

‘Agrarians or Anarchists?’ The Venceremos Brigades to Cuba, State Surveillance, and the FBI as Biographer and Archivist

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In the late 1960s, as thousands of Americans traveled to Cuba to evaluate the nation’s evolving revolutionary process, the FBI launched a surveillance campaign designed to prove that travel to the communist island by US citizens represented a threat to national security. Focusing on the FBI’s investigation of the Venceremos Brigade, a radical humanitarian organization that sent delegations of Americans to Cuba as volunteers for agricultural and construction projects, this article evaluates the FBI’s claims that Cuba was indoctrinating leftwing Americans with revolutionary theory and training them in guerrilla warfare. But while state surveillance was intended to criminalize the Venceremos Brigade in legal terms and demonize it within the popular imaginary, it failed to reveal any prosecutable evidence of criminality. Instead, the FBI’s efforts inadvertently transformed it into the group’s clandestine biographer, as agents produced a substantial archive of print material on the group. Amassing thousands of pages of surveillance, including rare pamphlets and ephemera, the FBI’s unofficial archive unexpectedly confirmed the liberatory and humanist aspirations of the brigade. Although there is a dearth of scholarship on the Venceremos Brigade, the longest-lived Cuba solidarity organization in the world, the FBI’s files remain the most extensive archive on the group ever produced, surpassing any university’s holdings. Files on the Venceremos Brigade illustrate the manner in which counternarratives can surface even within the body of the state’s archives on grassroots political movements, narratives that are potent enough to challenge the power of the state’s evidence deployed against them.

In the fall of 1969, a transnational activist organization from the United States called the Venceremos Brigade burst into public consciousness, drawing media coverage by sending a delegation of some two hundred leftwing volunteers to the Republic of Cuba—an intentional violation of the US ban on travel to the island by American citizens—to support the Caribbean nation’s political self-determination and socialist development.¹ There they worked side-by-side with Cuban students, farm laborers, urban volunteers, and government officials, including Fidel Castro himself, as well as volunteer brigades from across the Third World. The Venceremos Brigade drew participants from the multifaceted US left, including the antiwar, New Left, Black Power, labor, and women’s movements, and incorporated Puerto Rican activists from the northeast and members of the Chicano/a movement from the Southwest and California. Its delegations provided US leftwing activists with an opportunity to evaluate the historical process of the Cuban Revolution firsthand and to support the nation’s initiatives in the provision of universal healthcare and education in addition to subsidized housing and food.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) quickly took note, describing the group as a collection of “radicalized American youth, all sharing pro-Castro sentiments and opposing what they term U.S. imperialism.”² That spring, Senator James O. Eastland, the anticommunist and segregationist crusader from Mississippi, took to the Senate floor to lambast the group in a widely covered speech entitled “The Venceremos Brigade—Agrarians or Anarchists?”³ The US State Department also expressed its concerns, contending that the “symbolic brigades” of American radicals had been “used by the Cuban government to score propaganda points with both domestic and overseas audiences.”⁴ Yet it was the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that took the most sustained interest in the group. Conducting a massive multidecade surveillance campaign, the FBI eventually produced at least twenty-three thousand pages of files on the group.⁵ By the mid-1970s, as the Venceremos Brigade continued to send yearly delegations of activists to Cuba, the FBI claimed that the Caribbean nation had become the primary foreign inspiration for US social justice movements. “For the youthful revolutionary,” one Bureau report contended, “a new model of successful revolution existed—Havana.” Instead of the Old Left’s gaze toward the Soviet Union, there now existed “another center of world revolution ... that would rival Moscow and Peking.” Havana, the FBI concluded, was where US radicals could “learn at first hand how to create revolution.”⁶

In the imaginary of the American security state, Cuba thus became the new epicenter of global revolution for the 1960s era and the primary foreign benefactor of the US multiracial left. These transnational engagements between Cuba and the Venceremos Brigade, as well as allied formations such as the Black Panther Party and the Weather Underground offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), would become preoccupations of the FBI in the coming years, as key US officials charged that ties between the burgeoning multifaceted US left and Havana represented a threat to American internal security. But while state surveillance was intended to criminalize

the Venceremos Brigade in legal terms and demonstrate that its activities represented a threat to the stability of US society, the FBI's investigations failed to produce prosecutable evidence. No members of the Venceremos Brigade appear to have been convicted of crimes stemming from their transgressions of the ban on travel to Cuba. Instead, the FBI's documentation efforts inadvertently transformed it into a kind of clandestine biographer, as the bureau's agents produced a substantial and detailed archive of print material on the group.

Examining the investigative apparatus arrayed against the Venceremos Brigade, this essay first evaluates the way that notions of "foreign influence" informed state surveillance efforts in ways that mirrored extant anticommunist anxieties while also pointing to the emergence of new concerns, ones that were informed by the increasingly global orientation of many American social justice movements during the late 1960s. The purported foreign origins of domestic radicalism, according to the FBI, while not a new trope within the long history of the Cold War, were nevertheless refracted through the particular concerns of the US state during this era of unprecedented social upheaval. As American radicals increasingly framed their demands for social justice in global terms, looking abroad to the decolonizing world for inspiration, political theory, and usable history, US officials too perceived street protests and rising militancy through a transnational gaze, ever cognizant of the global terrain on which the destabilization of the domestic social order was occurring. For US radicals and FBI analysts alike, Cuba's evolving Third World socialist experiment, more than the Soviet Union or China, now represented the most potent global locus of radical theory. Recorded in thousands of pages of classified documents and amassed within surveillance archives, the FBI's files on the Venceremos Brigade sought to prove that travel to Cuba by American activists amounted to a conspiracy to transport Cuban radical ideology into the United States.

Yet the FBI's prolific documentation of the activities of the Venceremos Brigade also revealed unintended ambiguities within the state's narrative. As American law enforcement and security agencies sought to contain domestic political protest in the late 1960s by linking it in the popular imaginary to foreign radicalism, so too did state surveillance sometimes seem to inadvertently amplify the liberatory claims of the social movements themselves. This article contends that while the FBI's production of surveillance files on the Venceremos Brigade was intended to demonstrate that the group posed a threat to national security, the actual files, which contained voluminous material testifying to the group's work as radical humanitarian organization engaging in volunteer agricultural and construction work in Cuba, often created an inverted mirror image of the group's self-fashioning as a radical internationalist solidarity organization. The FBI's files on the Venceremos Brigade, like state documentation projects aimed at other leftwing movements of the 1960s era, illustrate the at times ambivalent nature of state narrative-making. Intelligence files on the Venceremos Brigade suggest the manner in which counternarratives can surface even within the body of the state's archives on grassroots political movements, narratives that are

sometimes potent enough to challenge the power of the state's evidence deployed against them.

FBI files devoted to the Venceremos Brigade, like state investigations directed at other social movements of the long 1960s era, demonstrate the punitive capacity of the state to mobilize surveillance as a subterranean narrative-making project in the face of perceived ideological threats, but also its limits as a project of containment. Indeed, many FBI surveillance campaigns of the 1960s era produced trails of clandestine documentation that have since proven useful to scholars seeking to construct historical accounts of left radicalism.⁷ Nonetheless, state surveillance files have been understudied in their function as repositories of political dissent in their own right. Moreover, the FBI has been undertheorized in its role as both a punitive archivist of social movements and an unauthorized biographer of dissidents. Although they must be read with a critical eye, state surveillance records can yield insights about the relationship between state, popular, and academically generated scholarship on social movements. Locked away in storerooms, the bureau's classified files on social movements might be seen as a vast and subterranean incarcerated archive, one that can be paroled to the public record, and thus collective historical memory, by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) after it has been determined by review that the release of the information poses no remaining danger to the state.

While the Venceremos Brigade, which continues to send delegations of Americans to Cuba every summer as of this writing, is the longest-lived Cuba solidarity organization in the United States, it has only recently received significant scholarly attention.⁸ Given the relative dearth of scholarship, the FBI's extensive documentation of the Venceremos Brigade is notable as the largest known collection of documentary material on the group. Nonetheless, as a kind of unauthorized biography, the collection, which includes surveillance material, analysis, and commentary by FBI officials, is also notable for the way that it inadvertently reproduces some of the organization's self-representations. While the internationalist aims of the Venceremos Brigade sought to refashion domestic social justice praxis in the late 1960s into a hemispheric and global project through engagement with the Cuban Revolution, the FBI's portrayals of the group's putative danger to the security of the US state were also framed in global terms. Perceiving the Venceremos Brigade as a vector for the transmission of Cuban revolutionary theory into the American body politic, the FBI's files and reports on the group often emphasized the potential for transnational dialogue, symbolic solidarity, and political collaboration between Cuban revolutionaries and North American progressives and radicals to influence positive change within the domestic order. Framing the Venceremos Brigade's work in these terms, the FBI engaged in its own form of state transnational imagining that created a shadow image of the Venceremos Brigade's grassroots internationalism.⁹

Cuban Revolution, US Left

The FBI has not been alone in perceiving the Cuban Revolution as a formative influence within the multiracial US left of the long sixties era. Scholars of these social movements have long observed that Cuba's 1959 revolution was among the key global forces that helped energize the rise of a New Left within the United States, a constellation of movements that had become, by the mid 1960s, increasingly invested in examining and learning from revolutions, anticolonial struggles, and leftwing political movements in the Third World.¹⁰ Growing socialist and communist formations in interwar America, which crested in the 1930s, had been fragmented by state repression during the McCarthy era. By the mid 1960s, however, Marxist theory, and indeed the theory of communism itself, had regained credibility within some radical leftwing movements in the United States. This time, the liberatory appeal of socialism and applied Marxist theory emanated not from the Soviet Union, whose promise of communism had been besmirched in the public mind by totalitarianism, but from the rising Third World.¹¹ For many American radicals, the ideals of socialism, imagined as an alternative modernity constituted from principles of egalitarianism and radical democracy, shone most brightly from nearby Cuba. As a number of scholars have shown, the island's 1959 revolution captured the imagination of global leftwing and anticolonial movements, and in doing so, helped realign the US left toward the Third World geographically, and toward socialism ideologically, in ways that would have a significant impact on the political movements of the long 1960s era.¹² As scholar Fredric Jameson has argued, the Cuban Revolution "announce[d] the impending 60s as a period of unexpected political innovation rather than as the confirmation of older social and conceptual schemes."¹³

US black radical activists and intellectuals were among the first to recognize the significance of the Cuban Revolution, particularly its antiracist claims. Several dozen traveled to the island during the late 1950s and early 1960s to evaluate the unfolding revolution for themselves.¹⁴ Prominent black intellectual and literary figures including LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse, and John Henrik Clarke declared their solidarity with the emergent government or joined the Fair Play for Cuba Committee.¹⁵ Robert F. Williams, an advocate of black armed self-defense against the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan in North Carolina (who later accepted formal political asylum in Cuba in 1961 after being pursued by the FBI on spurious kidnapping charges) initially described Cuba as a "shrine of hope ... three weeks of the only freedom I have ever known."¹⁶

Cuba's resonance within the black radical left endured throughout the decade. Visiting Cuba in 1967 as a guest of Fidel Castro, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) activist Stokely Carmichael told a Havana audience that the increasingly internationalist civil rights organization that he helped lead in the American South looked "upon Cuba as a shining example of hope in our hemisphere."¹⁷ The public and state backlash was swift, with the State Department pledging to confiscate Carmichael's passport for violating the US ban on travel to Cuba, presaging

concerns within the State Department and the FBI regarding travel to Cuba by other American activists two years later.¹⁸

The Venceremos Brigade's efforts to incorporate divergent elements of the era's social change movements under the internationalist banner of "Third World solidarity" drew upon a groundswell of interest in the Cuban Revolution among the multiracial US liberal and leftwing public, which had followed the trajectory of the island's revolutionary transformation with pointed interest. By 1969, key American organizations within the largely white New Left had radicalized just as radical political and cultural movements in communities of color spread across the nation, giving rise to what scholar Cynthia A. Young and others have called a "U.S. Third World Left."¹⁹ With the movement against the Vietnam War near its highest ebb, the ideological tenets of Cuba's revolution, including its internationalist foreign policy and its socialist domestic programs, were increasingly congruent with those of the multifaceted US left. Indeed, many American activists increasingly looked out at the world in search of political inspiration and usable histories of resistance to militarism, racism, colonization, and the inequities encouraged by capitalism.²⁰

As one Venceremos Brigade member suggested, it was precisely this global gaze that had precipitated the group's formation: "We, who participated in the civil rights movement, the battles for self-determination of Black, Chicano, Native American and Puerto Rican People, the student protests, the antiwar movement, the fight for women's liberation, could never again be convinced that our society could be healed without deep and fundamental change. We began to look outside the borders of the United States toward those who were already building societies of justice, equality and human dignity: we were ready to learn from their examples."²¹

For many such activists of the sixties era, the search for both usable histories and a global radical theory that could aid them in reimagining domestic social justice struggles in global terms led them to Cuba. With the Venceremos Brigade's first travel contingent to Cuba in December of 1969, the group became the most visible and broadest-based expression of US leftwing interest in the Cuban Revolution. While the Venceremos Brigade initially arose out of the disarray of SDS, as the group's members searched for a way to simultaneously invigorate the flagging New Left while also shifting the substantial social energies generated by the ferment of the Vietnam War era toward a focus on the wider Third World, the participants and organizers of the Venceremos Brigade were, within a few years, distinctly multiracial in composition, drawing together a range of participants from across the era's multifaceted social justice movements.²²

Carmichael's censure in the United States for his sojourn to Cuba in 1967 and his public embrace of the Cuban Revolution and its figurehead, Fidel Castro, was the prelude to a period of increased official scrutiny of leftwing American travelers to Cuba, an area of inquiry that would reach a high point with the FBI's investigations of the Venceremos Brigade. When Senator Eastland took to the Senate floor in the spring of 1970 to condemn the Venceremos Brigade, he claimed that it represented a conduit

for the dissemination of Cuban communism into the United States. “We want our people to be aware of the direct chain,” the senator warned, “which reaches from Cuba into our cities, our campuses, our conventions, our lives—and which threatens the life of this Republic.”²³ Although Cuba’s ostensible danger to the United States was most often imagined in military terms, in large part due to the Caribbean nation’s strategic alliance with the Soviet Union and the still vivid trauma of the 1962 October Missile Crisis, Senator Eastland’s jeremiad against the Venceremos Brigade illustrates an additional, less recognized dimension to US foreign policy perceptions of Cuba. For some American officials, the communist island’s threat to the United States was not only military, but ideological. Cuba, they warned, was bent on deploying Marxist and anti-imperialist revolutionary theory inside the United States to subvert the American body politic from within. American dissidents who traveled to Cuba during the late 1960s thus became lightning rods for fears that the American Left was being influenced by foreign powers, anxieties that were frequently echoed in the tabloid press.²⁴

The anxieties projected upon the Venceremos Brigade were therefore transnational in their composition and were always framed in geopolitical terms. In the gathering tempest of social tumult and political upheaval characterizing the United States during the late 1960s, the Venceremos Brigade’s open embrace of communist Cuba appeared as a perfect storm of collusion between domestic radicals and foreign enemies. The globally informed suspicions of the US intelligence and foreign policy establishment made it possible to justify surveillance and harassment against the brigade in ways that mirrored well-known campaigns targeting other social movements of the 1960s era. The FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program, for instance, popularly known as “Cointelpro,” which sought to disrupt civilian opposition to the Vietnam War and to destroy key elements of the African American freedom struggle and other domestic political movements, deployed a variety of repressive tactics against leftwing activists.²⁵

In an era of rising social unrest, the Venceremos Brigade crystalized fears within US officialdom that Cuba was training Americans in the dark arts of guerrilla warfare, pamphleteering, and citrus tree planting, while recruiting them as spies for Havana. As American activists coalesced with Cuban officials and global leftists, including Vietnamese National Liberation Front representatives, American officials warned of the perils of allowing impressionable youth to consort with communists and revolutionaries in a foreign country. As an indication of the risk, the State Department pointed to a number of high-profile American radicals, including members of the Weathermen Organization and the Black Panther Party, who had participated in protest actions in the United States after their meetings with Third World revolutionaries in Cuba. As one State Department official put it: “Name any disturbance in the United States—on campus, in the streets, anywhere—and I’ll name you the leaders of it who have been to Cuba.”²⁶ The FBI’s campaign to discredit the Venceremos Brigade thus emerged amid a climate of significant official anxiety

regarding the global ties, both real and imagined, of US protest movements, which had grown large enough for the federal government to regard as a genuine threat to the social order.

Literary Dissent in the State Archive

If domestic social upheaval during the American sixties era drew from global influences, as the FBI hypothesized, then “influence” was most often conceptualized in ideological terms. For the FBI, exposing the perils posed by the Venceremos Brigade’s transgressions of the US travel ban required demonstrating that the group’s participants and organizers were adherents of a particular subversive ideology. In this sense, the Bureau’s investigation of the group demonstrated significant continuity with anticommunist investigations of previous decades.²⁷ In many such campaigns, state agents constructed a kind of literary archive on the work of a particular activist or organization, in which written records demonstrating the unsavory ideas of a person or an organization were collected and catalogued by state agencies. In this regard, the scholarship of Carole Boyce Davies is particularly instructive for illuminating the relationship between the state’s archive and political dissidents. As Boyce Davies illustrates in her research on Claudia Jones, a Trinidad-born black radical journalist who was deported from the United States in 1955 as a result of her leadership in the Communist Party USA, federal prosecution of American communists and other dissidents during the Cold War era was frequently constructed around “literary evidence,” in which the state collected a dissident’s writings and speeches as proof of an individual’s intellectual subversion.²⁸

In its investigations of the Venceremos Brigade, FBI reports endeavored a similar literary review of the group’s pamphlets, articles, and organizational statements, as the Bureau sought to demonstrate the brigade’s adherence to Cuban revolutionary theory. The FBI sought to produce a body of literary evidence against the brigade through a variety of methodologies. Agents analyzed brigade literature and press accounts, conducted direct physical surveillance of individuals in public, and intercepted their mail. Most valuable, however, was the testimony of informers. Like a number of other leftist organizations in the late 1960s, the brigade had been infiltrated by local law enforcement and state intelligence entities, including police departments and the FBI, whose files on the brigade are filled with redactions protecting the identity of its informants. Well aware that their activities were being covertly scrutinized, the brigade’s organizers encouraged non-cooperation with law enforcement, but to no avail. Although some brigade pamphlets included advice on what to do if contacted by investigators, transcriptions of the guidelines were subsequently reproduced in FBI reports.²⁹

The FBI’s amassing of a punitive archive did not always require direct surveillance or clandestine methods. Indeed, much of the documentary evidence that was ultimately deployed against US radicals who traveled to Cuba with the brigade

was collected from the public domain. American sympathizers of the Cuban Revolution had long claimed that the ban on travel to Cuba was motivated in part by the US government's desire to prevent its citizens from witnessing Cuba's socialist society with their own eyes. Travel to Cuba, organizers of the Venceremos Brigade hoped, would allow Americans to breach the information blockade on the island, enabling them to reach their own conclusions about the revolution's merits or failures, free from the filter of the American media. Upon their return, some brigade members held public forums or wrote first-person accounts of their experiences that were sometimes published in the leftwing press. For US officials anxious to keep Americans from traveling to Cuba, first-hand accounts of life in Cuba not only jeopardized the state's attempts to impose limits on the ability of American citizens to learn about Cuba—and, by extension, socialism—but also became key evidence of the Venceremos Brigade's ideological subversion.

In this regard, the FBI's focus on the Venceremos Brigade paralleled earlier federal investigations of US dissidents who had traveled to Cuba. Almost a decade before the Venceremos Brigade earned the ire of Senator Eastland, journalist William Worthy, a foreign correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, had become a lightning rod for debates about constitutional freedom of association after he was indicted in 1962 for entering the United States from Cuba without a passport.³⁰ The State Department had earlier refused to renew Worthy's passport in 1957 after he had defied the US ban on travel to communist nations to report from China, the Soviet Union, and Hungary.³¹ Charged with violating the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, Worthy became the first American citizen indicted under its terms. His prosecution spawned widespread international protests to keep him out of prison.³² Paralleling the Venceremos Brigade's efforts to provide an alternative portrait of Cuban society within the US public sphere, Worthy's reporting from Cuba had created a textual bridge between the two countries, encouraging the early support that the Cuban Revolution enjoyed among the American liberal and leftwing public. Although Worthy's prosecution technically focused on his passport violation, mainstream press coverage and the investigation initiated by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, chaired incidentally by Senator Eastland, made the political subtext of the case clear, playing up Worthy's leftwing political connections and claiming that the journalist "displayed a marked hostility to the United States and its laws."³³ These aspects of Worthy's journalism and public pronouncements in support of the Cuban Revolution therefore became a key component of the body of state's evidence deployed against him, in ways that foreshadowed the FBI's interest in the Venceremos Brigade.³⁴

The Bureau and the Brigade

The Venceremos Brigade's self-fashioning as a solidarity organization acting in open support of the Cuban Revolution encouraged the FBI to create, through its documentation of the group's activities, an inverted mirror image of the group's

internationalism. In 1976, as the Bureau conducted an intense national investigation to apprehend members of the Weather Underground Organization, which had conducted a campaign of bombings against domestic targets associated with the Vietnam War,³⁵ the FBI emphasized both groups' connections to Cuba. For the bureau, the influence of Cuba and other communist nations such as Vietnam on the American radical left transformed the Weather Underground—and, by extension, the Venceremos Brigade, whose early delegations in 1969 and 1970 had included several members of the former—into internationalists whose violent actions could be ominously explained by the group's collusion with the interests of a foreign power. "The revolutionary who has committed his destiny under the banner of Marxism-Leninism," the FBI report argued, "establishes his identity with a world center of revolution (in this instance Havana)... He ceases to be merely 'domestic' when he adopts his international identity as a revolutionary."³⁶

By underscoring the global connections of American radicals, the FBI sought to reveal the way in which domestic social upheaval might be linked to the nation's foreign policy concerns, thus meriting greater scrutiny due to their implications for state security. As the 1976 report contended, "[t]he revolutionary acting in behalf [sic] of a foreign government in the political arena [should not] be classified merely 'domestic,' the implication being a status of lesser dangerousness."³⁷ Although the Weather Underground faction of SDS played little role in the actual formation of the Venceremos Brigade,³⁸ the FBI highlighted this footnote of the brigade's history in order to further criminalize the organization. "When the WUO initiated, planned and organized the Venceremos Brigade (VB) trips," the report claimed, "they did so with the encouragement and instructions of the Cuban government. The question of foreign influence can hardly be ignored when the purposes of the VB trips primarily served the national policy of the Cubans."³⁹

Paralleling the state's investigations of Claudia Jones and William Worthy, the FBI's scrutiny of the Venceremos Brigade's transnational radical praxis sought to demonstrate the presence of ideological subversion through an engagement with the group's literary production. While some written material about the brigade's activities was provided by informants, FBI agents also acted as amanuenses to monitor press reports and media stories, including those appearing in grassroots activist publications. An October 1973 report by the bureau included reproductions of advertisements that the Venceremos Brigade had placed in a publication produced by the Third World Women's Alliance, in which the brigade described itself as an anti-imperialist political education project. The brigade's self-portrayal of its engagement in public radical pedagogy became, for the FBI, evidence of particular interest. Transcriptions of Venceremos Brigade literature, often in the form of recruiting pamphlets, appeared in FBI reports as exhibits of the group's subversive ideology. The brigade's newsletter, *Turquino*, often contained a section devoted to "political objectives" that outlined the group's ideological perspectives and organizing principles. Typical goals for the group included "facilitating dialogue among different

U.S. movement groups ... educat[ing] the U.S. movement to an anti-imperialistic consciousness,” and “support[ing] and aid[ing] Cuban propaganda programs.” For the FBI, however, these directives served as evidence of the Venceremos Brigade’s efforts to engage in subversive activity through its relationship with a foreign power.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, counternarratives can survive even within the body of the state’s archive on political dissidents. Evaluating the FBI’s files on Claudia Jones, Boyce Davies observes that Jones’s extensive FBI file became, “ironically, one of the most significant of her biographical documents,” one that could ultimately refute the power of the state’s body of literary evidence deployed in its attack upon her. Although the state’s archive “sought to contain the life of Claudia Jones, the material itself is so powerful and so honest that it transforms these same files into a massive documentation project, producing instead of destroying its subject.”⁴¹

Many FBI files on the Venceremos Brigade similarly contain accurate representations of the group’s political commitments even as they are included within the surveillance reports for purposes of incrimination. As one report observed, quoting from a newsletter from the Center for Cuban Studies in New York: “[T]he VB is a year-round political education project which seeks to build anti-imperialist solidarity with national liberation struggles around the world through the Brigade experience in Cuba.”⁴² Although the Center for Cuban Studies is introduced in the FBI report as an organization “whose purpose is to propagandize on behalf of the Cuban CASTRO Government,” the report’s lengthy summaries of both organizations actually constitute an accurate depiction of their radical humanitarian praxis.

The regenerative and rehumanizing potentials of state surveillance, however inadvertent, are also apparent in a lengthy report on the Venceremos Brigade issued in 1973 as a result of the “Theory and Practice of Communism” hearings conducted by the House of Representatives Committee on Internal Security in 1972. The report, running almost four hundred pages and published in bound form by the US Government Printing Office, consists of several sections of informant testimony, witness statements, and a lengthy appendix of photos, diary entrees from informers, and reproductions of the brigade’s writings. The committee’s chair, Representative Claude Pepper of Florida, explained that the purpose of the hearings was to answer the following questions: “Did these Brigades consist of humanitarians who merely assisted the Cuban people in cutting sugarcane, building houses, and harvesting fruit? Or have citizens of the United States been imported by Castro to be indoctrinated in communist propaganda and the techniques of revolution? Do the Brigades constitute a threat to the internal security of the United States?”⁴³

In posing a series of contrasting questions, including one that seemed to proffer a possible humanitarian objective for the group, Pepper inadvertently left open the possibility that the brigades might have a benign purpose. Although the federal government had long juxtaposed the discourse of humanitarianism, which emphasized top-down charity and reified the legitimacy of powerful governments and institutions as a contrast to leftist goals of social justice and the reorganization of

society along egalitarian lines, the FBI's documentation of the Venceremos Brigade's activities revealed a slippage between these apparent binaries. In its transcribed testimony, the committee questioned several recently returned brigade members about the nature of the group's work in Cuba. The committee also asked brigade participants about fundraising, Cuban and foreign contacts in international volunteer camps, and the backgrounds of individual participants.

In one section of the report, the committee heard testimony from Dwight Douglass Crews, an informant working for the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office in Louisiana who, posing as a leftwing activist, had joined the brigade and traveled to Cuba with the group in the spring of 1972. Crews stated that while on the island, he and the other Americans had been assigned to work with a group of Cuban students to build a new town in the countryside. As Crews explained, "[t]here was a drive on within Cuba to provide houses for all of the people."⁴⁴ According to Crews, the housing development would be "a fairly large town with all types of facilities for people who were to live there." A quarter mile away, he said, a brigade composed of international youth volunteers from other nations was at work constructing a high school.⁴⁵ Photos reproduced in the report indeed show Crews and other American members of the Venceremos Brigade helping to construct concrete houses, with some Americans posing arm-in-arm with Cuban workers and Vietnamese volunteers.⁴⁶

Although intended to be incriminating, the photos and testimony contained in the report inadvertently confirmed the brigade's humanitarian mission of support for Cuban development in ways that mirror the group's own public representations of itself. Indeed, the committee's bound, book-like report bears some resemblance to the brigade's own edited collection of interviews, essays, diary entries, poems, and photographs, which had recently been published by a major press. Released by Simon and Schuster in 1971 as *Venceremos Brigade: Young Americans Sharing the Life and Work of Revolutionary Cuba*, the four hundred-page book, edited by a collective from the brigade, documents the experiences of Americans on the first three trips.⁴⁷ Although the committee's report may not have been compiled in response to the publication of *Venceremos Brigade*, the release of the report by the US Government Printing Office less than a year later suggests an effort to deploy a counternarrative to the brigade's successful articulation of itself in the public sphere as a radical humanitarian organization.

The brigade's political literature assumed another significance within FBI reports. Brigade members, the reports noted, viewed themselves as public defenders of the Cuban Revolution within the American public sphere. Viewing much of the mainstream press's coverage of the communist nation as tainted by Cold War journalistic bias and superpower hubris, the brigade sought to provide the American public with an alternate perspective on Cuba, one that was unabashedly anti-imperialist and prosocialist. Emphasizing the success of the revolution's social programs and condemning the US travel ban and trade embargo, brigade members conducted a public education campaign aimed at countering misrepresentations

about life in a socialist society. In its political literature, the Venceremos Brigade argued that socialism, far from making Cuban citizens the prisoners of a dictatorship, had instead allowed Cubans to attain a different kind of freedom, one in which universal access to education, healthcare, housing, leisure, and the arts had broadened the possibilities for human well-being even in the absence of US-style liberal democracy. While American interpretations of freedom tended to equate the concept with individual liberty and the right to participate in free markets, members of the brigade echoed the assertions of Cuban revolutionaries in arguing that freedom must also be defined using notions of collective good. According to a transcription of an internal brigade letter provided by an FBI informant in November 1971, educating the US public about the Cuban Revolution had now become the brigade's "primary political objective."⁴⁸ In disseminating political literature and holding public speaking engagements, the FBI contended that the Venceremos Brigade was developing itself into "one of the major vehicles in this country for disseminating information and propaganda on Cuba and the liberation struggles taking place throughout the underdeveloped world."⁴⁹

The trope of the Venceremos Brigade as a conduit for the spread of subversive ideas related to Marxism and Third World revolutionary theory inside the United States persisted in American media reports and law enforcement documents for years. US officials had long worried that contact in Cuba between American activists and visiting revolutionaries from Africa, Asia, and Latin America could have a radicalizing effect on the Americans. Many FBI reports display a particular preoccupation with meetings that occurred between American radicals and Third World revolutionaries in the international volunteer camps where the Venceremos Brigade stayed while in Cuba.⁵⁰ At the 1972 House Committee on Internal Security hearings, which were held in Miami and emphasized the brigade's public efforts to disseminate a favorable image of socialist Cuba inside the United States, witnesses described the organization's print material in similar terms. Miami television news editor Manolo Reyes, for instance, claimed that the brigade had achieved several goals, including serving as a "propaganda tool for Castro and international communism against the United States," bringing "revolutionary propaganda into the United States," and using the trips as opportunities for US activists to "increase their militant dedication through training, indoctrination, and some physical labor."⁵¹

As evidence, Reyes presented slides of three leaflets produced by the brigade's Chicago chapter. One, an invitation to a public screening of Saul Landau's 1968 film *Fidel*, featured a collage of photographs of Cuban citizens accompanied by the caption, "Who Are These People?" Underneath appeared the answer in block text: "They are the people of Revolutionary Cuba, who in 11 years have changed their country from a starving colony of U.S. imperialism into a land of 8 million people working together with incredible spirit and energy to build a new society—a society where survival is a human right and where the 'new man and new woman' can develop to their fullest human potential."⁵²

Conclusion

While FBI surveillance of the Venceremos Brigade was intended to criminalize the group, no members of the brigade were convicted of crimes related to their activities, including their open violation of the US ban on travel to Cuba.⁵³ News stories on the brigade, which sometimes cited police and FBI sources, seem also to have failed to provoke a significant atmosphere of public condemnation of Cuba. Indeed, the FBI's investigation of the Venceremos Brigade and the condemnatory pronouncements of politicians such as Senator James O. Eastland, who often drew from FBI and other government sources to make their accusations, directly preceded an era of growing public weariness with US policy toward Cuba, including the travel ban and trade embargo. The emergence of growing public support for the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two nations and the easing of travel restrictions amid the brief US–Cuba *détente* during the presidency of Jimmy Carter in the mid 1970s suggests that attempts to turn the tide of public opinion against engagement between American citizens and revolutionary Cuba were unsuccessful.⁵⁴

Nonetheless, while the FBI's efforts to establish prosecutable criminality or credible threats to US state security appear to have failed, the bureau's efforts instead accomplished something unintended: the production of a vast, largely secret archive of print material, transforming the FBI into a kind of unauthorized archivist. Although there has only recently been significant scholarly interest in the Venceremos Brigade, which remains to this day the world's oldest US–Cuba solidarity organization working to end the American embargo and travel ban, the FBI's amassing of tens of thousands of pages of surveillance files, which often include reproductions of the group's print culture, is likely the most extensive documentary project on the group ever produced, surpassing the holdings of any university archive.⁵⁵ Despite its incriminatory and defamatory intentions, the actual material contained within the FBI's files on the Venceremos Brigade's political activities constitutes a usable past, one that confirms the radical humanist and anti-imperialist commitments of the organization and provides precedents for principled transnational collaboration in the interest of social justice and national self-determination. Unable to completely suppress the counternarratives that developed within the files, the clandestine archives of the FBI serve dual functions as both catalogues of punitive evidence and archives of dissent. The FBI's archives on the Venceremos Brigade provide new avenues through which to understand the relationship between the political protest, state power, and narrative-making during the late 1960s era as a generation of US leftists sought to learn from Cuba's evolving socialist revolution during a period of intense social upheaval.

Notes

¹ The Venceremos Brigade's activities in Cuba received widespread media coverage in Cuba in newspapers, television, and radio, and repeated coverage in the US mainstream and leftwing

press. See, for instance, Juana Carrasco, “Arribaron a Cuba 216 jovenes norteamericanos que estaran 2 meses en la zafra,” *Granma*, December 9, 1969, 1; “So How Was the Skiing in Cuba?,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 25, 1970; Marta Perez, “My Labor Wasn’t Going to Enrich Some Capitalist,” *Claridad*, July 15, 1973.

² CIA, “Situation Information Report, Venceremos Brigade Update,” December 31, 1969, 2. Obtained via FOIA request by author, 2009.

³ “The Venceremos Brigade—Agrarians or Anarchists?” US Congressional Record, March 16, 1970, 7462–67; speech reported by *New York Times*, March 17, 1970.

⁴ US State Department, “American volunteers for PAIGC,” message to American Embassy, Lisbon, Portugal, June 26, 1973. Obtained via FOIA by the author, September 2010.

⁵ This figure was reported to the author by an unnamed representative of the FBI’s Record/Information Dissemination Section, speaking off the record, by telephone in December of 2009. The FBI has not provided a figure in writing and is not required to do so under the provisions of the FOIA. David M. Hardy, Section Chief, FBI, Record/Information Dissemination Section, Records Management Division, letter to author, January 16, 2018.

⁶ FBI, “Foreign Influence – Weather Underground Organization,” August 20, 1976, i, 80, 82.

⁷ See, for instance, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, *Black against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

⁸ See Ian Lekus, “Queer Harvests: Homosexuality, the U.S. New Left, and the Venceremos Brigades to Cuba,” *Radical History Review* no. 89 (Spring 2004): 57-91; Teishan A. Latner, *Cuban Revolution in America: Havana and the Making of a United States Left, 1968-1992* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Kavitha Iyengar, “The Venceremos Brigade: North Americans in Cuba Since 1969,” *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, 7, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 236-264. A number of personal accounts and treatments in periodicals also exist. See, for instance, Michael Kazin, “Cuba, Que Linda Es Cuba? Notes on a Revolutionary Sojourn, 1969,” *Dissent Magazine*, August 17, 2015; and Dick Cluster, “The Venceremos Brigade: A 60s Political Journey,” *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* 8 (Winter 2009): 30–31; Elizabeth Martinez, “The Venceremos Brigade Still Means ‘We Shall Overcome.’” *Z Magazine* (July/August 1999): 56–62. For a recent account of Cuba’s impact on US social justice activists during the 1960s era, including those of the Venceremos Brigade, see David L. Strug, “Witnessing the Revolution: North Americans in Cuba in the 1960s,” *International Journal of Cuban Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 68-87.

⁹ My use of the terminology of transnationalism, which here is generally concerned with processes and relationships across space, and internationalism, which here denotes a set of political commitments, borrows from Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way, “Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis,” *American Quarterly*, Special Issue: “Nation and Migration: Past and Future,” 60, no. 3 (September 2008): especially 637; and Robeson Taj P. Frazier, “Sketches of Black Internationalism and Transnationalism,” *The Journal of African American History* 96, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 231–35.

¹⁰ See Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che* (New York: Verso, 2002); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Cynthia A. Young, *Soul*

Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹¹ See Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*.

¹² See Kepa Artaraz, *Cuba and Western Intellectuals Since 1959* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Anne Garland Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018); Van Gosse, *Where the Boys Are: Cuba, Cold War America and the Making of a New Left* (New York: Verso, 1993); Latner, *Cuban Revolution in America*; Ruth Reitan, *The Rise and Decline of an Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999); Rafael Rojas, *Fighting over Fidel: The New York Intellectuals and the Cuban Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Todd F. Tietchen, *The Cubalogues: Beat Writers in Revolutionary Havana* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010).

¹³ Fredric Jameson, “Periodizing the 60s,” *Social Text* no. 9/10, (Spring-Summer, 1984): 182.

¹⁴ Devyn Spence Benson, “Cuba Calls: African American Tourism, Race, and the Cuban Revolution, 1959–1961,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 93, no. 2 (2013): 239–71.

¹⁵ The most complete history of FPCC is Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*.

¹⁶ *The Crusader*, August 13, 1960; April 29, 1961. The trajectory of Williams as an activist is examined by Timothy B. Tyson in *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Stokely Carmichael, Address to OLAS, published as pamphlet *Black Power and the Third World* (Third World Information Service, no date). For examinations of the relationship between the Cuban Revolution and the African American freedom movement, see Spence Benson, “Cuba Calls”; Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*; Sean L. Malloy, “Uptight in Babylon: Eldridge Cleaver’s Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 3 (June 2013): 538-571; Reitan, *The Rise and Decline of an Alliance*; and Sarah Seidman, “Tricontinental Routes of Solidarity: Stokely Carmichael in Cuba,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2012); and Young, *Soul Power*.

¹⁸ “U.S. to Lift Passport of Stokely Carmichael, *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 1967, 11. Carmichael’s engagement with Cuba is examined in Seidman, “Tricontinental Routes of Solidarity”; and Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely: A Life* (reprint, New York: Civitas Books, 2016).

¹⁹ See Young, *Soul Power*; and Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

²⁰ See, for instance, Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

²¹ “The Venceremos Brigade, 1974: Four Years Building Solidarity with Cuba,” *Cuba Va, Venceremos Brigade*, 1974, 2.

²² For accounts of the group’s origins, see Latner, *Cuban Revolution in America*; and Iyengar, “The Venceremos Brigade: North Americans in Cuba Since 1969.”

²³ “The Venceremos Brigade—Agrarians or Anarchists?” US Congressional Record, March 16, 1970, 7462–67; speech reported by *New York Times*, March 17, 1970.

²⁴ Among the best known is a sensational series run in the *Long Island Press*. See Georgie Ann Greyer and Keyes Beech, "Cuba, School for U.S. Radicals," *Long Island Press*, October 15, 1970.

²⁵ The FBI's campaign of repression against the Black Panther Party, which J. Edgar Hoover infamously singled out as the "greatest threat to internal security of the country," is the best documented, and there is extensive scholarship on the FBI's efforts to destroy the BPP. See, for instance, Charles E. Jones, "The Political Repression of the Black Panther Party 1966–1971: The Case of the Oakland Bay Area," *Journal of Black Studies* 18, no. 4 (June 1988): 415–34; Robyn Spencer, "Merely One Link in the Worldwide Revolution Internationalism, State Repression, and the Black Panther Party, 1966–1972," in *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution*, ed. Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009). See also David Cunningham, "The Patterning of Repression: FBI Counterintelligence and the New Left," *Social Forces* 82, 1 (September 2003): 209–40; Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 2001); and Ross Gelbspan, *Break-ins, Death Threats and the FBI: The Covert War Against the Central America Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1999).

²⁶ Greyer and Beech, "Cuba, School for U.S. Radicals."

²⁷ For instance, see Landon R. Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²⁹ See FBI, "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates and Brigada Venceremos," file no. NY 100-166943, October 16, 1972, 8–10; and "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates and Brigada Venceremos," file no. HQ 105-195696, September 28, 1973, 12–13. For a Brigade discussion of the importance of keeping FBI infiltrators out of the Brigade, see "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates and Brigada Venceremos," file no. NY 100-166943, June 7, 1971, 6–7. Obtained via FOIA by author, April 2008.

³⁰ "Worthy Surrenders on Illegal Entry," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 29, 1962, 1. See also Gosse, *Where the Boys Are*.

³¹ "Worthy to Face Passport Showdown," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 16, 1957, 1.

³² "Indictment of William Worthy," US District Court, Southern District of Florida, April 24, 1962. William Worthy Papers, box 10.1, Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University.

³³ US Senate, Internal Security Subcommittee, *Communist Threat to the United States through the Caribbean*, 87 Congress, 2 Session, 1961, 791.

³⁴ See Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and Jinx Coleman Broussard, *African American Foreign Correspondents: A History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013). Despite his journalistic legend and the ubiquity of his reportage in the footnotes of scholarship on the global civil rights era, Worthy has until recently been significantly under-examined as a historical actor in his own right.

³⁵ For an account of the Weather Underground's campaign, see Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oakland: AK Press, 2005).

³⁶ "Foreign Influence: Weather Underground Organization (WUO)." United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Chicago, Ill., August 20, 1976. File no. CG 100-40903, 2.

³⁷ "Foreign Influence: Weather Underground Organization (WUO)." United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Chicago, Ill., August 20, 1976. File no. CG 100-40903, 2.

³⁸ See Latner, *Cuban Revolution in America*, 31-34.

³⁹ "Foreign Influence: Weather Underground Organization (WUO)." United States Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Chicago, Ill., August 20, 1976. File no. CG 100-40903, 2-3.

⁴⁰ FBI, "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates and Brigada Venceremos," file no. NY 100-166943, February 14, 1972, 7. Obtained via FOIA by author, April 2008.

⁴¹ Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, 207-08.

⁴² See, for instance, FBI, "Venceremos Brigade (VB) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates, Brigada Venceremos," file no. HQ 105-195696-261, July 22, 1974, 3. Obtained via FOIA by the author, April 2008.

⁴³ House Committee on Internal Security, "Theory and Practice of Communism, Venceremos Brigade," hearings, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, October 16th, 18th, and 19th, 1972; 7820.

⁴⁴ House Committee on Internal Security, "Theory and Practice of Communism, Venceremos Brigade," hearings, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, October 16th, 18th, and 19th, 1972; 7857.

⁴⁵ House Committee on Internal Security, "Theory and Practice of Communism, Venceremos Brigade," hearings, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, October 16th, 18th, and 19th, 1972; 7858.

⁴⁶ House Committee on Internal Security, "Theory and Practice of Communism, Venceremos Brigade," hearings, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, October 16th, 18th, and 19th, 1972; 7858.

⁴⁷ Carol Brightman and Sandra Levinson, eds., *The Venceremos Brigade: Young Americans Sharing the Life and Work of Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971).

⁴⁸ FBI "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates and Brigada Venceremos," file no. NY 100-166943, February 14, 1972, 25. Obtained via FOIA by author, April 2008.

⁴⁹ FBI "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates and Brigada Venceremos," file no. NY 100-166943, February 14, 1972, 25. Obtained via FOIA by author, April 2008.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, FBI, "Venceremos Brigade (BRIGADE) aka American Brigade, C and C Associates, Brigada Venceremos," file no. HQ 105-195696, September 28, 1973. Obtained via FOIA by the author, April 2008.

⁵¹ House Committee on Internal Security, "Theory and Practice of Communism, Venceremos Brigade," hearings, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, October 16th, 18th, and 19th, 1972; 7825–6.

⁵² House Committee on Internal Security, "Theory and Practice of Communism, Venceremos Brigade," hearings, 92nd Congress, 2nd Session, October 16th, 18th, and 19th, 1972; 7826.

⁵³ If such convictions exist, the author has not been able to locate evidence of them.

⁵⁴ For public perceptions regarding the warming of diplomatic relations during the mid 1970s, see, for instance, Lars Schoultz, *That Infernal Little Cuban Republic: The United States and the Cuban Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); and William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

⁵⁵ Although the Center for Cuban Studies in New York maintained a large collection of materials on the Brigade as part of its Lourdes Casal Library until 2008, the FBI's files contain photocopies of many of these same materials.

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