Abstract

The Venceremos Brigade is an ‘anti-imperialist Education Project’ that began its travel to Cuba in 1969 to support and learn about the Cuban Revolution. On Venceremos trips, North American volunteers offer aid to Cuban government projects while touring the island nation and learning about both Cuba and revolutionary ideals. Participants in the projects are involved for both personal and political reasons, offering a model for productive political relations born of hostilities. Although its story remains undocumented within histories of both the US Left and US-Cuban relations, by 2015, the group had sent more than 9,000 North American activists to the island. Through reading newspapers from Cuba, Venceremos Press Publications in the US, and by listening to personal narratives, this article documents this important political education project that continues to model productive relations today.

Keywords: Venceremos Brigade, Cuba, US-Cuban relations, US Left, New Left, Cuban Revolution, socialism

As Cuba and the US approach normalised relations, the moment manifests with a presence that most US citizens have not experienced for decades. For most North Americans, the current shift is a complete turn from relations begun at the inception of the Cuban Revolution. In truth, this shift mirrors the work that the Venceremos Brigade has been realising for decades. I found the Venceremos Brigade among the weeds of the American Left, modelling a distinct and positive form of US-Cuban relations amidst a political context hostile to Cuba. Born from fraught relations, the Brigade has persisted throughout the period defined...
by negative relations and demonstrates how a productive politics can emerge from a politics of hostility: when mutual interests are involved. The current relational shift offers a new vantage point from which to reconsider US-Cuban relations – offering a space to explore the Venceremos Brigade.

The Venceremos Brigade was a political education project founded in 1969 by members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) along with officials of the Republic of Cuba. The Brigade continues to travel to Cuba today, and to date has sent more than 9,000 activists to the island (Sale 1973). Those who have participated in the Brigade have done so to demonstrate support for the Cuban Revolution/Government, foster socio-economic growth in the country, develop political and social consciousness, and learn about Cuba. ‘Brigadistas’ have traditionally demonstrated support and helped to foster growth on the island by participating in national sugar harvests or housing projects, all the while learning from the Cuban Revolution. Today, brigadistas continue to travel to Cuba and work on the island while learning of its politics and culture.

Having begun ten years after the 1959 culmination of the Cuban Revolution, this long-standing North American project of support for Cuba should be known. The group’s participants embody a recurring trend from the course of US history: North Americans negotiate the contradictions of the US’s proffered patriotism that simultaneously allows for institutionally marginalising certain subgroups of citizens. The Brigade’s participants demonstrate this historical tendency through their collective, demograph diversity – they represent a broad scope of the US along the dimensions of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. There is little written on the Venceremos Brigade within the pertinent historiographies – neither in the history of US-Cuban relations nor in the history of the New Left. The story’s importance and relevance become increasingly apparent as our present moment asks us to rethink our orientation towards Cuba.

The age into which the Brigade was born was one dominated by a fundamentally anti-Cuban narrative. The narrative was historically constructed, having begun long before 1959, and the story has only marginally changed since the culmination of Cuba’s communist revolution. Looking to Cuban-American policy today, we are entering a new policy arena, one governed by a decrease in hostility, a spirit of reconciliation, and fundamentally speaking, a future of productive relations between the US and Cuba. This is the US in which I read the Venceremos Brigade, not a US that was ruled by ‘an impulsive force calling for the invasion of Cuba and the overthrow of its government’ or a US ruled by ‘expansionism and industrialism – the territorial urge accompanied by a search for markets’ (Langley 1968, 185–186). Rather, I locate the Venceremos Brigade today, in an evolving political situation wherein the US president has begun to ease travel restrictions to Cuba, and diplomatic talks are transpiring between the
nations for the first time in more than half a century. From this grounding, I articulate an untold story.

Although productive relations persisted beneath relations of hostility between the US and Cuba for decades, the American Left did not share the story of the Venceremos Brigade, during an era when Cuba and Cuban activism caused for crisis. Groups would often suffer FBI investigation and organisational failures when making visible their support for Cuba (see the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) 2005). The current moment allows us to reimagine the American Left, broadening the scope to include aspects of Cuban activism long forgotten. Today, we can and should speak of the Venceremos Brigade, because the scope of Cuban-American relations is broadening, because the US requires an alternative relational model, and because documenting this collaboration is an important story to tell in and of itself.

All parties involved were interested in the Venceremos Brigade. Cubans were interested because they could frame the project as a national project that attracted North Americans away from the US’s imperfections. Many North Americans were interested because they could protest US policies and learn from a ‘Third World’, socialist revolution. White participants could access an authentic socialist revolution just 90 miles from home, participants of colour could identify with a Third-World liberation movement, and Cuban-Americans could rediscover their roots by travelling to the island in solidarity. The Venceremos Brigade, while embodying a form of positive Cuban-American relations, also embodies a protest against the US capitalist, imperialist, political structure and tradition (Pérez 2007). The Venceremos Brigade in the present moment is of importance, in that it models an example of positive relations to conceive of today. The story of the Venceremos Brigade, then, is one of the productive relations, mutuality and self-interest grounded in a tradition of ‘ally-hood’ between the American Left and Cuba.

During the 1960s, the North American social landscape was unique. Imagine the chaos and organisation that contradictorily dominated the political arena during the era: there were students protesting, nationalist groups advocating and ethnic groups organising for the purpose of recognition. In the midst of this landscape of protest, communism was upheld as an alternative ideology to US capitalism. Communism was also conceived as imperialist as it was practised by the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, so many on the Left remained open to more just alternatives. Drawn by the allure of an alternative in Cuba, individuals oppressed by US political and social structures sought to ally themselves with people who were likewise oppressed by the US. This would include international Third-World allies. Cuba became a natural space for US citizens to turn to, for both inspiration and refuge, problematising tensions in a divided US landscape.
of pro-socialist and anti-socialist ideologies. This is the moment into which the Venceremos Brigade was born.

To tell a proper history of the Venceremos Brigade, we must first understand what the Brigade was, who the people involved were, and the transnational context in which it occurred. Unravelling this history helps to answer a central question moving forward – does the Venceremos Brigade allow us to reconceptualise the current moment of Cuban-American relations? I challenge the Brigade's exclusion from the narratives of US-Cuban relations and the American Left. Its systematic absence forces us to think through the actors and reasons guiding its exclusion, from those two narratives and across nations. In 1969, the American Left positioned itself ideologically in the midst of Third-World and Cold-War politics, both of which influence the formation of the Venceremos Brigade. Furthermore, the US’ policies were oriented in opposition to Cuba militarily, economically and culturally with invasions, a trade embargo and travel restrictions. By thinking about the history of Cuban-American relations, it becomes clear how discourses of oppositional rhetoric interacted, and how the production of the Venceremos Brigade is both intelligible and incredibly distinct.

We read the story of the Venceremos Brigade in very few places. It is written in Cuban newspapers and in the North American participants’ written and oral accounts. Together, these paint a picture of the Brigade’s participants and experiences. Telling this untold story thus relies upon contextualising the accounts before focusing on the story and the different ways that individuals conveyed their experiences (both at the time in print and persisting today in memory). One of the sole means left to achieve knowledge of the Venceremos Brigade involves personal narrative. I offer a vision of the Brigade through individuals’ experiences, via the art they create and the stories they tell. The personal accounts present Cuba, the US and the Brigade through eyes and voices that experienced a form of Cuban-American relations that the US nation as a whole is beginning to witness and experience today.

In the following section, I examine the historical context under which the Venceremos Brigade developed.

Prologues to the Venceremos Brigade

One way that Cuba and the American Left were linked to each other was by North American travellers to Cuba and the Cuban government’s support of American leftist causes. This connection situates North Americans’ support for Cuba in the form of the Venceremos Brigade. North America’s leftist groups in the 1960s distinguish themselves from the Old through distinctive causes spanning beyond communism. The 1960s groups included identity groups and
student activists, many of whom claimed to have been inspired by the Cuban Revolution, and who often alluded to the island nation as a Third-World ally. However, discussion of an actual Cuban-American relationship (such as the Venceremos Brigade) rarely appears in leftist narratives and histories. The Venceremos Brigade, linked with many New Left organisations, in fact began with members of the SDS (Lillydahl Collection). Carl Oglesby, anti-war activist and former president of the SDS, is credited with conceiving of the trip.

The New Left consisted of diverse, radical North Americans who sought to challenge the US society, including some who allied with or travelled to Cuba, offering a path for us to follow between the US and Cuba. Those in the American Left were both interested and invested in Cuba and its affairs, supporting a Communist revolution just 90 miles from the US’s shores, while Cubans espoused support for North American radicals who were challenging US imperialism. For years, the activists contested North American hegemony in distinct ways oriented around disenfranchisement and disempowerment. Van Gosse, a New Left scholar, has defined the movement as a ‘confrontation’ with the social, political and cultural consensus in American life that emerged in the 1950s; they challenged ‘Cold War Liberalism’, ‘social inequalities’ and the ‘suburban affluent way of life’ (Gosse, *Rethinking* 2005, 5–6). These North Americans’ and Cubans’ mutual interests culminated in 1969 with the first Venceremos Brigade, simultaneously signalling the end of the SDS. The SDS, among New Left organisations, had become increasingly radicalised over the span of the 1960s, creating new organisations by the end of the decade. One of those organisations was the Venceremos Brigade.

The SDS embodies the vision of the New Left. Born at the cusp of the 1960s, the SDS functioned within a context of groups standing up to claim rights, remaining politically unrestful and questioning US influence abroad. The SDS as a student group sought to build responsible and democratic environments for the left within universities, as well as extend that intellectual influence into the politics and society of mainstream US (Sale 1973, 13). Founded in 1959, their two principal goals involved (a) challenging monolithic communism during the Cold War, leading to (b) insurgent protests seeking allies in international communist alternatives (Sale 1973, 92). By 1963/1964, local chapters conducted their own recruiting, wrote their own literature and planned their own activities. An anti-hierarchical structure was central to the SDS’s structural philosophy, and its persistence partially led to the demise of the programme. An anti-authoritarian structure was sensible for the students’ organisations and anti-war activism, and as the decade wore on, the SDS progressed and evolved ideologically.

The SDS brought a certain notion of war and militancy home. The Vietnam War could not remain singularly located abroad when students made visible the
war and its problems on US soil, through protest. Arrests, for example, fostered a feeling of revolution on US soil, where ‘revolution’ is conceptually integral for understanding the SDS both in isolation and in the context of the relationship between the American Left and Cuba. The group had dropped the draft as its central issue by 1968, shifting towards the issue of race. This shift to race was connected to a notion of an anti-colonial struggle transpiring in the US (Adelson 1972, 230), linking North American experiences to Third-World liberation struggles broadly. The term ‘Third World Marxism’ encapsulates this shift from US-centred activism to Third-World liberation alliances that occurred from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s (Elbaum 2002, 39). By this point, many North Americans of colour across the US were successful as activists, and the landscape of US activism into the 1970s became increasingly defined by activists of colour and Third-World Marxist movements.

By the late 1960s, the SDS was vast in size (with over 250 campus groups) and included hippies, Vietnam protesters, urban blacks, draft-resistance organisers, free university demonstrators, farm labour protestors, work-ins, among others. The expansive array of participants illustrates the fundamentally New Left ideology that the SDS embodied, in that its members held disparate desires and goals that came together along common axes. Looking to its fall, the shift towards Third-World liberation alliances failed to achieve a unified trajectory, causing the SDS to fracture amidst struggles between ideological anarchism and communism (Adelson 1972, 228). One of the offshoots included the Revolutionary Youth Movement I, whose Weathermen’s violent occupations and bombings are a famous example of the deterioration and reorientation occurring within the remains of the SDS. While there was a general fracturing of the SDS, those who had embraced Third-World Marxism continued to do so in alternative ways. We thus locate Cuba in the American Left and the SDS at this 1969 juncture, a connection that began in 1959 with the FPCC.

The Venceremos Brigade came from the SDS. The SDS had signalled its ideological inclinations by supporting a most radical challenge to the US’s Cold-War orthodoxy from its inception. Given an internationalist focus, Third-World Marxists favoured solidarity efforts with national liberation revolutions. Many SDSers, along with others in the American Left, had travelled to Cuba, both to meet with each other and meet Cuban revolutionaries, but the SDS’s trips to Cuba began to decrease during the mid-1960s under FBI pressures (Gosse 1993). Venceremos was not the first North American project that sought greater ties with Castro’s Cuba, then. A decade earlier, shortly after the revolution, another group of students travelled to the island, under the guise of ‘fair play’. The FPCC organised travel groups composed of North American activists visiting Cuba to express support for the Revolution and learn from the nation and its citizens.
connective role that the Venceremos Brigade plays between Cuba and the American Left is presaged by the FPCC, founded at the Cuban Revolution’s inception. FPCC, like the Venceremos Brigade, allowed North Americans and Canadians to travel to Cuba to learn about the country and express support for the nation’s revolution through a media campaign and travel under travel bans.

The SDS played a central role in the FPCC, which was offered as a positive campaign in favour of Cuban self-determination. North American journalists and liberals who admired Castro and his work with the poor in Cuba organised a Public Relations campaign in support of Cuba’s self-determination and fair treatment in 1960. Soon after the Revolution, the grassroots group sought to provide support for the Cuban Revolution beginning in New York City with an editorial in the New York Times. Published in the Fair Play pamphlet by the New York FPCC later that month, FPCC proclaimed its purpose to disseminate truth, combat untruth and reveal Cuba to the American public (Fair Play 1960a). The Committee was founded by 30 individuals concerned with the systematic bias against Cuba appearing in the US press. These individuals felt that Fair Play would benefit both Cuban and US citizens who mutually suffered from the lies involved in such representations (Fair Play 1961).

The FPCC grew to encompass dozens of chapters nationally (Gosse, Movements 2005, 13–14). These chapters disseminated information about Cuba and taught their audiences about the Cuban Revolution. Many FPCC chapters taught through personal experience, and tours of the island facilitated personal appeals (the largest in Christmas 1960 with 300 students). The objective of FPCC tours was to both (a) work on a project with Cubans, to create friendships and broader understandings and (b) provide an opportunity to assess the Cuban experiment of social reconstruction (Canadian FPCC 1964). Thus, the FPCC is an example of a precursor to the Venceremos Brigade and the goals of the two groups were largely the same. Balancing the ideological and practical context, what made FPCC so unique was that Cuba played both literal and metaphorical roles for those in the Press who founded FPCC along with the students who engaged with the island physically, through travel.

The committee did not close its offices until December 1963, according to the testimony by Vincent T. Lee in April 1964. In 1963, V.T. Lee resigned as the FPCC’s chair following revelations that he and Lee Harvey Oswald had been in communication. The fact that a US President’s death could be connected to a pro-Cuban group could not possibly bode well for the longevity of said-group in the US political context. Begun as a plea for fair treatment for the Cuban people, an advertisement in The New York Times on April 6, 1960 began a physical movement. The existence of a pro-Castro group during the contentious period of 1960 US indicates the great importance that Cuba held for the American Left.
specifically. This helps map out the relationship between Cuba and the US, with goals to bridge a relational gap that the Venceremos Brigade continues to strive towards. The FPCC planted a physical seed for Cuban sympathy, offered a model for travelling to the island to express that sympathy and demonstrated that the Cuban experience could teach tools for mobilisation.

Broadening to the SDS, Gosse links its demise to the ‘demise of the New Left’, from whose ashes the New Communist Movement ‘created a host of small, centralized organizations, each with a few hundred members, its own newspaper, and plans for infiltrating ...’ (Gosse, Movements 2005, 35). Like the better-known Weathermen, the Venceremos Brigade was another offshoot of the SDS begun in 1969. In Gosse’s The Movements of the New Left 1950–1975: A Brief History with Documents (2005), the Venceremos Brigade is excluded from the story. Its exclusion is curious, given that the Brigade began in 1969 and its membership consisted of every activist group that Gosse discusses in his history. Invisible are the stories of African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans, gay liberationists, and radical and lesbian feminists who all actively participated in the Venceremos Brigades.

That the Venceremos Brigade is not discussed as a natural outgrowth of the SDS is curious. One can propose multiple explanations given the many ways in which US bias towards Cuba disincentivised publicity. Hostilities and silences have created for the erasure of positive and mutually beneficial aspects of Cuban-American relations to emerge out of the North American Left. Discovering Cuba within the rubble of the SDS requires that we keep in mind the historical trajectory of Cuban-American relations, then, so as to capture the relationship between the US and Cuba from 1959 until today.

For centuries, the US had benefited from Cuba’s agricultural supplies and sugar industry, an idea to keep in mind as the Venceremos Brigade’s work interacts within that story. Negative relations have crowded out the story of the Venceremos Brigade and the North American Left’s presence on the island. The US Left ideologically pursued many socialist principles in line with the Cuban Revolution, espousing ideas of ‘revolution’ and ‘decolonization’, fortifying its rationale to explore post-revolutionary Cuba.

The omnipresent background of ideological warfare made the Cold War exceptional. Its logic guided both the US’s and Cuba’s decisions during the era, continuously heightening animosities. As long as Castro stayed in power, the US hesitated to normalise relations between the countries; as long as the US pursued sanctions against Cuba, the Cuban government maintained its stance in opposition to the US. Cubans experienced hostility via an economic/trade embargo, conceived as a ‘blockade’ in Spanish (bloqueo). The island enacted its hostility deliberately by vociferously rejecting US paternalism (which constantly suggests
that Cuba’s leadership lacks support) and highlighting the counterrevolutionary actions funded by the US government. The US experienced Cuba’s hostility via its rejection of a US-Cuban relationship, and Cuba’s consolidation of power post-revolution (including nationalizations of US property and its history of association with the Soviet Union). The US reacted to the hostility with policies that isolated the island, including the economic and travel bans. The hostilities cyclically continued (Bender 1975, 9–10; also see Dominguez and Prevost 2008). These tensions and hostilities defined the contradictory space from which both the FPCC and then the Venceremos Brigade emerged. Through the FPCC’s opposition to the US’s efforts to destroy the Cuban Revolution, I locate a decade of North American activism in Cuba through the FPCC. This group frames any understanding of the Venceremos Brigade, developing a robust connection between the SDS, Cuba and Cuban-American relations.

Examining how this ideological context and Cuba interacted beyond the scope of 1963, the US’s complete turn away from relations with Cuba continued to make the island particularly appealing to those disenchanted with US politics. Looking to understand Cuba rather than reject it, many on the left in the US critiqued US hostility, recognising it as a reflection of selfish interests. They saw in the US a fear for democracy in the face of evil, fear of the Soviet scourge that Castro and his regime had become, North American fears rooted in naiveté. Many Cubans’ anger proved relatable to these young North American radicals, experiencing frustrations over imperialism and the US government’s support for counterrevolutionary movements. In his memoir on the 1960s, Todd Gitlin describes how many on the Left viewed the Cuban Revolution as a prototypical Third-World revolution that could replace the Soviet model. Castro’s Cuba was thus of particular importance to the New Left, modelling a student revolution (1993, 122).

As members of the New Left and the SDS, these activists continued to participate in this support through travel. On trips to Cuba, North Americans worked with Cuban students and identified with a collective spirit of defiance against the US hegemonic power structures (Gitlin 1993, 122). Todd Gitlin describes a visit to the island. He speaks of touring factories, farms, training schools, witnessing energy, commitment, mobilisation, moral incentives, making friends and talking about politics and revolution (1993, 274–280). He discusses his disgust with US capitalism upon return, choosing to give talks, write articles, and encourage others to travel to the island, because Cuba offered a place in the world where people were ‘seizing the chances for a humane society’ (1993, 279). Todd Gitlin’s story demonstrates that travelling to Cuba to learn and be an ally was rooted in the nation’s leftist, youth culture, even without the formal organisation of the FPCC or the Venceremos Brigade.
Turning to 1969, according to Sale, the most important international turn for the New Left was towards Cuba. The SDS sent an official delegation in honour of the tenth anniversary of the revolution, laying the groundwork for a scheme ‘to send Movement people to Cuba to cut sugar cane for the 1970 harvest, a project which eventually evolved into the Venceremos Brigade, one of the most imaginative enterprises ever undertaken by the American Left’ (1973, 517). The SDS’s turn to Cuba was both important and imaginative, reflecting the possibilities for a future-looking US Left. Van Gosse as a New Left scholar similarly locates the Venceremos Brigade. He traces the fall of the SDS, where ex-SDSers organised Brigades, sending thousands of radicals to violate the US embargo on travel to revolutionary Cuba. He continues by claiming that the Brigades ‘were just one part of an apparent revolutionary upsurge’ (Rethinking 2005, 195). These Cuban-American/American-Left stories begin to clearly merge at the end of the 1960s. The moments of convergence offer an opening for a discussion of the Venceremos Brigade. The Venceremos Brigade sent thousands of young radicals to Cuba, but is mentioned little in SDS or New Left Literature. The Brigade is then lumped together with other radical upsurges, which grounds its trajectory, but excludes it from a greater historical narrative.

Understanding the Brigade requires a discussion both of what it was and, given the discussions of it, how the actors understood their participation in it. I centre both US and Cuban perspectives, as they offer details and explanations as to the role that the Brigade played in distinct national contexts, while also addressing some biases regarding the actors’ motivations, illuminating all sides of the story. As this narrative is source driven, it is important to highlight what and from where these sources come. Those with sound knowledge on this invisible trip include organisers, travellers and Cubans on the island. Having utilised academic scholarship produced in the US, I will turn to Cuba’s national newspapers and culture magazine, Granma and BOHEMIA, and Venceremos Press Publications. These first two sources offer data on the Brigade, collected from the José Martí National Library in Havana, Cuba. The Venceremos Brigade Press offers North Americans’ accounts, published in the US. Along with two pamphlets, there are stories related by the participants in a book titled Venceremos: The Life and Stories of Participants.

Connecting these stories, I document three narratives in particular: (a) a narrative constructing the history of the Brigade, grounded in mutual interests; (b) a story of interaction between the US and Cuba through an anti-imperialist education project; and finally, (c) a story of personal experience. These three lenses provide insight into the distinct stories told, allowing for a cohesive understanding of the Brigade as an anti-imperialist education project to emerge.
A History of the Venceremos Brigade

The logistical details of the Brigade offer an important basis from which to begin a conversation surrounding the Venceremos Brigade, because there are scant historical facts from which we can draw, base or contextualise the Brigade. Piecing together the story of the Venceremos Brigade, we experience the story as related by distinct parties with particular reasons for sharing. This explicit story requires two perspectives, then, as both Cubans and North Americans offer a vision of what the Venceremos Brigade was.

The Brigade presented in the Cuban Press

The Venceremos Brigade’s story truly begins in Cuba. While travelling to Cuba to support the tenth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, members of the SDS conceived of the Venceremos Brigade. They proposed a work trip that would contribute to the Cuban Revolution and allow North Americans to learn about Cuba on eight-week visits to the island. To tell the story of the Venceremos Brigade, I look first to its Cuban context.

The Cuban official press creates a foundation to understand what it was that the Brigade was achieving. Telling a story of North Americans travelling to Cuba in support of Cuba, and perhaps more importantly, protesting against the US, was fundamentally important for the Cuban government. Few US citizens witnessed the outgrowth of the SDS in the form of the Venceremos Brigade, and those who did remained unexposed to a representation of the Brigade in daily news publications. Cuba opened its doors to those North Americans who were willing to express support for the Cuban Revolution and reject US policy. The Cuban government thus allowed North Americans to travel to Cuba because the travels served Cuba's national interests, offering the communist government the opportunity to highlight the failings of US imperialism. The version of the story that the Cuban press shares is clear and concise, as the Cubans offer the most direct account of what the Brigade intended and achieved. Granma and Bohemia carefully document the story as it was communicated in Cuba, as the state press meticulously covered the state’s investment in the Venceremos Brigade. The Cuban press from 1969 to 1995 documented 11 of 26 Brigades between these two publications. These accounts necessarily leave holes in our narrative, but ultimately offer a rich breadth of information, offering a vision of the Venceremos Brigade as it was crafted and understood in Cuba.

I begin documenting the story of the Venceremos Brigade by offering a timeline from the Granma pieces. The Cuban story (as disseminated by the Cuban press) of the Venceremos Brigade began in January 1969. On the 2nd of January,
Granma reported that the Brigade had been formed to visit Cuba for the tenth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. On this trip, they forged plans for a long-term Brigade and connected with institutional structures in the Cuban government. Then in December 1969, the first Brigade arrived at Cuba with 216 participants. These brigadistas participated in Cuba’s 10 million ton Sugar Harvest, a national campaign that ultimately failed, but which intended to cut 10 million tons of sugar. The Brigade’s second trip transpired just two months later, from February to March 1970, when 400 participants travelled through Canada to arrive at Cuba. Granma then wrote of an April 1971 trip, the fourth Brigade. Unique to this iteration, the participants offered a televised panel interview before departing from the island. The fifth Brigade resided on the island from March to May 1972, and 138 participants worked on housing projects, unlike previous Brigades where brigadistas helped with sugar cane harvesting. From March to May 1973, 102 Brigadistas participated in the sixth Brigade, and that trip continued to construct houses.

This sequential story omits trips from 1973 to 1981. Granma then continued to document the Venceremos Brigade in the 1980s, but its reporting changed. The basic nature of the trip was maintained, in that North Americans arrived at the island and worked in agriculture or housing projects for six weeks before travelling the island for two. The reporting thins, though, and what surfaces in Granma is a data-driven reporting style. In 1981, the 12th Brigade arrived with 80 participants, and in April 1983 the 14th Brigade arrived with 135 participants. Next in April 1985, the 16th Brigade arrived, in April 1986 the 17th with 173 participants, in April 1988 the 19th came with 134 participants and finally in August 1995 the 26th Venceremos Brigade arrived at Cuba with 80 participants.

Granma shared one version of the Venceremos Brigade, in language servicing the Cuban Revolution and People. The story follows a basic scheme that repeats over the years. Granma consistently reported that the North Americans arrived at the island, described that Brigade’s work, and quoted a North American who was working or a Cuban director who explicated the trip’s goals. The newspaper discussed the revolutionary spirit, socialism and lessons that the Cuban Revolution imparted upon North American visitors, and then concluded with North Americans saying goodbye and thank you to the Cubans for both their generosity and lessons. The formulaic story grounds the Brigade with details, dates and mechanics. The Cuban press tells a story of North Americans travelling to Cuba for eight weeks, six of which are spent working in the fields before touring the island for two; much of the government’s story deplays the North American visitors so as to critique US imperialism. To begin to broaden the picture, I turn to North Americans’ representation of the Brigades.
North Americans present the Venceremos Brigade

While the Venceremos Brigade travelled to Cuba, North Americans were the ones who were travelling. For North Americans, the Venceremos Brigade was a political education project that expressed solidarity. For the Cuban government, the Brigades offered an opportunity to gain political capital and realise a position to educate North Americans. The trips were thus mutually beneficial. North Americans often travelled for personal reasons, so the stories they offer are generally more personalised and lack in some of the data that Cuba offered. Looking to personalised logics offers a broader definition of the Venceremos Brigade.

North American publications also offer a history of the Brigade. The Brigade published various pamphlets along with a more substantial work, the latter of which I utilize to anchor an analysis of North Americans living in Cuba. The two pamphlets, published in 1974 and 1976, offer a picture of the Venceremos Brigade as North Americans conceived of the trip. Venceremos Brigade: Young Americans Sharing the Life and Work of Revolutionary Cuba is a collection of writing about the Venceremos Brigade, but it remains limited to the first two Brigade trips (1969 and 1970). The collection includes poems, essays and short pieces by various participants from the Brigade, collected by brigadistas Sandra Levinson and Carol Brightman. The Brigade published the collection in 1971, and the travel accounts communicate that the visitors intended to collect information to bring back to the US by documenting their experiences.

I introduce a North American account of the Brigade by way of a conversation I had with a current brigadista, Kathe Karlson.9 Beginning in 1969, she explained that a group of activists, not yet the Venceremos Brigade, went to Cuba. Many North American social activists were travelling to Cuba at the time on solidarity missions, and this specific group while on the island learned of the Ten Million Ton Sugar Harvest. According to Karlson, Venceremos Brigade lore proffers that as Cuba planned for its largest sugar harvest in history (both as a necessary economic safety valve and as a political statement against the US trade blockade) Comandante Fidel Castro asked that all Cubans work in the sugar fields. The pioneer brigadistas purportedly came together to suggest that North American activists could fold into the empty industrial spaces that Cubans working in the fields would leave vacuous, so as to sustain operations on the island. Fidel purportedly responded that if the North Americans wanted to come to the island, they would cut cane in the fields with the Cuban revolutionaries. Thus, the North American social activists became brigadistas, and the Venceremos Brigade began.

According to Bob Guild,10 as an anti-imperialist education project the Brigade intended to expose North Americans to the Cuban Revolution and Cuban socialism, so that the North Americans could bring information regarding Cuba back
to the US. Levinson and Brightman, Guild, Karlson, and the Venceremos Press’s pamphlets all begin by confirming the same origin story of the Venceremos Brigade. Indeed, North Americans’ accounts of the Brigade reveal the trip’s orientation around information-gathering and education, frequently articulating how they are searching and learning in Cuba. Looking to the details that Levinson and Brightman offer on the first two trips, from the beginning, the groups included black, brown and white youth. The participants included civil rights advocates, black, Chicano, Native American, and Puerto Rican Americans, student protestors, anti-war movement activists, and women’s liberationists. All were gazing outside their own borders to Cuba, which was ‘building societies of justice, equality, and human dignity’ (Educational Commission, Venceremos Brigade 1974). Brigadistas claim that they are willing to defy the US government with illegal travel, because they feel that US citizens need to learn the truth of the Cuban Revolution.

According to Brightman and Levinson, while in the US, the group met sporadically under a regional structure that supervised, recruited, selected and fundraised for the trips. Two hundred and sixteen North Americans went on the first trip in 1969 via Mexico, cutting cane for six weeks before returning via Canada. Upon their return, in February 1970, the second group set sail with 687 participants; the third in August 1971 offered 409 volunteers. According to the editors, the accounts of these first two Brigades reflect the Venceremos Brigade as a whole, because the Venceremos Brigade is ‘one Brigade – and although different incidents, situations, and problems arose in each contingent, all reflect a general experience’ (1971, 15).

Following the initial agreement to travel to the island, black, brown and white youth leaders met in the US and began coordinating regional structures and organising brigadistas for their travels. They established a process that on the participants’ side entailed first a decision to go, followed by applications, interviews, group meetings and travel preparations, all before arriving at the island itself. An information sheet given to future brigadistas (‘Information Sheet’ 1971, 52–54) tells the story of brigadistas’ preparation. In the informative mailing, they are told to bring passports, certificates of vaccination, a Mexican tourist card, permission letters from their parents (which signals the youthful nature of the Brigade’s demographic) and supplies such as clothing and toiletries. North Americans then travelled via either Mexico or Canada, before arriving at Cuba, where many claim to feel welcomed by a unique sense of belonging.

Upon arrival, the North Americans go to work camps and start to learn in the cane fields. Cane-cutting appeared to challenge many North Americans, who were unaccustomed to the back-breaking work, learning from new socialist power structures and the ‘Cuban Way’. Learning a new revolutionary culture
inextricably involved studying Che and his new socialist man, destroying racism and sexism, offering education and healthcare, nurturing art and culture and offering a space for self-exploration and unity. The North Americans brought these lessons home to the US soil. The Venceremos Brigade communicates that the Cuban government intends to foster the development of enough capital for investment across the entire island, through its massive harvest (Educational Commission, Venceremos Brigade 1974). The project became increasingly necessary as Cuba’s Revolution triumphed in an economic context formerly controlled by US industries. (A politically successful political-economic revolution required a focus on economic development.)

The Venceremos Brigade ultimately embodied a binational project of unity and solidarity. Its binational nature resulted in simultaneous representations of Brigade activities in both Cuba and the US, and from both accounts we can construct a basic history and story of the decades-long project. The nature of this project was anti-imperialist and educational, and we likewise read that story in accounts in both the US and Cuba.

Venceremos Brigade as a Project

Telling the story of the Brigade ultimately reveals its fundamental role as an anti-imperialist education project. The Venceremos Brigade cannot simply be understood as a trip to Cuba – a true understanding requires analysing the disparate motivations involved and the intentions surrounding the project, which we can access via analysis of how the project was represented via media in both the US and Cuba. These media representations demonstrate that perceptions of the trip were diverse, depending upon those who elect to share their stories and their reasons for participating. Cuba through its press sought to tell a story of the Brigade surrounding unity and teaching, while North Americans tend towards a story of consciousness development and learning. The stories of learning, teaching and unity highlight the intentions of the Brigade, while stories of consciousness development highlight the personal experiences involved in the Brigade trips. Before looking to that personalised narrative, we will look to the trips’ calls to solidarity, lessons about socialism, constructing socialism and collectivity.

La Brigada Representada en Cuba – The project and intentions in Cuba

Given its centrality as a news source in Cuba, a close reading of the rhetoric in Granma’s coverage of the Brigade yields important insights. I look to language to derive stories, so as to better understand how Cubans may have perceived the
Venceremos Brigade, as its press presented it, as an interaction between the US and Cuba.

I divide my analysis of how Cuban society received the Brigade in its press by looking to two pervasive narratives that the newspaper offers. The narratives offer a story of the purpose of the Brigade, where the first is tied to solidarity, unity, fraternity and anti-imperialism, and the second to learning from and being inspired by change, peace and the Revolution in Cuba. I frame these narratives as ‘trip-as-solidarity’ for the former and ‘trip-as-learning’ for the latter, together operating under the guise of justifying the Cuban Revolution.

The first article published on the Brigade in Cuba is printed on 10 December 1969. Cuba’s first printed impressions of the Brigade highlight the intentions of both education and anti-imperialist solidarity from the outset. The article is titled ‘La Más Importante Enseñanza de la Revolución Cubana es que nos Demuestra y nos Refuerza la Idea de la Posibilidad del Cambio, de la Posibilidad de la Revolución’ (‘The Most Important Lesson of the Cuban Revolution Is That It Shows and Reinforces the Idea of the Possibility of Change and the Possibility of Revolution’).13 The article documents an interview conducted by a conglomerate of Cuban media news outlets and reiterates the first representation of the Venceremos Brigade offered to the Cuban people. By asking questions of their North American visitors, Cubans began to grapple with a new and novel subject. The narrative choice is interesting, in that instead of representing a Cuban’s perspective, the Cuban editors begin by voicing North Americans’ positions. These activists arrive with the dual intentions of rejecting the blockade and demonstrating solidarity. Various Cuban news outlets questioned the brigadistas, working in conjunction and documenting the same story, including Juventud Rebelde, Granma, Noticieros del ICR, Prensa Latina, Bohemia and Radio Habana Cuba. The questions surrounded the queries regarding their name, organisation, participants, work, learning, and how they feel regarding the experience. Their answers are followed by Granma describing a panel of politicised young people with brilliant responses, who conclude by affirming that ‘los diez millones van’ (the 10 million goes on). The questions posed in the press conference indicate what Granma wanted the Cuban citizenry to know, what they perceived as meriting reiteration and further examination. From questions interrogating the idea, name, organisation, and participation to the work, trips, and learning projects, one begins to perceive that the Cuban press is envisioning a Brigade whose participants decide to work in and learn about Cuba because it is enlightening.

The Cuban government creates a forum for discussion, offering queries that guide public perceptions of the project. Granma communicates two broad classes of stories regarding the Brigade that fall under the construct of
justification, as the stories tend to favour a Brigade-as-solidarity message or a Brigade-as-learning message throughout. The narratives sometimes challenge each other, while at other times they are largely complementary. Juxtaposed, these narratives offered multifaceted justifications for the Cuban Revolution.

The first narrative of solidarity and unity against anti-imperialism is a story that serves the Cuban government. The Venceremos Brigade helps justify Cuba’s position in opposition to the US, by demonstrating that even North Americans, citizens of the imperial nation, would live and work in Cuba. Unity in the face of hegemonic imperialism allows the Cuban government to position itself as a universal, international ally that is willing to work with disempowered peoples. Utilising the Venceremos Brigade to communicate that there are ‘North Americans against US imperialism’ communicates that the US is everyone’s enemy, an evil that even Americans themselves chose to escape.

That North Americans come to Cuba to be inspired and learn from the Revolution likewise justifies the Cuban Revolution under a Brigade-as-learning construct. The brigadistas’ goals to learn, gather information, and teach North Americans on the US soil reinforce the ideals of the Cuban Revolution. In this story, Cubans have risen above US imperialist aggressions, having decided to offer gifts of learning to its citizens. Cubans offer peace, Revolution and socialism, visions of Che and a ‘socialist man’ to North Americans in search of alternatives to their capitalist culture. Teaching justifies the Cuban Revolution via the allure of international alliances, as the Revolution offers knowledge to learn from. As an alternative to Soviet Russia, Cubans demarcated their socialism as a facet of Third-World politics and Marxisms, framing the Cuban Revolution as a peaceful model for the world’s future. As these two central themes emerge, they are present throughout, favoured to differing degrees in Granma’s documentation.

By folding into a national movement, the brigadistas are communicating a sense of fraternity to a movement larger than themselves. This notion of solidarity lies in the background of the participants’ responses to interview questions, but also in, for instance, the first photo article of the Brigade which appeared on 12 December 1969 in Bohemia. Before offering its visual story, Bohemia discusses teamwork between Cubans and Americans. The solidarity theme plays out throughout. For example, on the 11th of December, a day after the first documented interview is published, another story in Granma features brigadistas condemning the assassination of members of the Black Panther party. Discussing Cuba’s initial representation of the Venceremos Brigade also includes a discussion of imperialism both at home and abroad, integral to a solidarity narrative. Cuba was seeking to align Cuban, Vietnamese and North American causes against US imperialistic behaviours. Addressing US imperialism, Cuba offers an alliance between Cuba, Vietnam and the Black Panthers, all victims of
US imperialist control. Vietnam is then centred a week later, in the final representation of the first Venceremos Brigade trip in Cuba (Bohemia, Vietnamitas y Norteamericanos, 12/19/1969). The article, titled ‘Vietnamese and North Americans’, highlights the exceptionality of the Venceremos Brigade, pointing to the brotherly and friendly encounter between two warring nations’ citizens. This anti-imperialist thread allowed the Venceremos Brigade to unify across international differences.

Anti-imperialism, solidarity, unity and fraternity are narrative themes running throughout the press’s Brigade-as-solidarity representation of the Venceremos Brigade. In an interview with brigadistas in 1970 (Bohemia, Versión de la conferencia de 4/3/1970), during the second Brigade, North Americans again linked their motivations to expressing solidarity with Cuba. These North Americans juxtaposed their own nations’ struggles with Cuba’s to augment the notion that solidarity was integral for the Venceremos Brigade. Through unity and solidarity, the Brigade unites across human struggles against imperialism. In an article that appeared in April 1971 celebrating Cuba’s success a decade after the Bay of Pigs Invasion, brigadistas extol the Revolution for its victories and its values, conceiving of their participation as a constructive force in solidarity with the Revolution (Granma 4/19/1971). Internationalism, unity, solidarity and fraternity in the face of imperialism are evident.

The presentation of learning trips occurred in the 1970s as well, though they are less prevalent. The Venceremos Brigade was packaged as a trip that inspired and taught lessons, by manifesting peace, revolution and change. Read an article published in 1971 (Granma 4/10/1971), for instance. On 10th April, the Brigadistas convey that the travel and trade embargoes are intended not only to isolate Cuba, but also to isolate the ‘American mind’. They speak of the explanatory lies and half-truths that the North American establishment offers, and proclaim that they will ‘take advantage of the opportunity to bring truth regarding the Cuban Revolution to the American people’. The vision offers a theme of learning from the Brigade’s inception. Rather than focusing on their role as teachers, Cuba-circa-1971 is unaccustomed to the Venceremos Brigade; it has yet to adopt formal lesson plans for their North American visitors. The newness implicates the absence of the formalised education that had developed by 1981. Rather, the lessons that North Americans are learning in 1971 are often self-taught truths.

These self-taught truths are beautifully articulated in 1970 (Granma 4/25/1970). In an article titled ‘Documento de la Brigada “Venceremos” al Pueblo Cubano’, the Brigade says farewell, thank you, and reflects on what the experience in Cuba offered to them as marginalised North Americans. They return to fraternity and the solidarity narrative while discussing their learning project, telling one story on multiple levels. Discussing Cubans as heroes and
citizens centres the laudability of cutting sugar cane by morning, guarding the island by night, and producing children who represent the future. The North Americans’ statement is filled with words communicating inspiration, welcoming the revolutionary spirit framed as ‘internationalist’ and ‘humanist’, accompanied by a spirit of action that unites across nations and peoples.14

In Granma’s 1980s articles, the narratives shift. What emerges are the same themes presented differently, demonstrating an evolution in relations rather than a static relationship between North Americans and Cubans. Granma publishes an article titled ‘Welcoming the 14th Venceremos Brigade’ (Ofrecen bienvenida al XIV 4/20/1983). This article begins with a Cuban’s perspective and conceives of the Brigade from a Cuban’s standpoint, thanking the brigadistas for their militant solidarity. Voicing the ‘work in solidarity with Cuba and all just causes’, the article speaks on solidarity while changing the tone of its reporting. Whereas in 1983 Granma highlighted broad trip details, in 1985 the details were even more scarce. We only read of the construction of a historic site honouring the American Communist, Sandy Pollack. This demonstrates a change in the Cuban press reporting as the newspaper turns to trips-as-learning, which became increasingly present in Cuba’s national-press-storytelling in the 1980s.15 In 1986, there is an article consisting of two paragraphs (Granma 4/22/1986). In lieu of philosophising and politicising the trip, Granma utilises the first paragraph to describe the Brigade’s activities. The Cuban journalists simply claim that North Americans have ‘developed friendship and solidarity with Cuba’ since its founding in 1969. That solidarity feels distinct from the solidarity communicated in 1969.16 I argue that Granma clearly signals its shift in 1981, as it begins to centre a thematic of learning, inspiration and change.

After explicating the work that the Brigadistas will partake in, an April 1981 article says that the North Americans will be offered a series of lectures about economic, political and social life on the island. They are also offered the opportunity to meet with pivotal cultural and political figures, students and workers (Granma, Participará la Brigada 4/15/1981). The educational messaging simultaneously points to Cubans’ interests and upholds North Americans’ initial intentions – as a political education project. Rather than centring gracious, good North American volunteers, gracious, kind Cubans are offering the gift of the Cuban Revolution to its visitors.

Juxtaposing the first interview with interviews conducted for an article published on 7th May, 1988 proves enlightening. In ‘Meeting with the Venceremos’, Cuba offers a personal narrative again. Why would the Cuban press’s representation of the Venceremos Brigade in 1988, when the Brigade is less anomalous and new, and thus less newsworthy, merit a personalised interview style? Interviewing
the participants highlights accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution, and the personal stories of three North American activists are used to highlight future trips and lessons to be learned in Cuba (Granma 5/7/1988). Cheryl Scott learned from the Cuban medical system; Carmen Acosta is planning the next Brigade rather than speaking about the current one; Charles Marshall speaks on the lessons learned and formally taught. Rather than learning about North Americans, this latter interview conveys the lessons that Cuba teaches.

The Cuban press shares an evolving narrative of the Venceremos Brigade that develops as the Venceremos Brigade progresses, while also maintaining the same thematic strains, all connected to a justificatory rhetoric. Funded by the Cuban government, the documentation is intentional and linked to the State. The Cuban government decides to publish articles about the Venceremos Brigade, almost annually, devoting resources, both human and material, to reporting on the Brigade. Cuba is telling the story of the Venceremos Brigade because of the politics that it offers, written in Spanish, to the Cuban people, in service to the Cuban nation.

North Americans tell their stories in a different language, for a different purpose, to a different audience. The stories written in the US highlight both the project’s intentions and some of the more personal experiences involved. North Americans on the Venceremos Brigade decide to travel to Cuba for many reasons, and much like their Cuban hosts, their motivations and incentives were multiple.

**Young Americans learning in Revolutionary Cuba**

In order to explore the messages that North Americans communicated surrounding anti-imperialism and education on the Venceremos Brigade, I explore the work that most thoroughly documents the Brigade, Levinson and Brightman’s *Venceremos Brigade*. The educational project is centred as the motivating factor, along with solidarity. The North Americans’ thematic accounts parallel Granma’s telling, while adding a certain amount of information-gathering, manifesting in stories of socialism, collectivity and the Cuban Revolution.

The thematic of understanding socialism and collectivity is present as the North Americans conceive of Cuba as a socialist Revolution and Project offering a model for unification. Fostering solidarity among each other and across liberation movements worldwide was important for many brigadistas. The North Americans, as foreigners to the Cuban experiment, are confronted with Cuba’s position in relation to socialism, worldwide imperialism and revolution. They spend many pages considering how they as North American activists participate in these schemas of socialism and collectivism. This is in large part because North Americans came to Cuba to learn, and what they principally came to Cuba to learn about was the island’s socialist revolution.
When the North Americans discuss the reasons guiding their decision to travel to Cuba, many mention that they sought to work with Cuban Revolutionaries, hoping to learn from Cuban socialism. In an interview, K.D. (Venceremos Brigade 1971, 40–42) explained that he wished to travel to Cuba to help work and construct the Cuban Revolution, while also expressing internationalism. This ethos of internationalism brought many North Americans to Cuba, as they discuss socialism along with its implications in both the Cuban and international landscapes. Ron Uriarte (1971, 37–40) expressed that he went to Cuba in search of truth. He wanted to understand what was happening in Cuba, and he felt that he would feel solidarity with Cuba through internationalism.

The process of learning about Cuba as a socialist project plays out as the North Americans physically participate in and construct socialism. Glenda Cimino discussed a fundamental desire to 'build something'. She said that she went to Cuba to learn how to build something, to support Cuba, to learn what a Revolution was really like (1971, 47). Her multilayered reasoning centres a desire to build a revolution, to express support and to learn about the Cuban Revolution by learning from the ground up. Charles Winant (1971, 50–51) was a Vietnam War veteran who wanted to help Cuba, so that he could fight for a cause he believed in. He explored how while fighting in Vietnam he felt shame for the US, and claimed that he would like to learn from a Revolution that privileged its citizenry in its entirety. Winant’s perspective reinforces the notion that North Americans sought to build socialism for various reasons, but that none could go to Cuba on the Brigade without the knowledge that they were helping to construct Cuban society.

Given that many of the Venceremos Brigade participants, particularly its founders, were anti-Vietnam War activists, what made travelling to Cuba particularly special to such activists was, at least in part, that Cuba was an island where North Americans, Cubans and Vietnamese peoples could meet together and work to forge society, together. Leslie Cagan offered an example of this position (1971, 131–132). She found that after being in Cuba, she understood Vietnam, and the will, determination and commitment of the people to have a free, independent and unified nation. The Vietnamese were defeating North Americans because they had something beyond a formula and technology, in the intangible spirit and joy of struggling for one’s own society and victory, a sentiment Cagan felt privileged to access in Cuba.

Another facet of collaboration involved conversations among intra-American groups and conversations regarding international unity. Lucy Marx offered a beautiful example of such progress. She described a press conference, wherein the Brigade was represented by a Mexican man, a Puerto Rican man, a black woman and a white woman. Alluding to the national and international
solidarity evident in this press conference, she praised the fact ‘that they could unite as comrades in meeting the sometimes hostile questions of the press’ while committing to revolutions worldwide (1971, 184). Such a commitment, embodying both a support of fellow-North Americans and an internationalist spirit, illustrates how participants saw the Venceremos Brigade as offering a chance for the formation of diverse solidarities.

Collectivity was thus omnipresent in North Americans’ minds while in Cuba. Jerry Berndt (1971, 70–72) offered a frame to understand the trajectory of the development of a collective understanding. He claimed that the North American activists came to Cuba thinking in terms of ‘I’, conceiving of themselves as revolutionary within their circles at home. He said that ‘we all come to Cuba with big I’s. We will leave Cuba with smaller i’s, and a sense of us, of being together.’ The development of a collective consciousness is tied closely to learning in Cuba. The North Americans, after learning collectively, brought their newly learned practices back to the US, broadening their revolutionary capabilities. Tying revolutionary work consciousness to the implications of collectivity, Donna Mickleson spoke of a special knowledge that she gained (1971, 112–113). She found that there was knowledge, no matter how bad things get, that every strike of the machete had meaning. There abides righteousness and a sense of justice in the North Americans’ accounts as a whole, as they connect positive attitudes surrounding work to collectivity and togetherness.

Alongside stories of socialism and collectivity, there is at root a story of Cuba. We are offered a story of the Cuban Revolution through radical North American eyes. Distinctive, novel leadership helped to create the Cuban Revolution. Ignacio Quero spoke of the Cuban Revolution and its interaction with the Venceremos Brigade (1971, 66–67). He explained that there are no differences among the revolutionaries regarding race, colour, state or language as they fight together as human race for a common goal, through unity. Javier Ardziones, a Cuban director, affirmed this message (1971, 76–77). He explained that learning the revolutionary will to cut cane, to grow in the face of difficulties, is what the Cuban Revolution offers. For as Julian Rizo explained (1971, 99–100), those cutting sugar cane begin to feel both the ownership over and the usefulness of their work. This is the Cuban Revolution that the North Americans seek to fold into.

The North Americans responded in kind to these assertions, as cutting sugar cane became the theatre of revolutionary learning. Jeff Van Pelt offered a metaphor between cane-cutting and revolutionary principles (1971, 83). He found that by handling a machete, one carries the knowledge that one is holding a useful but dangerous tool and weapon, preparing for battle and work simultaneously. He further acknowledged a uniqueness in Cuba – of learning by doing (1971, 89), a lesson exemplified by physically cutting sugar cane. What the North Americans
learn is not how to actually cut cane, though. Responding to Ardizone’s supposition, Robert Takagi spoke of a revolutionary will (1971, 92). He found that cutting cane is mental and psychological work, requiring a positive attitude and a strong will in the face of difficulties. This act of will is intricately tied to the unique physical experience, though, as Ann Wagner discussed (1971, 119–120). She explained that the hard work of cutting cane is an education requiring concentration and dedication, where success involves a link between actions and ideals that make the sugar cane fields ideal for learning the Cuban Revolution. The tensions between the physical and psychological, as they play out in the sugar fields, demonstrate the distinct ways that the Revolution is learned in both body and mind.

The Cuban Revolution involved learning the ideals and principles motivating the island’s citizens and revolutionaries. Lucy Marx, for instance, explained that she discovered the fundamental need for the Cuban Revolution (1971, 116) while on the island. For after working in the fields, she understood what it meant to have to revolt because there remains no alternative to inescapable oppression; she could now empathise with the Cuban sentiment that motivated the Revolution. Glenda Cimino recognised a grand hope as she learned the Revolution. She said that Cuba would be perfect someday, and that the North Americans would someday be revolutionaries (1971, 186). As Mike Glick explained (1971, 186), the North Americans were offered a new yardstick to measure themselves with, seeing the distance yet to be travelled. These North Americans came to Cuba to learn the Revolution, and ultimately learn what it will take to become a revolutionary.

North Americans enhanced their notions of collectivity and they learned of Revolution while in Cuba. The Cuban government clearly intended to teach brigadistas about Cuba and socialism. Working in the camps created conditions for that education, as many of the North Americans responded to those intentions and conditions. This dialogue reinforces a fundamental dynamic of the Venceremos Brigade: it offers a space for exchange and conversations between North Americans and Cubans. That this project is anti-imperialist and educational is obvious from both the Cuban Press and the Venceremos Press publications. Differences in documentation reflect the difference between a politicised presentation of the Brigade in Cuba and a vision of personal education that the North Americans articulate. That more personal story that North Americans convey offers an important frame for understanding the Venceremos Brigade.

**Stories of Personal Experience and Development**

The personal experiences of brigadistas are revelatory. Moments of development and growth are conveyed in many different mediums by the participants
themselves, whether through essay, story, poem or interview, and questions of
time enter into these forms as well, depending on when the personal stories are
documented. The stories thus far have communicated how the actors conceived
of the Brigade and indicate some of the intentions guiding Cubans’ and North
Americans’ participation in the radical programme. It is difficult to understand
the Venceremos Brigade when reading only the perspective of two self-interested
actors, broadly constructed, writing in the 1960s–80s. What made the Brigade
truly unique for the North Americans was its model of travel in conjunction with
the intent of political consciousness-raising, and since this was experienced on a
personal level, accessing those explorations happens through individual stories.

Joel Sloman’s book of poetry, Cuban Journal,17 was written during these first
Brigade trips and tells the story of his entire Brigade experience, offering a
broader account of the complicated, personal experience of the Venceremos
Brigade. He published his entire journal in 2006, the most recent printed docu-
ment I look to. Sloman initially intended his journal for a brigadista audience,
and a brigadista audience may not have taken well to poems that highlighted
both personal and political tensions involved in the Brigade. Through poetry,
Sloman could speak to those similarly questioning the Brigade and those com-
pletely enchanted by the Brigade, looking to read a piece multiple times, simul-
taneously. Sloman’s account challenges an entirely positive vision of the
Venceremos Brigade by questioning revolutionary ideologising. Sloman com-
municates exhaustion, semblances of disbelief in the Cuban Revolution, and
challenges to his personal and political positions. Ultimately, Sloman’s account
demonstrates a certain authenticity that the politically oriented accounts we
have read thus far lacked.

Kathe Karlson is a current brigadista, offering a vision of what the Venceremos
Brigade continues to be. Her experience demonstrates an interaction with the
Brigade both as a participant and as an organiser.18 Having organised the trips
since the 1990s after an initial 1971 trip, Karlson now participates in a very dif-
f erent Brigade that has changed with time. The movement is still composed of a
diverse range of individuals coming from eight to ten states, but the trips are
smaller, with 25 to 60 people. The participants publicly challenge travel bans, as
they situate themselves within a less hostile Cuban-American relations. Upon
considering a re-evaluation of the Brigade’s functionality, Karlson along with
others rejected a proposal to pause the Venceremos Brigade trips. The travellers
now participate in two-week trips, wherein they work for four to five days on
agricultural or construction projects and attend cultural and political inter-
changes. The group then travels to other provinces, interacting with mass organ-
isations like the youth, hip hop movement, internationalists, women’s groups,
trade unions, campesinos and journalists. Rather than discussing and teaching
about Cuba in insular activist groups, the brigadistas on the most recent trip met with representatives from #BlackLivesMatter. The Brigade went on its 46th iteration in 2015.

The Brigade’s goal to open lines of communication and information between the US and Cuba has yet to be accomplished – for that reason along with others, the Brigade persists. With easier access to Cuba, the Brigade must reposition its axes of relevance. Listing groups that can learn from Cuba, Karlson returns to #BlackLivesMatter and other racial justice activists along with Latin American countries such as Venezuela. The US has a particular responsibility to learn about Cuba and Cubans’ experiences according to Karlson, because of the nation’s role in maintaining immoral and illegal blockades. That responsibility to learn about Cuba parallels the charge of this piece – to learn about the Venceremos Brigade as it becomes increasingly relevant today.

**Conclusion**

As Betita Martinez explained in a piece published in *Z Magazine* (1999), the Brigade is unique among political organisations from the 1970s, in that it still exists, so many years after its inception. That piece was written in 1999 – that the Brigade still operates in 2015 makes it much more exceptional. Current moments of change are both beneficial and challenging for the Venceremos Brigade. The current moment of relational flux offers new opportunities for consideration and cooperation between the US and Cuba. Normalising relations requires careful consideration, then, for simply unfreezing relations that have remained stagnant for decades cannot ameliorate the root causes of historic division. As Melanie Ziegler proposes, Cooperative Building Measurers (CBMs) offer models to bridge divides between historically hostile nations through mutually beneficial policies (2007), a policy orientation that the Brigade demonstrates on an interpersonal level. The Venceremos Brigade is one example of a North American group continuing to work with Cuba, offering a model for productive Cuban-American relations moving forward. I have documented a small portion of the Venceremos Brigade, an anti-imperialist education project that emerges today offering new lessons. This is a starting point for a dialogue and discussion about North Americans whose experiences merit further documentation in the years ahead.

**Notes**

1. This language of the ‘Third World’ is dated given our modern rhetoric of developing/developed countries. I use ‘Third World’ here and elsewhere, conscious of the
Cold-War implications, because the Venceremos Brigade must be contextualised within the Cold-War world.

2. The New Left is a term employed by some scholars after the decades examined to describe a variety of social movements that dealt with identity, anti-imperialism and various other political issues of the 1960s and 1970s that included educators, agitators and others seeking reforms in gay rights, abortion, gender roles, drugs, race and other US social ills.

3. Some of the committee’s notable founders include Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, James Baldwin, Allen Ginsburg and Carleton Beals.

4. This Fair Play pamphlet and those that follow are preserved in the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan.

5. I collected these Cuban Press publications from January to May 2014 at La Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba de José Martí in Havana, Cuba. These publications represent a certain national consensus.

6. These Venceremos Press sources come from the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan’s Special Collections Library in Ann Arbor, MI.

7. Interestingly, the newspapers in the José Martí Library’s collection included only those eleven Brigades. The rest were either (a) excluded from the library’s archives, (b) the articles were literally cut out from the archived paper or (c) the articles were never written. On a logistical level, writing the story of the Venceremos Brigade could have been challenging with distant locations of work camps compromising Granma’s reporting capabilities. A nation facing international isolation and economic sanctions may have lacked the number of disposable individuals required to document the story of the Venceremos Brigade.

8. The omission of the Venceremos Brigade from Granma and Bohemia from 1973 to 1981 is difficult to understand without more information. The Venceremos Press’s pamphlets, which I explore below, also document these years that the Cuban press omits, with pieces published in both 1974 and 1976.

9. Karlson was a participant on the third Venceremos Brigade and the 30th–42nd Brigades, which she shared with a conversation by phone on 21 February 2015.

10. I credit this terminology to Bob Guild, National Education Director of the Venceremos Brigade in the 1980s, from an interview on 12 February 2015.

11. The Venceremos Brigade Press’s documents that I refer to are pamphlets that the Venceremos Brigade published in the 1970s.

12. I often link Granma and Bohemia for their similar intention, styles and content.

13. ‘La Mas Importante Enseñanza de la Revolución Cubana es que nos Demuestra y nos Refuerza la idea de la Posibilidad del Cambio, de la Posibilidad de la Revolución.’ Granma. 10 December 1969. Print.

14. One of the aims of the Venceremos Brigade was to liberate and elevate humanity to Che’s ‘Hombre Nuevo’. Upon returning from one of the early Brigade trips, the Venceremos Press published a pamphlet teaching about Che and his philosophy on the new socialist man. Americans claimed that they would go back and teach fellow Americans about the real Cuban Revolution, and we see that with a Brigade pamphlet about the new socialist man and the new form of humanity that Cuba and the Revolution is purporting to develop.
15. We read a different story in 1985 as well. Whereas in 1983 we were still offered broad trip details, in 1985 we only read of the construction of a historic site. Reporting on the 14th Brigade, in honour of Sandy Pollack, we learn of a trip that is constructing a patrimony, and little else. This helps us see how the story of the Brigade is changing for Cubans at the least.

16. We read a very similar article on 26 April 1988 when the 19th Brigade is reported with unemotional details. It still seems to be a solidarity narrative, but one filled with facts rather than argumentation and politics.


18. This content comes from an unpublished oral history/interview with Kathe Karlson that I conducted on 12 March 2015 via Skype.

19. #BlackLivesMatter is an activist movement that was created in 2012 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, accused of killing a young black man, Trayvon Martin. Martin’s death sparked national outrage as many in the African American community claimed that Zimmerman was a murderer who was acquitted because of the colour of his skin and the colour of his victim’s skin. The movement is a call to action in response to anti-black racism in the US that seeks to broaden the conversation around state violence enacted on black bodies in the US.

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