Interview with Catherine Murphy

Conducted at her house in Mt. Rainier, Md.

On May 24, 2017

### A: Today is May, 24, 2017, and this is Ann Halbert-Brooks. I’m here with Catherine Murphy to interview her about the collection that she is donating to UNC on the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. Catherine, how did you first come to Cuba?

C: I first went to Cuba in 1992, but I had grown up thinking about Cuba my whole life because I grew up very close to my grandmother—my dad’s mother—and her sisters, and they had both been born and raised in Cuba, my grandmother in 1910, and her sister just a few years earlier. Their parents were North Americans who lived and worked in Cuba temporarily. They were working in building sugar mills. My great-grandmother worked for the Red Cross, and my great-grandfather worked for a construction company, and they worked on sugar mills and railroads. No one in my family has a ton of details, although my great-grandmother wrote memoirs about Cuba in the 1930s that are pretty interesting. My grandmother and my great aunt grew up in Cuba, and I grew up very close to them, especially to my great aunt who took care of my sister and I—my mother started medical school at Stanford when I was 4 and my sister was 2, and my great aunt babysat us every day—so we heard these stories about Cuba all the time, it wasn’t just an occasional thing, it was a very common occurrence over quite a number of years.

So I guess I always knew that I wanted to go or I had that piece of this felt very connected to our family history especially through my great aunt and my grandma who felt so connected to it and spoke about Cuba throughout her whole life. So I first went in 1992, and I was doing an undergraduate degree in California, and I designed a group of [noise & interruption]

I went to Cuba in ’92, it was full-on Special Period, and I had no way to anticipate that or prepare for that really.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was really fascinating and really challenging in a lot of ways. I was fascinated with…how Cuba was dealing with the Special Period and I was fascinated with how a country with very low resources would take on and grapple with survival, and then with issues of development and human services. So while I was living this immediate daily reality of the Special Period, I was also really struck with and fascinated by the social system that Cuba had built, this education system the healthcare system and how a low-resource developing world country would make such a strong commitment to that and actually make it happen. I was interested in those topics and I ended up enrolling in the University of Havana and doing a master’s degree at the FLACSO program, and that is a master’s program on sustainable development issues.[[2]](#footnote-2) They look at development theory concepts and what is development…the theoreticians of development, but also looking at working definitions of development used by the United Nations and UN institutions and looking at this new or relatively new set of concepts around sustainable development, both the social and environmental aspects.

I had been researching that and my research topic was not the Literacy Campaign, but it sort of bridged together this general interest in how Cuba was exploring notions of development and putting social development—their own kind of social development—practices into action, a key piece of which has been providing basic services to people who in most of the rest of the world would not have access to these services. So that interested me, those issues of global equity. I had been connected to a lot of low-income community organizing in the United States and so I was thinking a lot about how we might evolve our model of social development in the United States…[to] have a more efficient way to extend network of social protections. [As] I was doing this research while studying at the University of Havana, I was meeting all of these people in my process of researching I met a number of really interesting men and women doing cutting-edge work in contemporary Cuba, but it just so happened that a number of these people had been literacy teachers…but several of them referenced their experiences as literacy teachers as the most important thing they had ever done and that …really intrigued me and kind of gripped me.

One of the women in the *Maestra* film, Daysi Veitía, who became a hospital architect, I knew her very well…she had really done huge and wonderful things with her life, but she was one of the people who would always say that the most beautiful thing she had ever done was teach someone else to read and write when she was a teenager, a group of people, maybe 6 or 7 people. This story…it fascinated me [and] it intrigued me. The first interview that we did in 2003 was an interview that we did with Daysi Veitía and it was a life story. She was very ill and I had recently found out that she was probably terminally ill, and we recorded in a rush to do a recorded interview with her. I think that I had this idea [for a film and] that at that point it kind of became concrete. I got a film crew of a few Cuban film people that I knew and we went over to her house and did a really wonderful filmed interview with her in which I was just totally…it was so much more than I expected. I was so impressed with how fresh all the memories were to her. It was like she remembered people, places, names, dates, times, all of this detail that she talked about as if it had been yesterday or just last week! That in and of itself was fascinating and she also really encouraged me…she knew some of the people, like in her interview she names “oh me and Haydee Vázquez Medina” or whoever, she remembered all the people that she was with and she really encouraged me to interview a couple of them.

I never did interview them…I didn’t follow up enough to track them down but what I did was I started to interview other women that I knew who had been literacy volunteers like Norma Guillard who is a leading social scientist in Cuba and has done a lot of groundbreaking work around race and gender equality issues and she’s also worked a lot with the LGBT community. She had such beautiful story. She’s originally from Santiago de Cuba so she had that whole angle.

I also interviewed Gina Rey, who was…an architect and urban planner who was one of the founders of the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital and she just had a beautiful story as well.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I think what I had been expecting was that I would do a few interviews and edit a small film that would be meaningful for Cuba and meaningful for the world, or for the US. In a way, I think I did it for myself, for them and for myself…it was a deeply personal project from the beginning. I started doing the interviews in 2003, which was where I was wrapping up my Cuba years. I felt like I was sort of wrapping up things in Cuba, getting ready to move back to the States so there was some piece of it that felt like a bridge from what I had learned in Cuba and…bring a piece of that back to the US. It was piece about the best parts of what had been happening in Cuba in previous decades that we didn’t get a chance to hear about in the US. Those first three interviews, rather than kind of just creating a a sense where I thought “oh this is a great project, so glad I did it,” it was just like the tip of an iceberg. Still after all these years, almost 45 years… the fact that they just remembered everything, they were so immediate about it, so passionate about it, so emotionally connected to that story still, it really struck me and it riveted me. I continued to do interviews, and the idea of the project grew into being a larger film, more than a 10-minute film and although in the *Maestra* film we selected 9 of those interviews to make a half an hour film I did dozens of interviews, you know the number better than I do!

### A: More than 100…

C: So yeah, it just grew and grew and snowballed. At some point I thought there’s just such a huge story but I hadn’t done a lot of research on the Campaign their stories struck me so much that I started to do some research on the Campaign and the significance of the magnitude of the Campaign itself. 250,000 volunteer teachers, 100,000 of whom were teenagers, carrying out this massive national campaign for literacy: it just seems like an impossible feat, so I became fascinated on all of these levels with the Campaign itself and the magnitude of it what it might mean for the rest of the world and what it meant in a long-term way for the young people in who had been those young teachers, and how had it changed them.

### A: Now, with this vantage point of more than 50 years and more than 100 interviews, are there any that particularly stand out to you or that were particularly meaningful for your understanding, or that you think explain it especially well?

C: Yes. I think that a number of the interviewees…we were just talking about Daysi Veitía, she said that she felt like being on the Campaign totally changed her life because that was where she found a strong sense of empowerment or self-esteem. She had been a very shy, very quiet, very sheltered girl and young woman. Her parents didn’t even like to let her go to the corner store by herself, so she just broke out of that and suddenly she discovered that she was actually smart and capable and brave and courageous and could solve problems and had something huge to give the world. A lot of the interviewees, especially the young women talk in those terms. It changed the world for them. It changed the way they saw the world, and it changed the way they saw themselves because they discovered all of these things that had been prohibited for young women before, like being strong, autonomous, or brave, things that were not really cultivated in young women. You weren’t *supposed* to be that way if you were a young woman, so they got into all of this forbidden, exciting territory and many of them never looked back.

There’s so many different interviews that I could say. One of them was the interview with Silvio Rodríguez, the *trovador*, one of Latin America’s most beloved singer/songwriters. He taught on the Literacy Campaign when he was 14 years old, and the family that he was teaching how to read and write didn’t know that the world was round. He said, “Imagine, when you’re 14 years old and you’ve received this kind of minimal training to teach people how to make the alphabet!” Of course they had the books, the *cartilla* and the *manual*, but their training was really just to teach people “A, B, C, D…” you know, basic reading and writing, how to hold a pencil. To be confronted with these major issues like not knowing that the world is round and there’s so much in that. First of all, what huge challenges those young teachers had to face, human challenges, teaching challenges, pedagogical challenges, but it also really drives home how marginalized the students were, how many rural areas in particular, mountainous populations in the east in the Sierra Maestra or the Escambray, or the coastal people where he was teaching on the southern coast had little or no access to education. It was just those kinds of stories that really stuck out to me, of Silvio Rodríguez talking about how his family didn’t know the world was round or someone else who I talked to that was way high up in the Sierra Maestra, some of their students didn’t really understand that they lived on an island, or they hadn’t seen the Cuban flag, or they hadn’t seen José Martí—these kinds of elements, basic elements of universal education now in Cuba that are [taught in] primary school were totally foreign to some of the people in these very, very rural communities.

### A: What seemed to be some common goals or motivations for your interviewees?

C: It’s really interesting because it was the first question that I asked all of them, and I think I expected a little bit more lofty or ideological responses. Some of them had those responses, but many others were just like, “It was an adventure!” Well, I should say in all fairness some were motivated by these big ideas or ideologies. Many others were motivated by the idea of teaching. Many of them say that they were drawn by the idea of teaching, the importance of teaching the country people how to read and write, of teaching illiterate adults how to read and write. Many others also just say that they were swept up in this spirit of adventure, that “all my friends were going and I wanted to go too,” or getting away from home. I think also for the young women this getting out of the overly protective clutches of what the family structure was in the 1950s was a huge attraction. They had diverse answers but they generally fit in those categories and the adventure piece was big for everybody.

### A: One thing that you sometimes see when reading memoirs of the 1950s is a discussion of how women weren’t allowed out without a chaperone because their reputations might be tarnished. Did you see the teachers negotiating that issue of having a threat to their reputation if they went off into the mountains?

C: That’s a really interesting question. I actually think that was a major motivating factor for the parents who would not let their daughters go. In fact, I know about several cases of families who sent their daughters to the United States to stop them from going on the Literacy Campaign. The threat of the daughter going on the Literacy Campaign was a major—possibly the primary factor—in rushing and hurrying up and getting them out. I’ve spoken to at least two or three Cuban women living in the US whose families sent as part of the Operation Peter Pan, and their families were rushing to get them out of Cuba because they wanted to go on the Literacy Campaign.[[4]](#footnote-4) There certainly could be many, many elements to that, political elements of course, but there was a huge gender element in that, both I think the threat of becoming breaking gender norms but also certainly this whole issue of being unchaperoned. What might happen? The reputations, the threat of romance, and young men associated with the Revolution or maybe farmers, *campesinos*. There were a lot of class issues there and rural-urban prejudices too.

One of the women who told me that story was an incredible woman named Olga Vives. She said that her parents tried to stop her from going on the Literacy Campaign. They sent her on the Peter Pan brigade, Operation Peter Pan in order to stop her from going on the Literacy Campaign because they were afraid that she would become a strong autonomous woman or something maybe resembling a feminist. Well, she became a major feminist leader in the United States and became the national vice-president of NOW, the National Organization for Women. She chuckled about that. Unfortunately she passed away a few years ago so we were never able to do a recorded interview with her, but she was one of the cases and there’s a couple more. She was sort of the funny case because she became this feminist leader and maybe she was just dying for that autonomy already. There are a few other Cuban women I’ve spoken to whose parents rushed them out.

Well, the other young women, they really engaged in this serious negotiation with their parents. If you think there were 50,000 teenage girls that went on the Literacy Campaign, many of them really had to take on their parents, they had to enter into this intensive process of negotiation with their parents to be able to go. Many of the parents didn’t want them to go at first. Especially the dads didn’t want them to go, but they entered into negotiation. I really have come to see that negotiation as the first step toward this new era for Cuban women, for this group of young women in particular and Cuban women in general. Most of those women, they just loved so much what they discovered about themselves that they never looked back, they broke out of that little box and they never looked back.

### A: How did you go about recruiting interviewees to give these *testimonios*?

C: That’s interesting. Well, because I started with people I knew, I started with women, a group of women and it just kind of spread. I did those first three interviews in 2003 and I planned to have those be the end. Then, when I really realized that there was so much more to tell and to explore, I think I really hit a point where I realized this was such a massive phenomenon and there are thousands of testimonies to be collected. I really came to see the Literacy Campaign as a peak moment in the social history of the Americas, and certainly a peak moment in the history of education, so I felt at one point as though I was racing against the clock, like “well, I just have to do as many interviews as I can.” I was putting the word out about the project and that was when I brought in a couple research associates, Yvonne Chapman and Alina Márquez, who did some research work for me looking for new interviewees and doing digital audio recordings which are part of the archive collection that we’ll be donating to UNC.

It wasn’t too hard to get the word out. People who had taught on the Campaign themselves or had some kind of another role…also a lot of friends of my generation had parents that taught on the Campaign, or some friends younger than me had grandparents that taught. There’s a woman named Ana María Rojas who was part of the National Commission for the Literacy Campaign that put together the teaching materials, the pedagogical materials and compiled the *cartilla* and *manual* and I was able to interview her because of meeting her granddaughter. Her granddaughter was actually a good friend of Yvonne Chapman, so it’s like, it just spread and there was this organic process. I had Yvonne Chapman working on it and then her good friend, a good friend of hers who is Ana María Rojas’ granddaughter contacted me and told me about her grandmother, and that was how we ended up doing that collective interview with the living members of the National Commission.

I also went to the Literacy Campaign Museum in Havana, where the director Luisa Campos helped me. I asked to get into their archives, but I also asked for suggestions of people to interview, and one of the people that Luisa Campos suggested was Griselda Aguilera. Griselda Aguilera was the youngest girl teacher. She taught one person, one 58-year-old man named Carlos Pérez Isla who was totally illiterate. She taught him how to read and write—basic reading and writing—in 1961. I honestly couldn’t believe that story. It wasn’t believable to me that a 7-year-old could do that, so I tracked her down, maybe almost more out of incredulousness than out of interest in her story. I was really interested in her story but I just couldn’t imagine it was true. We actually interviewed her at the Literacy Campaign Museum and wow! Her story’s really true! It’s quite spectacular! She tells a piece of it in the *Maestra* film, and it is always one of the moments that sticks out to people the most. Her parents taught on the Literacy Campaign. They were both teaching on the Literacy Campaign in Havana and it’s not in the film, but she says that she just felt like they were getting up every morning, and they would leave the house like they were going to do something so important and she wanted to be a part of that. She was so young they didn’t take her seriously, but of course she was in first grade but she was reading at more of a second- or third-grade level so she had a lot to teach many adults had never had the opportunity to learn and she did it.

### A: It seems like you’ve been able to get really overwhelming response to this project from potential interviewees. What are some of their reasons for wanting to be interviewed, especially at this point? Is it a similar sense that they’re racing against the clock? Is it something about the environment at this point?

C: I think on the one hand people are so proud of the Literacy Campaign. It was such an important experience for them, a life-changing experience, a transformative experience for them on a personal level. It’s something that they’re very proud of and especially as history goes by. They’re really proud of the importance of the whole undertaking. I must say I don’t feel like anyone sticks out to me right now who talked about it in that boastful, “Oh, I was part of something really important,” way. They hold its importance in a very different way. It’s much more personal because it’s service. Such a key piece of the story is about the transformative power of service and the lasting importance of that in the lives of all of these thousands of young teachers who really experienced it, day in and day out, living with their students, working with their students, learning about the lives of rural people, learning about the challenges of rural people and working together with them and then taking the dedication of teaching them how to read and write. The power of that—in this very personal way—is very lasting. People are proud of that, you know? “Honored” might be more the word for what I felt like I read from that.

I also feel like there was really an element of the crisis that Cuba has been going through in the Special Period, in the post-Soviet period, from 1989 to now, where life has just been so challenging on so many levels. I felt like that might have been a piece of why so many of those who participated in the Literacy Campaign were so happy and excited to talk about it. It’s like, “This is what I’m about,” or “this is what we’re about and in spite of all the challenges now and the difficulties, this is the core thing that we want to be building.” It was almost just remembering, bringing back, and then transmitting what they were working to build at that time.

I think it’s important to say I made a point of reaching out to a number of people who no longer live in Cuba. There were a group of Latin American young people who volunteered on the Campaign, non-Cuban young people who came to Cuba in 1961 and volunteered on the Campaign and I did reach a couple of them and interviewed a couple of them. I also reached out to a number of Cubans who no longer live in Cuba, because while there were people that came from abroad, there were also a lot of Cubans who lived in Cuba who in 1961 and subsequently left. I did a few oral interviews in Miami. The people that I interviewed in Miami asked not to be recorded, but they were very forthcoming. I probably talked to three different people in Miami, and then I did a filmed interview with a gentleman who now lives in San Francisco, California, José Luis Gómez. San Francisco is one socio-political context and Miami is another, so it was interesting and understandable that the people I spoke to in Miami asked to not be recorded at least during the first conversation. It was also really interesting that they—in spite of having broken with the project of the Cuban Revolution and having very different political opinions—did feel like it was a beautiful experience for them as young people. They seemed to really feel that it was a genuinely meaningful undertaking, and that it was important to them personally in some ways, but they feel really differently about things now. They left either of their own volition or in some cases their parents left, but in many cases they chose to leave themselves. There’s a whole other story there that would be very interesting for someone to explore.

### A: What reception have you seen to the film *Maestra* and any other projects that you’ve done with these materials in the U.S. and then in Cuba? Are there differences?

C: Well, showing it in the U.S., people can’t believe it. It’s this seemingly impossible story, and so people in the U.S. see it and we’ve been showing it since the film was released in 2012 and we’re now in 2017. It’s enjoyed a very robust distribution for 5 years, which not all mid-length independent documentaries enjoy that so that’s been really wonderful and special, but people see it and they just go, “Wait, wait, wait, they did what? And they were how many? Well how did they…how was it possible?” It’s just stunning, or unbelievable. There’s always a little bit of that, and people are also really inspired. Mass illiteracy remains a major unsolved global problem. It remains an unsolved problem in the United States. It’s largely invisible or invisiblized in the United States so it’s like illiteracy is around us all the time, but we just haven’t really learned to see it, or learned to look for it, or learned to talk about it, or find a national solution. I think the film really strikes people, the story strikes people and they ask, “How did they do that? How is it possible?” and “Couldn’t we try to do something like that? Couldn’t the rest of the world do that?” or “Couldn’t we try to do that here too?” People are sometimes really surprised and sort of shocked. If most of what they’ve heard about Cuba has been very negative it’s hard sometimes for people to believe that what they’ve heard could coexist with this incredible story of a nation trying to overcome illiteracy and all of these young teachers being part of it. It’s like they grapple with how to hold those two things together.

In Cuba it’s been really special and wonderful to show it, but it’s almost like the opposite. A lot of younger Cubans have come to me and kind of thanked me for the story in a way, for the way we showed it in the film. They’ve heard about the Literacy Campaign, of course, all their lives. There’s such a strong sense of history and people know their history in general, and there’s a lot of connection between history and the present. People feel connected to history, and they know about the Literacy Campaign, but they maybe know more about the macro-political story or maybe could even say a more “sloganistic” version of the story with the heroism of the historic leaders. Telling the story from the vantage point of everyday heroes and heroines and just regular people and what a huge role they played in it all…I’ve appreciated that a number of young people have come and have specifically thanked me for that and that they felt like it gave them a new perspective on what that phenomenon was. That’s really nice.

### A: You’ve touched on this a little bit already, but in *Maestra* and a lot of the focus of the larger project is on women even though almost half of your interviewees have been men. What is the goal with that, and what are you hoping to do by focusing on women?

C: I think that when I set out to collect the first stories I was really looking for stories of women and for the stories of the youngest women and how this experience may have changed the way they saw themselves. The country was changing and I was looking for what that connection was between a country going through a massive process of change and how that can be lived on a personal level; what’s the connection between the macro transformation and the micro.

This is very different, but in the particular instance of the Literacy Campaign, how did that change the lives of young women or especially the way that young women saw themselves vis a vis this larger project. I think I came to see it more as through these new opportunities that were afforded to them or that were available to them because of this larger project of the Literacy Campaign. Because of the Campaign, they were able to break out of those very narrow confines of the gender roles that existed in Cuba in the 1950s. There’s a lot of race and class dynamics in that as well because lower-income women always had to work but any family that could afford to not have the daughters work, the daughters didn’t work.

In middle class families the daughters were very, very protected, like they did not leave the house without a chaperone, or they learned to walk with a book on their head, or that the way to cultivate a “good future” for them—that mainstream social construct of the time of learn how to be a proper lady and learn how to be a good wife and a good mother. It’s important to be a good wife and a good mother in the larger sense of the world, but if that’s all you have open to you and there’s the total exclusion of the public sphere, intellectual life, spiritual life, artistic life, or autonomy…I was really curious about that, and the young women that participated in that Literacy Campaign because they were able to break out of that so much. It was life-changing for them and so that really interested me.

At the same time, it was transforming for the men too. The young men that participated in the Literacy Campaign were profoundly transformed and it didn’t really dawn on me until some years into the project that it also transformed them around gender confines. It also gave them some movement on the very strict gender confines of men, and young men, and what men are supposed to be. Now, there was a big difference in terms of the way that parents reacted. When young men went to tell their parents that they wanted to join the Literacy Campaign, the parents generally approved and it fit into those Western concepts of manhood and masculinity. You go out into the world and find your way in the world, and become a man.

When the young women told their parents they wanted to go, most of the parents adamantly refused because they were worried it was dangerous. It was dangerous, and there were a lot of reasons for parents to worry, but a lot of that worry was around breaking gender norms. That was really fascinating terrain for me and it was something that I wanted to explore through the interviews.

At the same time, there are all of these incredible men that were on the project. Slightly over half of the young teachers were young women, but the other almost-half were young men, and *vale la repetición* as they say, it was a profoundly transformative experience for them. I started to run into men who I knew, or friends of friends, or friends’ parents, dads, uncles, grandfathers or whatever, and I started to interview them. Many of those interviews actually happened after the *Maestra* film was already edited. I would come across these incredible stories like Enrique Pineda Barnet, he was the first *maestro voluntario*, and he was old friends with Ivan Napoles who was our cinematographer from ICAIC.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ivan Napoles was saying “you’ve got to interview [him], you’re doing something on the Literacy Campaign!” He almost insisted that we interview Enrique Pineda Barnet. It was of course a fascinating story, so we all went together to his house, and we spent an afternoon with him. We interviewed him about the experience and also watched this archival Cuban film called *Maestro del Cilantro*, which he stars in and it’s sort of about his experience, not entirely, but that was totally wonderful. They knew someone else, and there were other people we interviewed.

We interviewed Daniel Diez, who founded Televisión Serrana which was initially a UNESCO project in the eastern mountains of Cuba. Well, he fell in love with the mountains in the Literacy Campaign when he was teaching. Or there was José Fuster, who is this wacky painter-ceramicist who was a literacy volunteer in 1961 and he said that he spent his whole life painting the scenes that he saw on the Literacy Campaign. It was like there were these deep, lasting stories for the guys and so I didn’t want to exclude them.

It’s also sort of funny because when I started showing the *Maestra* film in Cuba, numerous men came up to me and they were like “you left us out!” and at first I thought, “well, this is how women have felt throughout the ages!” but it’s not just that simple. They have had so many beautiful experiences and beautiful things to tell so yes, we started interviewing more men. I’ve actually done a number of interviews—research interviews—with men like with Jorge Odio, who has a beautiful story. He came from a very poor family in Palma Soriano and he had never been able to go to school because he didn’t have shoes, which was a very common story. When the Campaign started, he signed up to be a student but he was more the age of the young *brigadista* volunteers than the other students. He took the classes for a few days and then he ran away from home and appeared in the next town presenting himself as a literacy volunteer. They gave him students, and he taught these people how to read and write! He said that he would stay up reading, studying the lessons furiously before he would teach them the next day. There’s just so many beautiful stories told by the guys, by the various men that we interviewed. Of course the Silvio Rodríguez story that I shared with you earlier too.

I did a special edit for the 50-year anniversary of the Campaign with the wonderful Cuban editor named Manuel Iglesias. I gave him all the transcripts that I had prepared for *Maestra* and all of the interviews that we had digitized, and he did a special edit that we titled *1961*, and we screened that in Cuba, and it has stories of men and women. There was this really wonderful soundtrack largely done by Lucia Agüero , a leading composer who has done a lot of *bandas sonoras* and soundtracks for films. That’s never been subtitled into English so I’ve shown it in Cuba and I’ve shown it at a couple academic conferences in the States that were bilingual or had a heavy focus on Spanish. So yes, the men’s stories are wonderful too and very important for history and I’m very glad that we’re giving them to UNC and hopefully more people will research in them and create other fine things.

### A: For any potential future researchers, is there anywhere that you would recommend they start?

C: I guess it depends so much on where, and what aspect they’re looking at or looking for. It’s hard to say. It would be interesting to look at the regional differences. I don’t know, I think the things that stick out to me wouldn’t necessarily be the most interesting.

For me if there was one thing that we would have included in the film more, it would have been more what the *brigadistas* talk about learning from their students. We do go into that a little more in *1961*, and I actually asked Manuel to do that because I felt like we hadn’t explored it enough in *Maestra*. Such an important part of the Campaign was breaking down that enormous divide between that urban people and rural people, and that urban people often feel superior and there’s so much prejudice throughout history that urban people are superior to rural people, urban living is superior to rural living, people in the city are smarter or more cultured, more sophisticated or whatever, and breaking that down was such an important piece of what happened in the Campaign. I think the teaching materials on this are fascinating, that part of the *instrucciones al alfabetizador* where they say, “show tremendous concern for all the problems that your students face, illiteracy is just one of them” and really trying to cultivate this deep concern and respect for rural people and their challenges. That’s a very important part of piece of the story. That then opened the door for the students the young student-literacy teachers who went to teach on the Campaign to honor and respect the these families that they lived with. Maybe the student families didn’t know how to read and write, but they had this tremendous wisdom in so many other ways, knowledge, intelligence, and traditional wisdom, and the way they talk about that is really interesting and moving I think. I don’t know that there would be enough volume on that to be a research project but it sure is a beautiful topic…*y allí para adelante*!

### A: We’ve come to the end of my questions. Is there anything else that you’d like to include?

C: I’m really delighted that these archives are going to UNC. I’m also really delighted that a lot of this comes directly out of your research and that’s exciting that how one thing leads to another, and I know that so many Cuba scholars either are cultivated at UNC or specifically go to UNC to study with Lou Pérez. That makes me particularly happy that the archives are going to be there and going to be at easy reach for present and future Cuba scholars. I would also just encourage people to continue to collect interviews and do that research because there’s still so many living people. The *alfabetizados*, there’s not many, but there are some that are still alive or children of *alfabetizados* are a huge area that could be explored. So I’m honored that and really happy that these interviews will contribute to that history but I would encourage folks to keep collecting, searching for more.

1. The “Special Period in Times of Peace,” the euphemism for the economic crisis that struck Cuba in the 1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. FLACSO: the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales at the University of Havana. It is part of an 18-country academic network dedicated to the study of social development across the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An urban planning commission established in 1987 to manage urban renewal in Havana. In the 1990s it led efforts to restore historic buildings like the Morro castle and the Cabaña fortress, the Saratoga and Telegraph hotels, and public parks around the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Operation Peter Pan was an effort by the Catholic Church and the CIA to bring the children of middle-class Cubans out of Cuba to the United States in the early 1960s. More than 14,000 children and young adults left Cuba for the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos, the official organization responsible for promoting and running the film industry in Cuba. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)