

## *War on Poverty, War on Division Street: Puerto Rican Chicago in the 1960s Through the Lens of the Janet Nolan Collection*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article examines the Janet Nolan Ethnographic Research on Puerto Ricans in Chicago Collection, produced by a team of researchers in Chicago's heavily Puerto Rican West Town neighborhood in the midst of the War on Poverty. The Collection has recently been donated to DePaul University and will soon be accessible to scholars for the first time. Nolan and her associates recorded and transcribed interviews with neighborhood residents and kept case files on dozens of families in the community, all in an effort to understand how a racialized population coped with poverty. After detailing three examples of the sorts of information contained in the Collection, the article examines the problems and potentials of the Collection as a source for scholarship on the history of Chicago's Puerto Rican community. Special attention is paid to the prior debates among scholars of slavery regarding the pros and cons of the WPA Ex-Slave Narratives. This parallel experience is particularly relevant because it played out on the terrain of the War on Poverty itself, and particularly in terms of debates over the contentious Culture of Poverty framework. The article concludes that critical engagement with the Collection can facilitate important new scholarship on Chicago's Puerto Rican community. [Keywords: Chicago, Culture of Poverty, ethnography, gender, racial formation, War on Poverty]

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## Introduction

**On April 15, 1966, in the midst of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, a Roman Catholic nun named Janet Parmalee got off a plane in Chicago.** Raised in the suburbs of the Windy City, Parmalee was returning, after several years of missionary work in southern Mexico, to lead one part of an ambitious, multi-site research project investigating the ways in which different racialized groups in the United States responded to poverty. She would spend the next fifteen months living in the West Town neighborhood on the city's near northwest side, meticulously documenting the growing Puerto Rican population.<sup>1</sup> Parmalee's research team produced an evidentiary record—nearly three thousand pages of ethnographic field notes, interview transcripts, and reflective essays—that provides a unique window into a pivotal period in the development of Chicago's Puerto Rican community.

Parmalee eventually left her order and married, taking her husband's surname and becoming Janet Nolan. I met Nolan in 2011, and we quickly became friends. Over the subsequent years I worked with her to find an archival home for her papers. Today, this cache of documents is officially known as the "Janet Nolan Ethnographic Research on Puerto Ricans in Chicago Collection." It resides at DePaul University's Special Collections and Archives, ensuring that it will be permanently held in Chicago and accessible to scholars once it is properly processed. The Collection tracks crucial historical processes and events, including: the growing concentration of the previously dispersed Puerto Rican population in the West Town and Humboldt Park neighborhoods; the starkly increasing poverty of the community and its changing ethno-racial self-perception; popular responses to the three-night-long Division Street riots of June, 1966; and the development of key community organizations like the Spanish Action Committee of Chicago (SACC) and the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO). Most importantly, it documents the quotidian struggles of ordinary people in the face of intransigent liberal bureaucracies, replete with small joys and sometimes larger sorrows.

This article describes the Nolan Collection, contextualizes its production and subsequent use in terms of the history of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago as well as the War on Poverty, and argues for a careful and critical engagement with the voluminous amounts of information contained within it.

Here, I suggest that the prior example of contentious debates among historians of slavery over the proper usage of ex-slave narratives produced during the 1930s can help guide scholarly interaction with the Collection. In this context, it is no coincidence that the slave narrative debates emerged within the same War on Poverty context that generated Parmalee's research itself. Nonetheless, while the comparison is instructive, there are unique facets to consider in the case of the Nolan Collection that have no prior parallel. Real problems will face scholars who wish to utilize the Collection, but within reasonable parameters, the benefits of such usage will far outweigh any downside.

Fifty years after Janet Parmalee began her research, the arrival of this special issue of *CENTRO Journal* is reflective of the modest boom currently under way in scholarly studies of Puerto Rican Chicago, past and present. The Nolan Collection holds the potential to dramatically reshape how the community is understood and represented by scholars today and in the future.

#### **Puerto Rican Chicago in the 1960s: Dealing with Displacement**

After two decades of growth and deliberate geographic dispersion, Chicago's Puerto Rican community in the middle part of the 1960s was rapidly being concentrated in a small number of neighborhoods, mostly on the near northwest side of the city. What had begun as a targeted and temporary labor migration immediately after World War Two, ballooned into a sizeable but precarious permanent population, increasingly dependent upon government assistance to offset the uncertainty of employment and the near-inevitability of poverty wages should work even be found. Puerto Ricans initially gravitated to Chicago because of its booming postwar economy, both in the service sector but also and especially in steel and other heavy industry sectors. By the end of the 1950s, however, the jobs boom had been more than offset by the simultaneous domestic migrations of Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and white Appalachians to the Windy City, suppressing the initial wage gains. Over the course of the 1960s, moreover, the process now known as deindustrialization began, as more and more businesses shifted their industrial production to lower-wage regions like the deep south and the Mexican borderlands regions (Wilson 2012). Compounding the problem, Puerto Ricans in Chicago routinely lacked access to stable, high quality affordable housing, which meant many families moved frequently, not only within neighborhoods but throughout the city. In addition, as Lilia Fernandez has indicated, "Puerto Ricans thus found themselves repeatedly displaced by urban renewal, highway

construction, and public housing projects that spurred them into neighboring white working-class areas” (2012: 132–3).

By the 1960s, Puerto Rican migrants had established a small network of community groups focused on improving conditions of life for the migrants and their children, many of whom had been born or mostly raised in Chicago. The Caballeros de San Juan, with assistance from the Cardinal’s Committee on the Spanish-Speaking of the local Roman Catholic Archdiocese, was the most prominent and well-established group organized along these lines. Their approach was generally collaborative rather than confrontational, focusing on practical projects like the creation of a credit union, and on religious and/or cultural events. Felix Padilla, who detailed the work of the Caballeros in his pioneering study *Puerto Rican Chicago*, argues that they “sought the elusive but ultimate goal of equality by means of accommodation” (1987: 136). The local office of the Migration Division of the Puerto Rican Department of Labor was similarly engaged, if inconsistently, in such efforts, especially regarding employment. As Gina Pérez has suggested, “Although the [Migration Division] office was initially established to orient migrant workers and help them secure employment, promoting Puerto Ricans’ gradual integration into their new social and cultural context quickly became the agency’s principal goal” (2004: 68). For the most part, however, the migrants themselves took responsibility for their own struggles without regard to traditional organizational structures and without much outside assistance or support.

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By 1966, many Puerto Ricans had relocated to Chicago’s West Town neighborhood on the near northwest side of the city. West Town during this period was a community in transition and thus demographically unstable. Beyond the growing concentration of Puerto Rican families that inspired the research project in the first place, references abound in the Nolan Collection to African American, Italian, Mexican, and especially Polish neighbors. The neighborhood had previously been overwhelmingly Polish, and many of the property owners were still Polish, even though they owned and in some cases

lived in buildings where most tenants were Puerto Rican. Earlier in the postwar period, Puerto Ricans themselves had been, in Lilia Fernandez's phrase "racially unknown to most Chicagoans" (2012: 8), but by the 1960s they were increasingly understood less in ethnic terms (comparable to Italians or Poles) and more as a separate racial group (like African Americans).

It was in this context that the War on Poverty reached Chicago's Puerto Rican community. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was the main federal agency responsible for most War on Poverty programs, but it delegated significant authority to local governments. Following the Economic Opportunity Act that had established it, the OEO strongly encouraged a general policy of "maximum feasible participation" (1964: § 202(A)(3)) by the people directly receiving services. This formula generated significant friction in the implementation of the War on Poverty in ways that varied greatly from place to place. In the context of New York, for instance, Sonia Song-Ha Lee (2014) has detailed the collaborative and largely successful efforts of African American and Puerto Rican community groups to gain control of local OEO-funded initiatives. In Chicago, the situation was starkly different. Conflicts between the OEO and local agencies was chronic, and appears to have impeded much local activity at least through 1966 (Mann 1966: 36–44). According to sociologist Jill Quadagno:

**Community action, as OEO defined it, was absent in Chicago. [Mayor Richard J.] Daley's machine kept tight control of the city's antipoverty programs, run through the Chicago Committee on Urban Opportunity (CCUO) with Daley serving as its ex-officio chairman. CCUO was administered by Deton Brooks, a Daley appointee and local black bureaucrat who delegated little authority. All the neighborhood antipoverty centers displayed 2x2 foot pictures of Daley and Brooks with signs identifying the centers as part of city government. CCUO's version of community organization was from the top down. (1994: 53–4)**

Research-focused projects appear to have constituted an exception to this arrangement, which allowed a complicated consortium, including the University of Notre Dame, the City College of New York, and private foundations, to establish a highly ambitious multi-site research project that operated independently of the Daley machine. To gain a better understanding of how different racialized groups dealt with poverty, research centers were created in six different communities across three cities, as described in a UPI

wire service article: African Americans in New York and Washington, DC, white Appalachians in DC and Chicago, and Puerto Ricans in Chicago and New York (*Florence Times-Tri-City Daily* 1968: 17 April).<sup>2</sup> Parmalee's primary contact was a sociologist at Notre Dame named William T. Liu, though she sent all the documentation her team compiled to the renowned sociologist Bernard Lander in New York, while keeping carbon copies for her own files.

### **Beginnings and Parameters of the Research Project**

Parmalee began her work in April, 1966, by renting a small apartment, opening a storefront office roughly one block north and one block west from the intersection of Division Street and Damen Avenue in the West Town neighborhood, and hiring a small staff of local Puerto Rican university students and bilingual whites like herself. Not unlike the Puerto Ricans with whom she worked, Parmalee herself experienced some difficulties living in West Town, specifically in terms of finding secure housing: she was evicted from her first apartment after less than three months and moved a few times before eventually settling into a small unit attached to the storefront office. She also had to maintain an odd deception: the project supervisors, Liu and Lander, were worried that a Catholic nun wearing a habit would be unable to gain the confidence of neighborhood residents whose participation was crucial to the project's success. Thus, Parmalee was instructed to wear "civilian" clothes and present herself as a single woman.<sup>3</sup> This requirement was perhaps less burdensome than it might seem: nuns in Mexico had long been prohibited from wearing religious attire, so Parmalee had not worn her habit in several years. Parmalee's eviction might be seen to confirm the fears expressed by Liu and Lander, given that her conservative Polish landlady was apparently uncomfortable with the semi-regular visits to her tenant's apartment by nuns in religious attire, believing they should remain in convents rather than walking the streets.

Initially, Parmalee and her co-workers were instructed to complete a comprehensive census of the surrounding blocks, a task that involved door-knocking and brief interviews with residents and business proprietors/employees. This process was completed relatively quickly and helped heighten visibility in the community for the University of Notre Dame Community Information Center (CIC), as the research project's storefront office was known. Unfortunately, records of this census were not retained in the copies kept by Parmalee, though descriptions of the process appear in field notes

during the spring and summer of 1966. The census helped ensure that neighborhood residents knew the location of the CIC office and increased the number of people who felt comfortable visiting to ask for assistance in dealing with problems at the Welfare office, their children's schools, or with police, prosecutors, and landlords. Parmalee and her co-workers would frequently accompany people on subsequent visits to various bureaucratic offices, a process they termed a "walk-through." In many cases it appeared that having professional-looking outside witnesses (and especially white witnesses) improved the outcome of such encounters. The team kept detailed case notes on all walk-throughs and on the overall circumstances of different families, filed alphabetically, so that if issues recurred, the paperwork was readily available from prior efforts.

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Nonetheless, the design of the project focused on research, not on action. In this sense, it echoed earlier efforts to investigate the problems faced by Puerto Rican migrants to Chicago, including a never finished project sponsored in 1953 by the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago, and a later report published in 1960 by the Chicago Commission on Human Relations (CCHR). The Welfare Council project lambasted the new arrivals as "a back country people with virtually no comprehension of American mores and limited capacity to comprehend them" (Welfare Council Records, Box 147, Folder 10). The CCHR report, by contrast, dispassionately if condescendingly investigated "the migration of Puerto Rican Americans to the mainland and more specifically their adjustment to the 'way of life' of the big industrial urban colossus that is Chicago" (Chicago Commission on Human Relations 1960: i). While there is no evidence that Parmalee or her supervisors were aware of either effort, they certainly helped lay the groundwork for the later research project.

Taken as a whole, the documents produced by Parmalee and her co-workers represent a dense and informative take on fifteen months in the composite life of a significant segment of Chicago's Puerto Rican community. The sheer volume of documentation is impressive, amounting to just under 3,000 typed pages, mostly single-spaced. Generally, three different types of

documents can be discerned: 1) case notes focused on specific individuals and families, detailing conflicts and struggles around welfare, schools, landlords, and others; 2) ethnographic field notes authored by Parmalee and her associates, documenting their impressions of the community, its residents, and particular events; and 3) transcripts of recorded interviews conducted with neighborhood residents. The interviews were normally recorded on reel-to-reel tape and then transcribed by a part-time office assistant; the tapes were not preserved but the transcriptions survived and provide some of the most informative details found in the Collection.

### **The Collection: Three Examples**

Certainly, the population described and analyzed in the Nolan Collection is in important ways unrepresentative of Chicago's Puerto Rican community as a whole during the mid-1960s. Since the purpose of the research project was to examine responses to poverty, it is predictable that relatively few professional class Puerto Ricans appear. The absence of references to labor unions suggests that even the stable working class segment of the community is underrepresented. The focus instead is on the most precarious classes and, secondarily, on those social workers and community activists who regularly interacted with them. Stories of misery tend to predominate in ways that can obscure the vitality and cultural resilience of the community. While the sheer volume and diversity of material precludes a comprehensive summary of the contents here, three examples from the Collection help illuminate the general contours: the Division Street Riots, the narrative of a single mother on welfare, and the emergence of the Latin American Defense Organization.

Parmalee and her associates regularly wrote personal reflections and narratives of their experiences. While most of these dealt with the daily grind of work on the project, they also sometimes included immediate written responses to major events. This was the case, for instance, with Parmalee's essay "War on Division Street," written on the first night of the Division Street Riots: Sunday, June 12, 1966. The riots took place the same weekend as the first Puerto Rican Day Parade downtown, which in turn was timed to coincide with the annual Puerto Rican carnival held in Humboldt Park. An extended eyewitness account of the beginnings of the conflict, "War on Division Street" is peppered with impressionistic details that appear nowhere else in the subsequent literature on the riots. Thus:

A dark Puerto Rican in a blue shiny suit and hat was standing on the Police car, trying to tear off the hood and there were shout [sic] through the crowd, "The police car! The police car!" Then a police ring notebook found in the car went flying two stories up into the air along with police pads and slips of paper which came fluttering down among the crowd. One youth turned over the refuse basket and gathered together some of the papers to start a fire. Fire. Suddenly the police car was on fire. The crowd backed away and got strangely silent. There were muttered comments: "Now they've really done it." "We want freedom," a woman's voice said in English. "No policeman will ever ride that car again." (Nolan Collection 12 June 1966)

Parmalee's account represents a unique perspective on the riots, while also raising questions about the identity and actions of the "dark Puerto Rican." Father Donald Headley, who worked extensively in Chicago's Puerto Rican community during the 1960s, witnessed this same event and claimed subsequently that the man in the blue suit was a plainclothes police officer (Schultz and Schultz 2001: 427).

On the second and third days of the riot, Parmalee and her co-workers recorded and transcribed interviews with more than two-dozen neighborhood residents in their teens and twenties, asking about the causes and consequences of the conflict. A number of people claimed to have been present during the bar fight that led to the police shooting of Aracelis Cruz, which was the initial catalyst for the riots. Others, especially younger community members, relayed rumors of outside agitators they had heard in the hours after the shooting, such as the claim that Puerto Rican gangs from New York had instigated much of the violence, or in a pseudonymous "Interview with Robin, Batman, and Zorro" that white Appalachians, "the hillbilly people," "were coming over to mess up the carnival" (Nolan Collection 14 June 1966).

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Many of the interviewees pointed to the long history of police abuse directed at Puerto Ricans specifically. In fact, direct personal experience of police misconduct was nearly universal among those Parmalee interviewed.

“I assure you,” said one young man, “no one can live in Chicago for eighteen years and not have problems with the police” (Nolan Collection 14 June 1966). Parmalee and her associates also translated and transcribed written material produced in the midst of the riots, including a flyer signed by two ministers attempting to calm the community on the third day of the riots: “This is the moment that we (Puerto Ricans) can demonstrate that we have capacity to solve all the problems without violence” (Nolan Collection 15 June 1966). While the Spanish original is not included in the Collection, the transcription helps document the approach taken by more moderate forces in the face of the riots. Nonetheless, the overwhelming distrust manifested among those interviewed is hardly surprising. The shooting of Cruz was merely the latest in a long sequence of incidents of police brutality targeting the local Puerto Rican population. As far back as 1960, in surveys conducted by the Chicago Commission on Human Relations (CCHR), an overwhelming majority of Puerto Rican respondents indicated that they “felt that they are being discriminated against by the Chicago police” (Chicago Commission on Human Relations 1960: 52). While the precise percentage is not noted, it was apparently “much higher” than the fifty-nine percent who believed that they were treated differently in general because of their status as new migrants.

But the conversations recorded by Parmalee and her colleagues during the week of the riots went well beyond the specifics of the riot and conflicts with the police, often touching on general issues of race relations. Another man suggested that “the problem is that the white[s] treat him [the typical Puerto Rican] like a Negro and the Negroes treat him like a white and we don’t have any place to go. (No status.) We are a race without color” (Nolan Collection 14 June 1966). In this and similar comments, several of those interviewed by Parmalee indicate a clear awareness of the ongoing process of racial formation through which the local Puerto Rican community was being transformed in unanticipated and unpredictable ways. The experience of being “in-between” echoes the prior experiences of both Mexicans and immigrants from Europe (Barrett and Roediger 1997).

As with race, the role of gender in the formation of Chicago’s Puerto Rican community comes into clearer focus through an examination of the Collection, in part because much of the most valuable material is focused less on well-known events and more on the trials and tribulations of specific families. In March 1967, for instance, Parmalee recorded a ninety-minute interview during a home visit with Raquel Crespo, a mother of three young

children (ages three, two, and six months), whose husband abandoned the family when he left Chicago roughly a year earlier.<sup>4</sup> The 18 page, single-spaced transcript is accompanied by a one page introduction, written by Parmalee, that questions the woman's sincerity, her fitness as a parent, and her eligibility for welfare assistance. It notes that "Raquel was sharp with the children and slapped them frequently in the face and on the hands when they bothered her." The introduction also mentions an abusive stalker who "threatened Raquel with disfiguration of her face if she tried to leave him and go back to Puerto Rico" (Nolan Collection 10 March 1967).

In the interview itself, Crespo details the indignity of being a single mother on welfare. She repeatedly utters the phrase "for one we all pay," lamenting the fact that the bad behavior of isolated individuals on welfare makes the system suspicious of all recipients. She also criticizes the double-standard the city's Department of Public Assistance applied to women, who are expected to be perfect mothers, as opposed to men, who are assumed to be absent fathers: "there are some of us [mothers] who are just like the men. If they abandon their children there will be some women who will do it also." In a classic example of bureaucratic inflexibility, Crespo was penalized for having moved out of a roach-filled apartment without providing advance notice to her caseworker. For eight weeks she did not receive any money from the City and had to support herself and her children by going into debt and (apparently) engaging in some unspecified criminal activity. "I went through shameful moments and it was a bad ... bad ... bad ... bad time. ... Those two months were hell." In the end, however, Crespo asserts, "I'll tell you the truth, I am better off with welfare than with my husband" (Nolan Collection 10 March 1967). In spite of all her difficulties, Crespo's awareness of her own agency is unmistakable. She and others interviewed in the Collection emerge, in Eileen Findlay's apt phrasing, "as artisans of the word, literally authors of their own lives" (2010: 165). Crespo's subsequent story is unknown, but this interview preserves her unique perspective.

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Many scholars of Chicago's Puerto Rican community have paid particular attention to questions of gender in migration, but material like the Crespo interview provide a different lens that can augment prior work. Thus, for instance, Mérida M. Rúa (2012: 38–45) has detailed the controversy over welfare dependency among Puerto Ricans that erupted in Chicago a dozen years before Parmalee's arrival in West Town. Rúa recounts the efforts of the city's Welfare Commissioner to discourage and even reverse migration from the island, using tropes that presaged some of the criticisms made by Parmalee against Crespo. Similarly, Maura I. Toro-Morn has argued that "one very important aspect of labor migration should include the work of women who migrate and do not necessarily join the labor force, but stay and do the reproductive work that supports families and immigrant communities" (1995: 713). Toro-Morn focuses on married women in migration, but her insights in this regard could apply to women like Crespo as well, single mothers outside the labor market whose role in the reproductive labor of their communities is both crucial and under examined.

While the stories of individuals predominate, the Nolan Collection also highlights the emergence of a new generation of community activist groups in the aftermath of the Division Street Riots, several of which deliberately identified themselves as pan-Latino. In particular, the Collection documents the early growth of the Latin American Defense Organization (LADO), which was founded in the fall of 1966 by a group of young Puerto Rican and Mexican activists. By the following spring it had grown into an active force in the neighborhood. LADO activists, including at least one former welfare caseworker, helped organize recipients demanding better and faster service from the Department of Public Aid. In May of 1967 they staged a disruptive picket demonstration at the neighborhood office that is described in multiple documents. One of Parmalee's colleagues witnessed the protest and described signs that read "Hunger knows no color" and "LADO wants justice" (Nolan Collection 25 May 1967). Parmalee herself interviewed a public aid recipient who had witnessed the confrontation while waiting for an appointment with her caseworker and claimed that the director of the local office called the protestors "dogs," while also noting that before the protestors left, "welfare officials finally gave one woman \$100" (Nolan Collection 18 May 1967). A leading member of LADO was arrested, and reports from his trial detail both the broad support of the group in the community and the intransigence of the authorities in the face of newly militant protest strategies.

LADO also produced at least one issue of a newspaper, timed for release on the day of the Puerto Rican Parade in June of 1967, and the Collection contains a multi-page transcription of its content, though it is unclear whether the original paper was published in English or in Spanish. The lead article began:

**This is the first issue of our newspaper. Of your newspaper. Meant for you and written by your friends about your problems – and offering solutions. LADO, the Latin American Defense Organization, is growing – growing stronger, gaining experience, winning support, acting while others talk. Ten months ago LADO was a hope and an urgent need. Now it is more – real; it is people demanding building repairs from slum landlords; it is a welfare check instead of only delay and humiliation; a job; a man falsely accused and defended by a LADO lawyer; a boycott of stores which take our money but don't hire our people; common understanding; and common problems of people (Latin American) – and also of black and white people who live as our neighbors and work at our sides.**

The paper recounted LADO's organizational successes, such as the woman who received Public Aid money at the picket the previous month, as well as an ongoing rent strike in the neighborhood. It also criticized more conservative approaches to social change, such as the idea that “we must be careful to respect authority and never anger the politicians and administrators and must do things through the proper channels” (Nolan Collection 12 June 1967).

In the history of Chicago's Puerto Rican community, LADO appears to be among the first organizations to draw directly upon the strategic approaches associated with the Civil Rights Movement. The group's emergence in the spring and summer of 1967 predates the arrival of the Young Lords Organization (YLO) as a political force in the nearby Lincoln Park neighborhood the following year. Lilia Fernandez (2012: 188–98) has documented a number of collaborations between the two groups in the late 1960s, but the Nolan Collection suggests that LADO might have been a specific source of inspiration for the YLO, which routinely used similar rhetoric in its own newspapers.

None of these three examples is any more “typical” of the content of the Nolan Collection than the others. But together they suggest the flavor of the overall Collection. Parmalee and her associates were concerned with both daily life and key events, and their writing mediates the way in which readers experience the perspective of neighborhood residents. At the same time, the interviews and newspaper transcriptions included in the Collection created

opportunities for those perspectives to be expressed directly in an open-ended fashion. This tension reflects one of several problems scholars will encounter as they delve into the Nolan Collection.

### **The WPA Narratives: An Imperfect But Instructive Parallel**

How should scholars approach and utilize the Janet Nolan Ethnographic Research on Puerto Ricans in Chicago Collection? One highly instructive parallel that can guide the attempt to answer this question is the usage that has been made, by historians of slavery, of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers Project Slave Narratives, produced in the 1930s. The Narratives were the result of over 2,000 interviews conducted with older African Americans in seventeen different states. While the originals are held at the Library of Congress, the Narratives (along with others produced during the same era by researchers unconnected to the WPA) were subsequently collected and published in a 41 volume series edited by George Rawick, *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*. Over the past five decades, dozens of scholars have made extensive use of the Narratives, most recently the historian Edward Baptist in his acclaimed 2014 book, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Other historians, most prominently John Blasingame, author of *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, have deliberately refused to draw on them, citing a range of problems.

Without overstating the case, several initial similarities between the WPA Slave Narratives and the Nolan Collection are worth noting: both were produced under the auspices of top-down liberal reform efforts aimed at reducing economic hardship (the New Deal and the War on Poverty, respectively); both were largely, though not exclusively, the result of interactions between white researchers and informants of color; both feature a mix of interview transcriptions and interpretive field notes or summaries; and both represent, in sheer quantity, a small but significant portion of the total available textual evidence concerning their respective objects of historical inquiry. As a result, an analysis of the future prospects of the Nolan Collection can be illuminated by examining the extensive debates among scholars of slavery over the past several decades on the validity and problems of the WPA Narratives.

Since the late 1970s, even the most vocal proponents of drawing on the WPA Narratives have acknowledged a wide range of pitfalls involved in their use. Some, including the problems of long-term memory in light of the decades-long gap between the experiences of slavery and the interviews

themselves, do not apply to the Nolan Collection, which focuses on topics that were entirely contemporary to its production (Spindel 1996). Others, however, appear potentially more troubling in their applicability. This is especially true regarding the power imbalance and societal distance between the interviewers and interviewees.

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There are both real similarities and profound differences between the production of the WPA Narratives and the Nolan Collection, when considered in terms of relations of power. One minor difference concerns language transcription and dialect. Scholars have repeatedly criticized the use of exaggerated black dialect in the Narratives, noting that it calls into question the fidelity of the narratives to what the interviewees actually said, while undermining the intelligence and authority of the ex-slaves. But if anything the opposite problem exists in the Nolan Collection. Many of the interviews appear to have been conducted and recorded in Spanish and then both translated and transcribed into English. When interviews were conducted in English, Nolan and her colleagues in many cases attempted to “clean up” the typically imperfect spoken diction and syntax of English Language Learners, by transforming it into near-flawless standard written English. In both situations, the translation/transcription process muted the very sorts of dialect and colloquialism that were often exaggerated in the WPA narratives. Both the narratives and the Nolan Collection feature interviewers who at some level mediate the expressions of their informants. This parallel is especially clear when considering those WPA narratives that are edited summaries of discussions rather than careful transcriptions of actual statements, alongside the field notes and case notes prepared by Parmalee and her associates. This hardly invalidates either the Narratives or the Collection as a whole, but it should be kept in mind when drawing on them as historical evidence.

The most damning criticism of the WPA Narratives concerns the demographics of the interviewers, who were largely white. Blassingame, probably the foremost skeptic regarding the evidentiary value of the WPA Slave Narratives, argues that

**The first and most important question one must raise about these sources is whether the interview situation was conducive to the accurate communication and recording of what the informants remembered of slavery. In this regard, it should be noted that black interviewers were virtually excluded from the WPA staffs in all the southern states except Virginia, Louisiana, and Florida. Discrimination in employment led to a distortion of information, since during the 1930s caste etiquette generally impeded honest communication between southern blacks and whites. (1977: xliiii)**

In its most extreme form, this problem is reflected in the fact that some interviewers were the children or grandchildren of slaveholders who had owned the interviewees prior to emancipation.

The grotesque intensity of this power disparity has no equal in the case of the Nolan Collection, which was not produced under Jim Crow conditions in the living shadow of slavery itself. Nonetheless, Parmalee's subject position as white woman, interviewing and observing Puerto Rican migrants in a white-run city in the midst of the Civil Rights era, clearly represents a power imbalance that bears consideration. As with the relative handful of African American WPA interviewers, several of Parmalee's research associates were Puerto Ricans born and raised or residing in the West Town neighborhood. Still, there is always some disconnect between researchers and those they research, often based in differences of class if not those of race or gender. In a context of urban poverty this disconnect carries an implied power imbalance that could stymie honest and meaningful communication in precisely the ways Blassingame suggests.

In the case of Raquel Crespo, for instance, Parmalee's Puerto Rican co-interviewer suggests that Crespo "put on a great act for our benefit" (Nolan Collection 10 March 1967). Of course this sort of comment raises multiple issues all on its own: while historians still too often treat claims made in oral history interviews as simply factual, this sort of caveat suggests the limits of such credulity. At the same time, the skepticism of the interviewers is itself cause for concern, as it suggests that the researchers held some bias against Crespo herself, likely based on her identity as a Puerto Rican woman and/or a single mother. This

may have emerged from the class differences between the two Puerto Ricans involved in the interview, with Parmalee's colleague potentially embarrassed by Crespo. In this regard, Crespo's interview, and the Nolan Collection generally, exemplify what Alessandro Portelli has labeled the "partiality" (1998: 73) of oral sources, which "are always the result of a relationship, of a shared project in which both the interviewer and the interviewee are involved together, if not necessarily in harmony" (1998: 70). Thus, individual scholars will have to reach their own conclusions on the evidentiary value of Crespo's words, as translated and transcribed by Parmalee's team.

### **The Culture of Poverty, Scholarship on Slavery, and the Nolan Collection**

There is another, more complicated aspect to the parallel between the Nolan Collection and the WPA Narratives. Historians of slavery began turning to the WPA Narratives in the specific context of the War on Poverty, whose ideologues themselves drew upon an earlier generation of historical writing on slavery, creating a cycle that directly impacted the production of the Nolan Collection itself. In the late 1950s, the influential historian of US slavery Stanley Elkins published *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, which drew a striking analogy between plantation slavery and the Nazi concentration camps. Elkins argued that chattel slavery was so brutally oppressive that it completely eradicated African cultural elements in black communities and destroyed independent initiative among slaves. In the early 1960s, the sociologist Nathan Glazer penned an introduction to the second edition of *Slavery*, helping popularize key aspects of the argument. In Glazer's words, the slave "was totally ignorant of and completely cut off from his past" (1963: ix). "In the United States," he argued, "there are simply no 'survivals' from African culture" (1963: ix). And, "where the slavemaster wielded absolute power, the slave became absolutely dependent" (1963: xiii). While subsequent scholarship on slavery has thoroughly repudiated these conclusions, they were widely accepted in the 1960s.

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*They surged to prominence in large part because they offered one of the only fully developed theories of poverty apart from explicitly Marxist approaches.*

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Glazer and his frequent collaborator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, became widely known as key intellectuals of the War on Poverty, despite their own significant reservations about the OEO's approach and in particular its formula of "maximum feasible participation" (Moynihan 1969). They surged to prominence in large part because they offered one of the only fully developed theories of poverty apart from explicitly Marxist approaches. Thus, as Annelise Orleck has put it:

**The War on Poverty, with its 'faith that progress is possible,' was both driven by and limited by the twentieth century's most powerful and influential explanatory framework for poverty: the idea that the poor remain poor because they are mired in a 'culture of poverty' – pathological behavior patterns that reproduce poverty in each generation. (2011: 22)**

Their framework was built most centrally on the maneuver of extending Elkins' thesis into the mid-twentieth century. Moynihan was the primary author of the influential 1965 study *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, which quotes extensively from Glazer's introduction to Elkins' *Slavery*. Moynihan popularized the phrase "tangle of pathology" to describe what he saw as African American social dysfunction resulting from the damaging legacy of slavery, and concluded: "it was by destroying the Negro family under slavery that white America broke the will of the Negro people" (1965: 30). The crux of the Glazer/Moynihan position was that slavery had replaced patriarchal with matriarchal structures in the black family, leading to incapacity and dependency.

While Glazer and Moynihan officially limited this analysis to African Americans, they offered strikingly similar assessments of Puerto Rican migrants to New York, in terms of family structure and the risk of dependency. In their 1963 book, *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*, they argue that "Puerto Rico was sadly defective" in developing "a rich culture and a strong family system" (1963: 88). For Glazer and Moynihan, these defects, combined with what they claimed was a high level and quality of services provided by the Migration Division, result in a situation where

**it may very well be that it is because the Puerto Rican group has been so well supplied with paternalistic guidance from their own government, as well as with social services by city and private agencies, that it has not developed powerful grass-roots organizations. (1963: 110)**

These claims clearly reflect the influence of the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, who developed the concept of a Culture of Poverty in the late 1950s. Lewis (1965) subsequently used the framework to explain the failure of Puerto Rican migrants in the mainland US to escape difficult economic conditions.

In the midst of the War on Poverty, and in the specific context of research on Puerto Ricans coping with poverty, it should hardly be surprising that some of Glazer and Moynihan's, as well as Lewis's, conceptualizations became absorbed as a sort of common sense by Parmalee and her research associates. Nolan later recalled having read Lewis's work, but indicated she had disliked it because "the people didn't seem human somehow" (pers. comm.). Her supervisors on the project encouraged her to read Herbert J. Gans' 1962 study *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*, as a way to highlight the elements of ethno-racially bounded urban working class communities that were worth examining. Gans rejected some but not all of the paternalistic interpretations of Glazer, Moynihan, and Lewis. In terms of family structure in particular, he sided with Elkins, Glazer and Moynihan in describing both black and Puerto Rican family structures as "matrifocal" (1963: 239), due in part to the legacy of slavery.<sup>5</sup> To what extent then, did unexamined preconceptions about family structure and matriarchal dependency influence the interview with Raquel Crespo? Further examinations of the Nolan Collection should account for the impact (however subtle) of these theories on the interpretations embedded in the field notes and case notes. While different in obvious ways from the Jim Crow attitudes that clearly skewed the WPA Narratives, the Culture of Poverty approach represents a form of white paternalism that contemporary scholars must confront.

Nonetheless, if we need a reminder of the potential value of the Nolan Collection, we need look no further than Herbert Gutman, whose exhaustive 1976 monograph, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925*, was one of the earliest high-profile books to draw extensively on the WPA Slave Narratives. In the introduction, Gutman acknowledges explicitly that he was "stimulated" (1976: xvii) to write his book by concerns about the racial politics of Moynihan's report. Gutman offers an extended criticism of Elkins' theories of isolation and dependency under slavery, concluding that "Enslavement was harsh and constricted the enslaved. But it did not destroy their capacity to adapt and sustain the vital familial and kin associations and beliefs that served as the underpinning of a developing Afro-American culture" (1976: 465). Alongside plantation records and census data, Gutman uses the WPA Narratives to

support his argument that black family structures were maintained under slavery and after emancipation. In similar fashion, it will almost certainly be possible for scholars to make use of the Nolan Collection precisely to counter the still-lingering legacy of Glazer, Moynihan, and Lewis.

There is one other crucial difference between the WPA Narratives and the Nolan Collection. While evidence is limited, it appears that the mostly white WPA interviewers held on to their racial paternalism just as firmly once the Federal Writers Project had been terminated as they had before it began. Parmalee, by contrast, was clearly transformed by her year and a half of research. Her experience in this regard is hardly unique; it roughly parallels that of a group of Maryknoll nuns expelled from Guatemala in 1967 under suspicion of being involved in subversive activities (Fitzpatrick-Behrens 2004). Nolan remains in Chicago, dedicating herself to Latino-led campaigns for bilingual education and to Latino civil rights more broadly. She helped found Inter-American Magnet School, a dual language public elementary school on the north side of Chicago (Zucker 1995). And, as described in more detail below, she testified against the Chicago Police Department as part of a lawsuit against police spying. Nothing in the historical record surrounding the WPA Narratives suggests that any interviewers were similarly transformed by their work on the Narratives.

What, then, is the proper scholarly stance with regard to the Nolan Collection? The literary scholar Saidiya V. Hartman, who uses the WPA Narratives extensively in her 1997 monograph *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, argues compellingly that “writing the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamation of archival material for contrary purposes” (1997: 10). In the case at hand, this means utilizing the Nolan Collection as part of the continuing scholarly effort to reframe the history of Puerto Rican Chicago away from the conceptual legacy of War on Poverty and the Culture of Poverty. As scholars explore the Nolan Collection further, Hartman’s guidance regarding the Narratives can give us some suggestions about how to move forward in uncertain terrain:

**With all this said, how does one use these sources? At best with the awareness that a totalizing history cannot be reconstructed from these interested, selective, and fragmentary accounts and with an acknowledgment of the interventionist role of the**

interpreter, the equally interested labor of historical revision, and the impossibility of reconstituting the past free from the disfigurements of present concerns. (1997: 11)

### **Conclusion: Re-discovery and a Permanent Home**

In the summer of 1967, Parmalee and her co-workers were notified that their employment was being terminated after fifteen months, even though it was originally designed to last several years. They never received any close-out feedback, and it appeared that the overall multi-site research project had been abandoned. A year later, however, a brief news report in the *Chicago Tribune* described the overall project as “still going on,” and even suggested a provisional conclusion: “Mass attacks on poverty will fail unless they are adaptable to local conditions” (7 April 1968). In the end, however, no final report was ever published. Afterward, Parmalee moved on with her life, eventually leaving the Maryknoll order, marrying James R. Nolan and giving birth to two daughters, on whose behalf she eventually began advocating for bilingual education in the Chicago Public Schools.

It is perhaps fitting that police misconduct, which figures so prominently in the Collection itself, was the key to its eventual preservation. In the mid-1970s, Nolan became aware of the growing “Red Squad” scandal that implicated the Chicago Police Department in political spying and attacks on progressive movements and organizations. What is now called the Nolan Collection contained contemporaneous evidence of police disruption aimed at the Spanish Action Coalition of Chicago, and Nolan subsequently became a key witness in the civil lawsuit filed by SACC against the City (*Chicago Tribune* 22 June 1984). When she testified at trial in 1984, Nolan and her papers came to the attention of Felix Padilla, a sociologist then researching what would become his second book, *Puerto Rican Chicago*, published in 1987. Nolan gave Padilla access to the Collection, and his book quotes from it in describing the Division Street riots. After that, it went back in a box in Nolan’s closet for another quarter-century.

Fast-forward to 2011: while in graduate school I read *Puerto Rican Chicago* and became obsessed with the tantalizing prospect of “over 3,000 written pages of field notes” (1987: ix) mentioned in the acknowledgements. This struck me as a potentially crucial primary source that had not been utilized in any of the subsequent scholarly work on Chicago’s Puerto Rican community. After a few false starts, and with helpful assistance from archivists at the University of Notre Dame and the Maryknoll Order, I managed to make contact with Nolan, still living on the north side of Chicago. She agreed to

meet with me, and very generously allowed me access to the Collection, which eventually featured prominently in two chapters of my dissertation.

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*DePaul was chosen in part because it already had a sizeable number of holdings documenting the Puerto Rican experience in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s (specifically in Lincoln Park), and because it places special priority on encouraging undergraduate students to make use of their archives.*

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Nolan and I became friends, and we worked together to prepare the Collection for donation to DePaul University, including the drafting of an autobiographical sketch that fills in many details of her life both before and after the research project. DePaul was chosen in part because it already had a sizeable number of holdings documenting the Puerto Rican experience in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s (specifically in Lincoln Park), and because it places special priority on encouraging undergraduate students to make use of their archives. Special Collections and Archives staff are currently conducting the significant work of preparing the Collection for scholarly access. This will involve extensive redactions necessary to protect the privacy of the individuals identified in the case files, like Crespo and many others; human subject protections in 1966 were apparently not up to contemporary standards. If all goes according to schedule, the Janet Nolan Ethnographic Research on Puerto Ricans in Chicago Collection should be available to researchers sometime in 2016, right around the fiftieth anniversary of its creation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, any biographical information on Janet Parmalee Nolan and the research project that she led comes from Janet Nolan, “An Autobiographical Sketch” (Nolan Collection). As of this writing, the Collection is still being processed, and no filing system has been finalized. Thus, instead of references to boxes and folders, I have included the date of each document cited for the benefit of future researchers.

<sup>2</sup> It has proven remarkably difficult to track the official record of the overall research project of which Parmalee led one component. Even a formal name has proven elusive.

<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Parmalee’s experience, Fitzpatrick-Behrens (2004) argues that being recognized as a nun provided a form of invisibility that was central to the work of Maryknoll women in Guatemala during this same period.

<sup>4</sup> Raquel Crespo is a pseudonym. As indicated in the conclusion, one aspect of processing the papers for scholarly access at DePaul will be redacting names and other identifying information.

<sup>5</sup> Gans (2011) eventually developed strong criticisms of the Culture of Poverty approach in general and of the Moynihan Report in particular.

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