obtaining information on their personal stories and their views of the town and its residents, Withers also gathered data on folklore, consumption, the everyday life of children and family morality. Produced almost simultaneously with the similar Puerto Rico Project conducted by Julian Steward and his students in the late 1940s (Mintz 1956, 1984), field notes reveal an observer trained in an anthropological tradition who was nonetheless keen to establish a close dialogue with psychology. His vision of Mayajigua's rural universe seems limited neither to the folk-urban continuum model of Robert Redfield and his students at Chicago, nor to the quasi-autonomy of the community studies pursued by Kroeber, Steward and Wolf at Berkeley (Lewis 1944; Murray 2005).

Between his first and second trips, Withers worked as an associate researcher with the Division of Psychiatry at Yale's Department of Student Health (Jablow 1972, 766) alongside Linton, Kardiner and Cora Dubois. This experience appears to have influenced how Withers listed the main topics that could be explored using the field material and texts—or "life histories"—sent by his informants. In fact the relation

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between "culture" and "personality" central to these interests had already been explored in his ethnography of a community in Missouri, published over the course of three chapters of a book co-authored with Kardiner et al. (1945). The production of "biographies" was inspired by a technique systemized by John Dollard in *Criteria for the Life History* (1935). By using texts written by informants or interviews, Kardiner et al. claimed it was possible to know "the culture in which the individual lives because everything he tells us is attuned to its values and emphases" (1945, 36).[8] Though unaware of their "culture" and the "arbitrary elements" involved in its formation, Kardiner et al. argued that some informants could draw on their own "frustrations" and "anxieties" to reflect on what they observed. Anthropologists simply had to encourage them to write and talk in order for the relations between "individuals" and their "culture" to appear to overlap. The relevance and reliability of the resulting information could later be checked through fieldwork and more interviews, corroborating the data or, minimally, achieving a balance between individual imagination and the conceptions and "representations" shared with other informants. "If possible", Kardiner et al. advised,

> he must be given an incentive to tell about himself honestly. And if an interpreter is present who is a member of the same society as the subject, we are bound to get a highly edited account. However if we observe his day to day activity, note his reactions to the ethnographer, and cross-check on his dreams, we can distil from all this a reliable story of his life and a dynamic picture of his personality. (1945, 37)

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Learning to See and Write

Withers corresponded with a few "informants" over the two years between his 1948 and 1951 trips to Cuba. Three of them in particular sent him copious letters containing detailed accounts of daily life in Mayajigua and the connections which they themselves, their families, acquaintances and neighbours had with local "others". Yet the relation between Withers and his three main informants was clearly different. They emerge not merely as interlocutors but as authors in their own right. B., the younger of Manolo's neighbours and apparently hired later by Withers, seems to have taken the production of *datos* very seriously. In a letter sent in 1955, B. seemed changed by the experience of reporting on Mayajigua's life to Withers and had begun to "take classes" in English. However, Withers dismissed the young man's efforts, claiming that B. had no idea how to meet his requests and thus warrant the payment sent to him each month. Annoyed by B.'s insistence on sending him reproductions of newspapers, magazines, storybooks and almanacs, the anthropologist wrote to tell him the kind of things he should report on instead. Though emphasizing that his comments were just suggestions, he told B. to stop using other sources ("NOT from books or magazines") and to write phrases in Spanish, "exactly as people tell or ask them" (original emphasis).[9]

L.R. shared with his neighbour Manolo some of the task of describing Mayajigua, sticking more or less objectively to the anthropologist's instructions concerning the importance of certain topics. A disciplined reporter, he separated his information

into thematic areas: *la política*, *el folklore* and *la religión*. Described in Withers' notes as too frightened to stay and chat in the evenings about stories of ghosts and sorcerers, L. R. seldom wrote about his family. Whenever he did, though, he turned them into the protagonists of weird encounters between "personas" and supernatural beings, responsible for deaths and misfortunes in his family in the past. At other times, as Withers' field notes suggest, conversations and "class(room) exchanges" would prompt stories about "Haitian carnivores" who "remove the hearts of young children to eat them".[10]

Manolo was neither a rural worker nor a sugarcane cutter, but the son of a *mayoral*, or foreman, born in the colony-village of Jiquí and who had worked in administrative jobs at the Central Violeta after an illness left him only partially sighted. Before Withers arrived, Manolo had divided his time between the post office and gambling, performing small services for extra income. He lived with his father and paternal grandparents in a modest house close to L.R. and his family. Possessing little formal education, his work for Withers was the first time he had used a typewriter.[11]

Compared to the texts written by B. and L.R., Manolo's prose is entrancing. His involvement with the activities of "reporting", "collecting" and "writing" seems different. Comparing his very first notes in the Withers collection, where he apologizes for the excesses, digressions and opinions about a particular event, to the final pages he sent, we can perceive just how much the writer and his prose have been transformed. Manolo is not once described in Withers' notes as a "storyteller", a label that could have readily been applied to the writer of the earlier texts. Even so, Withers seems to lament the loss of vivacity and creativity as the author turned into a professional reporter. "For a great quality in the original document", the anthropologist observed, "disappeared in the processing, namely, that of Manolo's growth, in his self-view and in the view of all his perceptions, during his long period of writing for me".[12]

However the "processing" of Manolo's texts demanded considerable efforts to transcribe and "rearrange topics". Earlier attempts to make use of the texts written by Manolo were apparently just as unsuccessful. Soon after two short trips back to Mayajigua in the summers of 1949 and 1950, and for motives that remain unclear, the anthropologist seems to have abandoned his project. Sometime between 1958 and 1959, with the help of the Chilean sociologist Luis Ratinoff and a grant from the RISM, Withers started work on a book based on his field notes and the texts sent by Manolo and his neighbours. Withers agreed to the sociologist transforming the papers into something "publishable".[13] "The effort was to arrange chronologically the autobiographical (and family) material in one volume, and the general material topically as in a general ethnographical report." The manuscript initially called *The Life of Manolo* (242 pages) resulted in a text *based* on Manolo's notes—pieced together as though to form an autobiography. The annotations left by Withers in the margins of many of the letters and texts sent by Manolo and his young neighbours show that the anthropologist not only took everything his informants told him very seriously, he carefully analysed every letter and text, noting their genre, central themes, people, notable events and unfamiliar words in need of translation. Despite Manolo's diligent use of the typewriter and careful explanation of each notion used in his description of things and events, Withers frequently struggled to clear up the many typographic,

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linguistic and semantic ambiguities. The ethnographer's difficulty seemed to stem from the carefree way in which Manolo crisscrossed the space-times of Mayajigua and the other places he had visited, experienced and described first-hand, or merely heard about, imagined or invented.

In the later manuscript entitled *The World of a Cuban Nobody: A Study in Social Perception*, the stories told by young Cubans are already densely interspersed by Withers' attempts to describe Mayajigua as a community that was no longer completely rural, but not yet entirely urban. Withers imagined, perhaps, that the information scattered across a series of textual interpretations of Cuba would be enough to conjure a "context" within which Manolo's agile prose would be suitably transformed into "data" for scientific purposes. In other words, through Manolo's "creation", the ethnographer conceived these hundreds of sheets of typed paper to be the direct result of lived experiences, assuring their authenticity and value. Manolo's writings were thereby transformed into "data" to be used to construct an ethnographic narrative faithful to life in Mayajigua.

Finally, the biographical information on Withers—along with the information on Manolo and his neighbours that, as I shall show, we can reconstruct by manipulating the textual objects kept by the anthropologist—are above all viewpoints (Mol 2002) produced by diverse authors concerning an extensive network of relations as complex as they are unknown to us. We know little about Withers' reluctance to publish his book after 1959, or his hesitation over the integrity of Manolo's data and the "discovery" of a world in transformation. Speculating on these topics would distract us from learning more about what Manolo decided to create in order to show what he did know. Just as Manolo experimented with different viewpoints to describe Mayajigua and its characters, our impressions concerning Withers' trajectory and the scant biographical information on him are simply viewpoints that emerge from the manipulation of texts and other artefacts. Curiously, the "data" produced by Manolo did not turn him into an author in the same way that Withers became a singular anthropologist through close contact with analytic experiments in "cultural and personality", experimental psychology and an interest in children's tales and literary creation. The textual artefacts sent by Manolo and carefully stored by Withers tell us nothing about the relations between the two men when the latter was living in Mayajigua. What we can discern from reading and handling the texts, though, is that Manolo was deeply affected by Withers' concerns to describe the world in which he lived. This is made clear when Withers becomes Manolo's interlocutor. Similarly Withers seems to have been affected by the many different universes described by Manolo, filled with strange dimensions and characters. By transforming Manolo into a subject and author, Withers—perhaps inadvertently and against his own wishes—was transformed into an object of his informant's imagination and attention. Writing to *Sr. Carl*—and thus performing the *trabajo* for which he had been hired—through the use of a new technology gave Manolo access not only to the "world" that interested Withers but to other worlds created by himself. To understand how these modes of creation permeated the knowledge produced by Manolo, I return to the passage cited at the start of this article where he describes his encounter with a

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physical and tactile artefact that apparently had a substantial effect on him following his initial encounters with Withers: a typewriter. The purchase of this equipment and the ingenious way he found of using the keyboard seem to have been key events in his life and the discovery of a new universe—that of the texts that he could read and create.

Manolo's Typewriter: el *trabajo*

Manolo was hired by Withers to write about everyday events, quarrels, conflicts, known stories or those told by third parties, beliefs, past happenings, political clashes, divinations, *cuentos*, disputes and family customs. The *trabajo* for the man Manolo called "my boss and friend Mr. Carl Withers" absorbed much of his day, and the search for further information was a constant preoccupation:

> a few nights ago I wanted to write a number of things for my work (…) but I didn't have enough material to go on, and so it set me thinking about how to get it and the idea came to head off into town to hear, see and try to delve into a matter, something I've done often in fact.[14]

In various passages Manolo describes his experiences of interviewing people, using chance conversations as sources of inspiration or data for his writings.
In a text entitled "Me Interviewing Some Guys" he writes that he had gone out

> to walk around town for a while to see if I could find someone to interview or a group playing to discover what they are talking about and tell you (…) a few minutes after setting out, I bumped into a guy whose name I don't recall but who everyone knows by the nickname Oriental. As soon as I saw this guy arrive, I said to myself, there's my subject matter.[15]

Manolo's "conversation" or "interview" with the passing acquaintance Oriental can be taken not as proof of the veracity of the situations he narrates, but as an indication that he considered himself different to those he was observing. This recognition is mentioned by Manolo in various passages in which he gradually reveals details about his life and how his *trabajo* changed how he told his own "history". Manolo tried various times and in diverse ways to write down his "sad" history and life. In these autobiographic creations he presents himself to Withers and to the anthropologist's potential readers as a temporary "scientist".

> For some time I have been writing my history and interrupting my account various times, I have already gone very far in this work, so I trust you will know how to keep my secret and nobody will discover anything about the matter, and also that you will be able to obtain data for your work from it, since it concerns a very sad history; however I want neither my name or those of my family to ever come to light (…) I shall become a scientist for a moment and analyze myself, and then perhaps I shall say something that could be of interest, who knows. My personality has something different from others, though I am a man like any other, but analyzing myself closely, there is something distinct from most. This something is, precisely, my character. Though possibly that of a man of around forty, it is fairly uncommon for someone my age, or at least a man, to focus on problems in such detail or have such a serious

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> character as my own, which allows me to analyze things so carefully and come to a more accurate conclusion about them.[16]

The capacity to write, report and "interview" neighbours and people from Mayajigua and nearby settlements led Manolo to consider different viewpoints. Even more importantly, he realized that observation inevitably involves an encounter with incomprehension and misunderstanding. "I immediately spoke to the guy and tried to drum up a conversation with him, but it was impossible for me because he lacks any basic understanding and laughed at me every time I spoke in earnest."[17] The first texts by Manolo were probably written while Withers was in Cuba, though not necessarily in Mayajigua. The frequency of titles like "I recall that…" and "What I heard" suggest that they followed Sr. Carl's guidelines as far as possible and that he received, perhaps in written form, evaluations and comments on earlier texts. In numerous passages Withers appears as a kind of supervisor. However, it would be a mistake to imagine Manolo as a disciplined student, a hesitant apprentice or a skilled imposter. In fact he combines all the qualities required to be a fine ethnographer. He took his paid work seriously and conducted interviews, participated in events, travelled to nearby localities, verified and cross-checked information and gave due credit to his informants. Manolo and his *compadre* L.R. also relied on local help. In some passages Manolo describes how people came to him to tell their stories, since "they understood his work". He would receive information and conduct interviews in exchange for a few cents or "ice lollies", offered mainly to children. L.R.'s grandmother, the post office worker, the Chinese trader, the staff at the undertakers, the elderly residents and street children: all of them interested the ethnographer in pursuit of "data" and were, in their own way, participants, if not in the text, then in manufacturing elements employed in its creation. Despite Withers' instructions and expressed preferences, Manolo had no qualms in steering his writing towards the topics that perplexed himself. And this, perhaps, is why we can recognize him as an ethnographer. Manolo was undoubtedly aware that the functions of describing, interpreting and establishing relations between the things he observed and heard pertained to himself, not Withers. While Manolo's texts can indeed be taken as identical in kind to those of an ethnography, we should ask ourselves what type of ethnographer Manolo was and how "the society" he wrote about was composed.

Telling the story of a rural worker, for example, he clearly asserts his freedom to redirect Withers' concerns towards his own interests.

> You have always told me that you are primarily interested in everything related to Mayajigua and that Jiguí doesn't interest you that much; I realize that this is because you are studying Mayajigua, not Jiquí, but I'm going to write about something that is happening with a young rural man…[18]

Nonetheless he reveals a striking concern to name, classify and describe relations between affines in accordance with a specific mode of sociological discourse. Fine-grained descriptions of this kind abound in the texts from 1949, announced by titles like "How the whites and the blacks were made," "About *el compadrazgo* (godparenting)", "More about honor and reputation" and "About dignity".[19] Observing the concerns and guidelines of

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Withers, most of the thousands of pages written by Manolo result from direct observations made in Mayajigua and short journeys to Jiquí, Esmeralda, Centrales and nearby colonies. Manolo proves to be an acute observer of the social differences distinguishing Cuban workers and the immigrants hired to cut and process sugarcane, the reputation of women in the small settlements and Havana, and local political intrigues and disputes. In these descriptions, Manolo frequently makes his own viewpoint explicit.

In his earlier texts Manolo interrupts the flow of his narrative to insert what I earlier called "other affects". In later writings the separation between *la sociedad* and the things that he experienced and heard, places that he visited and those he only knew existed, beings that he encountered and those he feared, things that frightened him and those he wanted, becomes more tenuous and sometimes non-existent. Sometimes the desires and hauntings are experienced by his characters and informants. At other times "the strange things" wandering Mayajigua are those inhabiting his dreams and memories. Manolo turned himself into a character for his own observations. Even so, he may have been fully aware that his work depended on transforming these affects into "data". Manolo suspected that some of the things he wanted to write about would be of "little importance" or "no interest". Still, he wrote about many such topics, always carefully recording the motives for their inclusion. The grandson of a woman "of public life", he had lived with his mother and her second husband in a colony of migrant Caribbean workers.[20] In addition to describing Mayajigua, he wrote about the village of Jiquí, the lack of work, his neighbours, the sugarcane cutters and the spells they cast, animals that turned into people and obscure characters who appeared from nowhere.

Although Manolo wrote on various topics he imposed, subtly and ingeniously, his own selective bias on the treatment of some questions. Extending beyond the geographic limits of Withers's interest—as in the case of his innumerable texts on the settlement of Jiqui—Manolo returned repeatedly to themes of personal interest to him. Among them, I have selected the attention he gave to the existence of non-human beings and the effects of certain moral interdictions in Mayajigua (and Jiquí). These were the themes that allowed relations between neighbours, living, dead and forgotten relatives, strange figures and ghosts to become established in some form or other. The points of the social universe described by Manolo set very different boundaries to those mapped by Withers: here, perhaps, it is worth exploring this expanded conception of what he called *La sociedad* a little deeper.

Hidden Brides

> I have a somewhat odd concept of all this, however I cannot deny that I am something of a believer in all these things, even though they seem absurd.[21]

Manolo observed other places and other human and non-human beings located beyond the borders of the Mayajigua imagined by Withers. His narrative juxtaposes a series of contingencies that establish links between those things that can be seen and others that can only be spoken about. Hence the properties of the senses and

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the visible world seem to be continually interrelated insofar as the things described and those sensed are always depicted as "partially existent" (Latour 2006, 260). Manolo's reflections—transformed into knowledge and texts in an apparently disorganized way by Withers for his own purposes—thus seem to haunt the reader seeking to detect transformations in the rural and local universes.

The things that Manolo saw, heard said and knew to exist also underwent a kind of metamorphosis, though not in the same direction or obeying the same purposes as those imagined, perhaps, by Withers. They were of another kind and did not presume the transition from one structure, system or social order to another. Transformation, for Manolo, apparently implied the way in which visible and invisible things affected each other. The society he described was thus a singular configuration of the enchainment or association between mutually implicated things. As an observer, his work involved highlighting situations, events and evidence in which different modes of implication appeared more salient. Sometimes he would refer to accounts of strange creatures as *causos*, or stories. At other times he would speculate on their veracity and the possibility of their existence. Manolo therefore maintained an open relation to the forces that directly or indirectly affected him. The fact that they were not visible to everyone did not imply their non-existence. This attitude in relation to the "data" collected and reported by himself distinguishes his texts from the notes written by Withers.

Withers' field notebooks contain various references to the shapes taken by these strange creatures and when they usually appear, although these "supernatural", "ghosts", los chupacabras,[22] "beings" and "things" become entangled in a framework that insists on transforming them into "folklore". On a winter's night in March 1948, Withers, Manolo and L.R. stayed talking late into the night. For Withers the distinction between night and day marked a separation between times and territories in which visible and invisible forces held sway. Reading Withers' notes it becomes clear that every reference to the supernatural is connected to family stories. The interdictions, quarrels, disputes and stories related to affinity are mediated by the intervention of some inescapable outside agency that both explains and controls human action. In Manolo's writings, however, what changes is not the plausibility of the existence of so-called supernatural things but how these can come to be known. He seems to believe in a clear distinction between the relation established by those he observed and what we could call "supernatural agency", and the "respect" that meant observers like himself took seriously what his "informants" told him.

A description of Mayajigua seen from Manolo's perspective must therefore include another class of beings beyond the "residents", "Cubans", "workers" and "island immigrants": "Spirits" or "ghosts", embodied in people and animals, or simply adopting curious temporary forms. In part extensions of human agency or presence—explicit in the references to the magical spells manipulated by humans that conjure these beings into existence—they are also present, albeit partially, in other manifestations not always produced by human action. "Ghosts" wandered the colonies, villages, yards, *bateyes* and sugarcane fields, causing "harm", bringing ruin to families, leaving the streets deserted and disturbing the slumber of the dead. But it seemed easy to

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describe their forms, differentiating the *personas* [persons] from the *muertos* [dead people].

> Ghosts are found everywhere almost always and perhaps they will never vanish, precisely because they are made by men or women who have relations with others who are not actually their spouse and, since this is spreading in Cuba, I tend to think it will never end (…) generally the term ghosts is applied to a shape formed by a person using stilts (stilts are lengths of wood made to stand and walk on; lots of people are able to walk perfectly well with stilts; they are strapped to the legs and waist of the individual using them) covered by a sheet or robe apparently made to scare everyone who sees them; they also place a large gourd on their heads with holes for the eyes, nose and mouth and a candle alight inside, which illuminates the inside of the gourd and gives the impression of something supernatural, undoubtedly very impressive. Though it's like I've told you, we can also use the term ghosts for the lights and shapes that want to see people, a dead person.[23]

In contrast to the "sorcerers" and "healers", whose existence seems associated with bodies, as we shall see below, ghosts are creatures that cross specific times and spaces, but do not limit themselves to the boundaries delimiting *la noche* and *el dia*. Men, women or "lights" can appear "dressed" in "white" or "black" emerging from an "empty street" or a "dilapidated building". Curiously Manolo seems interested in locating them almost sociologically in the streets and neighbourhoods of Mayajigua, identifying the reasons for their existence, although his belief prevents his description from ever becoming objective.

> (…) yesterday I discovered there have always been ghosts in Mayajigua and they have regularly appeared in its districts, many say especially along the road that passes in front of the Terri family's house, which leads directly to the district of El Guayabar (…) I have talked about many things with people everywhere, but come to the conclusion that the province of the ghosts is Las Villas (…) in Mayajigua men wanting to maintain their sexual relations with other men's wives sometimes have to pretend to be ghosts so nobody sees them (…)[24]

Manolo believed in ghosts and in the close relationship between humans and non-humans, and not the latter as a projection, fantasy or representation of the former. The continuity of both implied a specific kind of reproduction that was observable. When "unmasked", men or women who turned into ghosts to conceal encounters deemed illicit would be publicly dishonoured. These revelations did not stop them being a source of fear. Dishonour was the worst of deaths and Manolo had already studied the theme closely. The ghosts of the "dead", who also used "stilts" and wore clothing from which lights shone, populated the very same places. Hence the "unmasking" of these beings was publicly discouraged.

In numerous passages Manolo describes the behaviour of residents from Mayajigua as evidence of "sexual relations" between men and animals, sometimes resulting in strange creatures. "Living ghosts", Withers had noted in his diary following a conversation with L., could be "men visiting a married woman when her husband is away; frost people", who ran away when discovered and were identifiable by their "tails".[25] Aside from the description of their forms, behaviour and appearance, ghosts and spirits are

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always associated with bodies whose existence is never in doubt. Unfaithful men and women, sick wives and elderly people, Haitian sorcerers, "haughty" Jamaicans, Chinese traders and moneylending Turks appear not only as the characters but as the authors of the stories told about themselves. But Manolo was not always credulous. In many situations he presented himself as "respectful".[26]

Respect

Manolo and L.R. also referred to the man-gods and other creatures who strove to allay human misfortune. They would wander the smaller roads, visit small settlements, work miracles and cures, and appear in the hills. Apparently the existence or otherwise of the things described in Mayajigua and nearby towns was not an issue for Manolo. His main concern was to preface his accounts of them with a reflection on how a limited set of relations could be maintained with these creatures. *Hombre-dioses* and sorcerers were beings he "respected" (Román 2007). Manolo was keenly aware that the term *brujeria* covered an enormous range of actions and forces.[27] This perhaps explains why the theme was treated differently to people's allusions to the ghosts of the dead, intergalactic beings and anthropomorphized animals. In one of his first texts, entitled "About Sorcery", Manolo begins by considering the inconsistent use of the term, noting the difference between his own "explanation" and the ways in which other people thought about it.

> I shall explain before telling you "what it's about". What each of these aforementioned things is and how so-called sorcery and healing are very different. However I can assure you that all Cubans confuse everything, maintain their opinions and at the very least call me crazy or tell me that I pretend to know more than them.[28]

Sorcery was "worked" by "dreaded" people whose friendship and company were shunned, since they "might become angry and cast an evil spell". Next Manolo introduces his own "evidence" that the benevolent or malevolent aims of magical action distinguish sorcery from healing. In presenting them, though, he introduces a second fundamental element to his distinction. Both good and bad spells emanated from practitioners identified entirely by their human attributes. They lived in workers' colonies close to the big sugar mills. Manolo does not state what the bad spells were, only the people involved.

> I knew a black woman who lived in my town and whose husband was a telephone repairman for the Railways (…) This woman lived with her husband and children in a house in a colony close to the town. The house was made from timber planks and palm thatch with a dirt floor and some furniture (…) In this house belonging to the evil black woman there was also a man of the black race who, I don't know how, became friends with them and stayed there. This man devoted himself to sorcery and did so for sheer pleasure (…).[29]

After carefully describing the environment in which the *brujo* lived, he narrates a case involving an enamoured couple, jealousy, abandonment and the inadvertent use of the sorcerer's services. The bewitched young bride only manages to rid herself of her misfortune by seeking out a "healer" and "spiritist" in Camaguey and using "brews" and

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"baths" to cure herself of the spell. The story contains all the elements needed to explain the power of the healer's actions. Manolo interviewed "spiritists" and "healers", although he admitted to understanding little when they told him what happened during possession. Manolo called everything "beliefs" and since his relation to these practices was not the same as a "believer", he insisted that he did not understand them, despite his *respectful* attitude.

Wavering between belief and respect, Manolo preferred to identify what he really thought to exist. Ghosts exist because their actions have concrete consequences. Men and women are dishonoured, the dead are not properly remembered, outside thieves can be unmasked. Ghosts can be seen wrapped in sheets with wooden legs and sparkling lights. The opposite occurs with sorcery. All Manolo really knew about sorcery was that it was practised by people of obscure origin who lived in hovels, used strange ritual objects and arrived in the local towns in search of work.

Conclusion

As Strathern (1990) observed, the information that circulates in the field, subsequently transformed into ethnographic data in the text, can be taken as [if] documentary artefacts. Information and "data" are *made*: they result from practices, agencies, desires, rituals, aesthetic conceptions and political transformations. They become products of the agency of different subjects, transformed into the objects of anthropological research. But the transformation of lived experience into an object with relevance to the "culture" of ethnographers—achieved by acquiring the status of a document—is not the end of the process (Wagner [1975] 1981).

As I have shown, the papers written by Manolo not only describe lived or imagined events. Texts and the techniques used to transform them into significant elements in the lives of Manolo and Withers were also created and their modes of existence mediated the relations of both men to their different others. Nonetheless, comprehending the agencies circulating in Mayajigua and affecting Manolo inevitably involves the mnemonic and sensible objects he created. In a creative exploration of how anthropologists use the notion of context, R. M. Keesing provocatively locates the latter "in our heads, not out there" (cited in Holly 1999, 58; also Dilley 1999). Indeed the recent critique of "context" as a set of heterogenic knowledge practices fabricated a posteriori by observers provides a way for us to understand Manolo's creativity. Contrary to the idea that "contexts" are forms of knowledge produced from already "purified facts" (Latour 1986), assembled to produce a framework of "historical" or "sociological" references against which all agents' experiences can and should be comprehended, the "data" produced by Manolo and his neighbours emerge as inscriptions that enable different relations to be established between things seen, known, imagined or sensed. Hence they are not elements to "illustrate" histories and relations produced in the past, which is why they are not approached as part of a "context" or a shared system of references for understanding the relations between Withers' informants and their peers. Manolo created himself, his neighbours, the strange beings and the world they occupied as a certain type of artefact, as "data". In creating Mayajigua village and its

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people, he not only focused on the things observed, dreamed and known by others, but also on the creation of multiple dimensions and perspectives that made knowledge of the former possible. Consequently the work of creation involved different relations between human and non-human beings. The "data" produced by Manolo can indeed be apprehended as an almost infinite succession of planes—or mutually implicated contexts—through which the "world" in which he lived became knowable.

At the outset of this article I noted that Withers encountered diverse problems during his numerous attempts to use the letters sent from Mayajigua, and that he was perhaps aware of some of the potential effects of publishing them as an ethnography. But certainly not the effects that interest us here. In the margins of the texts he did highlight some of the creatures and figures cited, like an incipient inventory of the narrative wealth, imagination and symbolic universe recorded by "common folk". However, treating the references to these creatures as part of the "talent", "imagination" and creativity of the "reporters"—or even as elements that singularized each author—still has a strangely reductive effect. Separating the "sociological data" from those considered "imagined" or "folkloric" resulted in what we might call a "counter-intuitive" position: the less plausible and more imaginative and representational the characters and events described, then the more sociologically relevant and historically verisimilar their authors would become. I propose another way of describing the events that created Mayajigua and the surrounding area as spaces composed of social relations in which human and non-human creatures interact—treating, for instance, every action cited by the authors as part of the "social", or "la sociedad" in Manolo's terms.

Manolo is not a native narrator and does not situate the people he observed as equals. He conceives Mayajigua through distinct frameworks. If we are to take Manolo's ethnography seriously, without forgetting that it remains the outcome of his encounter and relations with Withers, we need to clear up a recurrent misunderstanding. Manolo cannot be considered an ethnographer simply because he wrote about his peers in a singular way. It would be naive to believe that when he conducted his "work" he considered himself "equal" to those he interviewed and observed. It is precisely this difference, the possibility of becoming a non-equal by writing about Mayajigua, that makes Manolo an ethnographer.

The presence of non-human creatures in the Mayajigua social universe cannot be taken as Manolo's idiosyncrasy alone (Strathern 1987). The "reporting" mentioned by Manolo in the opening epigraph included something more than details of the houses, occupations and localizations of residents, a map composed of small numbered fragments through which the families of each resident could be identified, based on Withers' own initial sketch. Manolo's descriptions seem to be interrupted by fragments of affects and memory effects, signalling different depths to the space-time of the towns and colonies in which he lived. However Manolo had no intention of transforming these into what Withers called an "autobiography". As he said, reporting what he saw meant more than earning a living. The typed papers were treated as sensible objects through which certain things could be said. We therefore need to understand not only what Manolo had to say about Mayajigua but also *how* he wanted to transform this knowledge

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into text. As I have sought to show, this inversion in relevance is necessary since it singularizes a way of talking about the things that Manolo saw, knew and believed, and about those things he claimed to have known, despite never once seeing them.

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Notes

[1] New York University/Research Institute for the Study of Man/Carl Withers Manuscript Collection, *Manolo Manuscript*, p. 47 (hereafter CWMC). I thank RISM and CLACS (Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies)/New York University for grant for the permission to use the collection.

[2] Honouring Manolo's request, only Withers's pseudonyms for his informants are used here. In analysing the role of Manolo's writings in this combination of perspectives, my aim is to highlight his work as a creator and author. Since they do not comprise "ethnographic data" per se but a critical perspective on these data's production, the citations of excerpts written by Manolo—with the exception of the epigraphs—are not italicized but placed in double quotation marks in the same way as the citations from Withers and other authors. Double quotation marks are used whenever I wish to emphasize particular words and expressions.

[3] Withers/Rubin, Letter, 12 November 1969. CWMC, Box 14, A-4.

[4] This coincides with recent explorations of the relations between humans, knowledge technologies and materialities—in particular documentary objects—by authors such as Strathern (1990), Latour (1986, 2005), Riles (2006), Heimer (2006), Reed (2006), Mol and Law (2002) and Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell (2007), in partial dialogue with studies on ethnographic archives (Trouillot 1995; Jamin and Zonabend 2001–02; Steedman 2002; Cunha 2006; Stoler 2009).

[5] Withers to Vera Rubin, 12/11/1969. CWMC, Box 14, Appendix, A-4.

[6] The fact that Withers had published little—and then under the pseudonym of James West—partly explains the author's relative obscurity, despite the good reception and impact of his only book, *Plainville, USA*, published in 1945. Neither Withers nor his biographers offer any explanation as to why he published under another name. Withers had ephemeral institutional ties, always as an English instructor, before deciding to pursue a doctorate in anthropology. His interests were in folk tales, poetry and expressions, and above all in children's

poetry and literature, on which he published books and collections under the pseudonyms of James West and Robert North.

[7] Lewis/Withers, 8 November 1947. Oscar Lewis Papers/University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Archives (hereafter OLP/UI). My thanks to Emily Brown for her support, and to Jorge Giovanetti for generously allowing me access to the letters exchanged between Withers and Lewis.

[8] The production of "life histories" is not limited to the proposals of Dollar and other authors interested in the proximity between anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis. Distinct styles of ethnographic narrative, as well as distinct methodological orientations, have made the manufacture of "life histories" a recurrent resource, especially in anthropological studies of small rural communities in the Americas. For a critical overview of the bibliography on this topic, see, among others, Mintz (1979, 1984), Watson (1976), Crapanzano (1977), Ochs and Capps (1996), Shaw (1980), and Peacock and Holland (1993).

[9] Withers, C., 25/1/1957, CWMC, Box 1, Correspondence.

[10] CWMC, Box 1, Folder 3, "Notes on Cuba", p. 39. Withers's field notebooks is no different essentially to other modernist writings—a style analysed, among others, by the various contributors to the essay collections edited by Sanjek (1990, 1993), as well as by anthropologists researching field notes stored in archives (Jamin and Zonabend 2001–02), Leopold 2008, and the special issue of *History and Anthropology* dedicated to archives and anthropology, "The Political Lives of Documents" (22 (4) 2011).

[11] The small settlements in Cuba's central region composed of people from diverse national origins and their descendants, separated from urbanized areas and dependent on the sugar economy. The first academic study of the topic was *Rural Cuba*, published by Nelson (1950). The region researched by Withers, as well as Manolo's position and family history, reveal important aspects of this universe, especially in terms of the tense relations between work, racial prejudice, ethnic and religious associations and immigration (Lundahl 1983; McLeod 1998; McGillivray 2002; Giovannetti 2006).

[12] Withers/Rubin, Letter, 12 November 1969. CWMC, Box 14, A-4, p. 2.

[13] Though recognizing the importance of Ratinoff's work, Withers reveals he had declined to translate it into English.

[14] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, p. 63.

[15] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, p. 63.

[16] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, p. 430.

[17] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, p. 53.

[18] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, p. 315.

[19] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, pp. 1173, 1178–1183, 1185–1187, 1139.

[20] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, pp. 364, 393, 826.

[21] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC Box 9, p. 176.

[22] Kinds of "beasts", predators such as "goat-suckers" or animalized creatures that haunt people in the countryside.

[23] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC, Box 9, p. 241.

[24] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC, Box 9, p. 241.

[25] E.g. "Maria la Vaca", *Manolo Manuscript*, CWP/RISM [Box 9, p. 48]. See also Withers, C. "Notes on Cuba, Cuba 3—13/2/48 to 25/2/48", Box 1, Folder 3, p. 29.

[26] For Manolo, the idea of *respeto* seemed to denote an attitude of caution, credulity and careful approach to things or beings unfamiliar to him. In other passages, however, when he narrates the history of men and women *sin respeto*, the sense denotes concerns with morality and social recognition. It is impossible to tell whether the recurrence of the theme in Manolo's writings drew Withers's attention or not. "Respect/*respeto*" is a native concept in different socialities of the Spanish and Anglophone Caribbean. From the 1960s onwards, its use and that of variants

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like "honor" in the ethnographies of Wilson (1973) and Martínez-Allier (1974), among others, was fundamental to the reorientation of studies on social organization, family and gender.

[27] Although Manolo refers to practices of "santeros" and "brujos", he does not identify them as being part of a specific "religion", or "belief" but does recognize their practitioners as being "los negros" and "los haitianos". As for his respect for "santeros", treated as healers with the power to invocate certain "spirits", Manolo associates them with the benign role of the "espiritas" and the power of the "espiritismo", who worked with candles, water, and "baños" (washing). In all events, in diverse letters, he uses the term "santerismo" to refer to the latter, and "brujeria" for those related to the production of harmful spells. The literature on so-called African-based religions and their connections with diverse forms of "espiritismo" has explored the overlapping of distinct practices associated with the agency of human and non-human beings (Palmié 2006, 2010; Holbraad 2008; Espirito Santo 2010).

[28] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC, Box 9, p. 48.

[29] *Manolo Manuscript*, CWMC, Box 9, pp. 45–46.

ORCID

Olivia Maria Gomes da Cunha http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3321-1595

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