

**AN ARMY OF TEACHERS:
CUBAN WOMEN IN POLITICAL EDUCATION, FROM THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN TO
YO SI PUEDO**

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History.

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ABSTRACT

Ann E. Halbert-Brooks: *An Army of Teachers: Cuban Women in Political Education, from the Literacy Campaign to Yo Sí Puedo*
(Under the direction of Louis A. Pérez, Jr.)

My dissertation examines the role of women in the Cuban Revolution through the lens of the 1961 Literacy Campaign. Using archival sources, print media, oral histories, and other primary source accounts, I argue that the Campaign was a key formative period for the nascent revolutionary state and for the 250,000 teachers who worked in it. Beginning in the guerrilla insurgency of the 1950s, the 26th of July Movement invested in education and described political education as a central component of its proposed changes to Cuban society. After 1959, this institutional emphasis on education facilitated the political mobilization of women and the creation of mass organizations like the Comités de Defensa de la Revolución and the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas. Individual women engaged critically with propaganda for the Literacy Campaign, volunteering to teach with the expectation that their professional horizons would be expanded through their work. In the decades that followed, their work also influenced their relationship with the revolutionary project.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJR	Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes
CDR	Comités de Defensa de la Revolución
FAR	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias
FMC	Federación de Mujeres Cubanas
UJC	Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas

INTRODUCTION

Since 1959...the works of male writers...have been produced in accordance with the norms of a culture that is not only patriarchal, but also—as a result of the magnificence of the guerrilla struggle and the threats of every sort that menaced the Revolution—a culture that was markedly virile, martial, in which the most prominent topics were “the difficult years,” the war. Thus, the enormous transformations brought about by women’s incorporation into society were not “interesting,” except insofar as they could be considered, paternalistically, a concession to women, a concession given to them because the Revolution was generous.¹

Accounts of the Literacy Campaign of 1961 often describe it as an achievement for Cuban women, who comprised a majority of the teachers in the Campaign. Photographs from the Campaign concur: young women were a prominent part of the teaching workforce in 1961, appearing in parades, in teaching demonstrations, and in photographs of daily life. Officials asked parents to give their permission for daughters to participate in the Literacy Campaign, promising that they would be protected as they worked. Still, if young women chose to run away from home or forge the signatures of their parents to enroll as teachers, they were able to teach even after the deception became known. Women also comprised the vast majority of all experienced teachers in Cuba in the 1950s and 1960s.² They were called upon to leave their families—albeit temporarily—to further the Literacy Campaign and, by extension, the revolutionary process begun in 1959.

¹ Luisa Campuzano, “Literatura de mujeres y cambio social: narradoras cubanas de hoy.” Reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios: escritoras cubanas del siglo XVIII al XXI* (Leiden: Almenara Press, 2016) 137.

² There were 34,845 female teachers in Cuba recorded in the census of 1953, out of a total of 42,571. Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), Table 54, p. 204.

Nevertheless, some of the most visible symbols of the Campaign were men like the martyred teachers Conrado Benítez, Manuel Ascunce, and Delfin Sen Cedre, all of whom were assassinated by counterrevolutionary groups in the Escambray Mountains of central Cuba. Thousands of other young men joined to complete their work, an unprecedented increase in interest in primary education among men.³ This interest in teaching likely drew on the framing of the Campaign. Armando Hart Dávalos, a member of the 26th of July Movement who was imprisoned for his revolutionary activities, served as Minister of Education and oversaw the project, and Fidel Castro first announced the project, supervised it on a national scale, and was featured in the literacy textbook in writing assignments like the one that directed students to copy out the phrase “united, both old and young, we vow with Fidel: together we will defend Cuba. They will never defeat us!”⁴ Fictionalized accounts of the Literacy Campaign like Humberto Solas’ 1968 film *Lucia* and Octavio Cortázar’s 1977 film *El Brigadista* also feature young men as symbols of the Revolution and the young adults it sought to create.

Despite this martial framing of the Literacy Campaign, young women chose to teach. Furthermore, their work implicitly refuted the idea that their later professional success was a “concession to women, a concession given to them because the Revolution was generous:” young women defied traditional authority figures to join the Campaign, stepped into positions of authority while teaching on the Campaign, and returned from their work with the expectation

³ Though many young adults went on to careers in other fields, it is still notable that young men were recruited in nearly equal numbers for the 1961 Literacy Campaign. In 1953, for example, just 5,777 of the 36,815 elementary schoolteachers in Cuba were men. This gender imbalance persisted among secondary and higher education instructors, suggesting that education was seen as a women’s profession. Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 54, p. 204.

⁴ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional, 1961) 62.

that they had earned access to higher education.⁵ Furthermore, their work shaped the Cuban state. The revolutionary government needed the labor of young women in the Literacy Campaign to demonstrate that it could effectively deliver social services to all Cubans. The templates that it used to mobilize those young women were adopted by other parts of the Cuban state in subsequent years to further consolidate their position in Cuban society. Lastly, by focusing on the early years of the Cuban Revolution through the lens of the 1961 Literacy Campaign—a project carried out largely by women and unambiguously one of the “enormous transformations” of that decade—it is possible to explain its lasting significance to participants who have remained involved in the revolutionary project.

This tension between the male symbols of the Campaign and its female workforce has played out in various forms since the project was officially announced in 1960. During the Campaign itself, it often took the form of women like the Minister of Education for the Rebel Army Asela de los Santos ceding her position to Armando Hart, and young women requesting the permission of their parents to teach. Following the Campaign, young teachers were granted scholarships to enable them to move into the workforce rather than becoming housewives. They were also given special access to the government through organizations like the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), where their gender was an explicit requirement for membership, and Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (CDR), where their work was represented on a national stage by men. Despite this, individual women found the Literacy Campaign a liberating experience, and in the twenty-first century their *testimonios* have helped to bring new attention to the 1961 Campaign and the contributions of women in the Cuban Revolution. The rise of

⁵ Campuzano, “Literatura de mujeres y cambio social.” Reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios*, 137

women's *testimonios* about the Literacy Campaign and the contemporary focus on the work of women like the 1961 Campaign veteran Leonela Relys in *Yo Sí Puedo* represent a distinct shift toward highlighting women's narratives of the Cuban Revolution, enabling women to benefit from the revolutionary project and claim to have played an integral role in it, a role that is worthy of respect and admiration by later generations.

Cuba before the Literacy Campaign

In his study of political culture and the Cuban Revolution, Richard Fagen observed “that if the revolutionary leadership was as committed as it seemed to be to achieving a fundamental reorganization of Cuban society...the historic importance of the Cuban case would revolve not around the guerrilla struggle but around the way the revolutionary leadership was going about accomplishing the massive redistribution of goods, services, and opportunities.”⁶ This redistribution was portrayed as a continuation of the guerrilla struggle; just as Fidel Castro led the Rebel Army to military victories against the U.S.-backed government of Fulgencio Batista, he would also lead redistribution efforts to return control of property, schools, and utilities to Cubans. These institutions could then be called upon to respond to domestic needs. Like Fagen, other observers of the Cuban Revolution were impressed with the speed with which the revolutionary government attacked problems that it viewed as priorities: issues like property ownership, electricity and telephone utilities, rents, and access to education. Some of these changes, like rent control laws, were promulgated quickly and helped to cement support for Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement. These reforms benefitted both men and women, and did not necessarily challenge gender norms through their implementation. Other reforms, like the expansion of educational access and elimination of illiteracy, required a labor force that could

⁶ Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) vi.

travel to communities without schools and establish them. They were carried out with the active participation of women, challenging gender norms in the process.

The Literacy Campaign of 1961 was the beginning of this effort: an ambitious project to increase adult literacy rates in Cuba from the 78 percent recorded in the 1953 census to universal adult literacy before the beginning of 1962. In the process, it would confirm that the revolutionary government was committed to long-term change and social equality.

The Campaign was ambitious in its timeline, but also indicative of how the revolutionary government sought to hold itself to a higher standard than other nations. In a regional context,

	Literacy Rates, ca. 1900	Literacy Rates, ca. 1950
Argentina	55%	86%
Bolivia	16%	32%
Brazil	29%	49%
Chile	32%	80%
Cuba	46%	78%
Jamaica	43%	72%
Mexico	21%	57%
Puerto Rico	18%	74%
Uruguay	59%	87%

Table 1: Selected literacy rates across Latin America around 1900 and 1950, as compiled by Javier Núñez. Núñez calculated these rates based on census data collected in different years and attempted to correct for any individuals who were not included in the original census data. In Cuba, for example, he took the official 1899 census figure of 43 percent and argued that it was an under-count, with the true literacy rate closer to 46 percent. By 1950, he found that census data more accurately reflected the demographics of each country.

Cuban literacy rates and educational access were, if not the highest in the region, among the highest as illustrated in Table 1.⁷

Literacy rates had also increased rapidly since Cuba received its independence in the early

twentieth century. Nevertheless, by the late 1950s the Cuban public decried what many saw as

unacceptably low literacy rates. In particular, many Cubans found it unacceptable that access to education was sharply curtailed by geography, with residents of cities like Havana having access to education, while those living in rural, often mountainous areas of Pinar del Rio, Las Villas,

⁷ Javier Núñez, "Signed with an X: Methodology and Data Sources for Analyzing the Evolution of Literacy in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1900-1950," *Latin American Research Review* 40 No. 2 (June 2005): 127, 130.

and Oriente provinces often lived far from schools and teachers. Fidel Castro and other members of the revolutionary government concurred, and proposed that universal adult literacy would establish Cuba as a regional leader in the field of education by demonstrating that it could educate its most marginalized citizens.

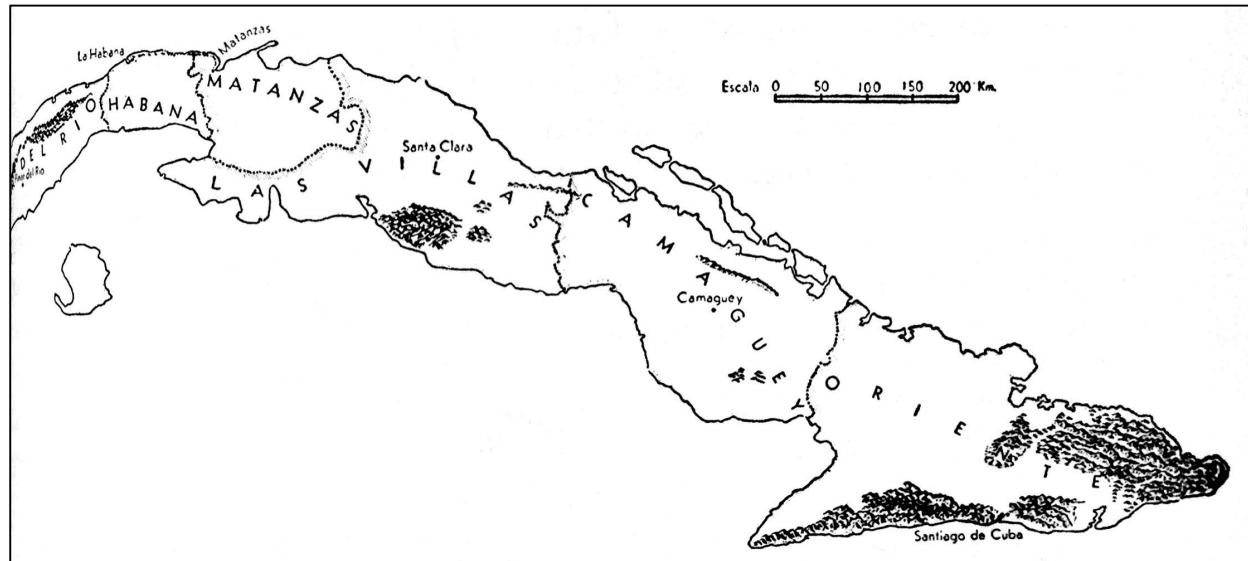


Figure 1: Cuban administrative divisions in the early twentieth century.

Urban	152,861	1,406,025	231,737	511,535	307,385	715,085
Rural	295,561	132,778	164,043	518,627	310,871	1,082,521
Province	Pinar del Río	Havana	Matanzas	Las Villas	Camagüey	Oriente

Table 2: The population of Cuba by province, ca. 1953. Cubans living in rural areas were less likely to have access to schools or other social services.

These marginalized citizens, particularly the residents of rural areas in Oriente province in eastern Cuba, were a bastion of support for Fidel Castro as he and the 26th of July Movement before they took power in January 1959.⁸ By the late 1950s, Cuba had a population of more than

⁸ Cuban provinces were laid out in 1879 and subdivided in 1976 into their contemporary administrative divisions. The image in Figure 1 above is drawn from Levi Marrero, *Geografía de Cuba*, 5th Edition (Miami: Moderna Poesía, 1981) 385. Population data is drawn from the Cuban census of 1953, Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 12, p. 21-22.

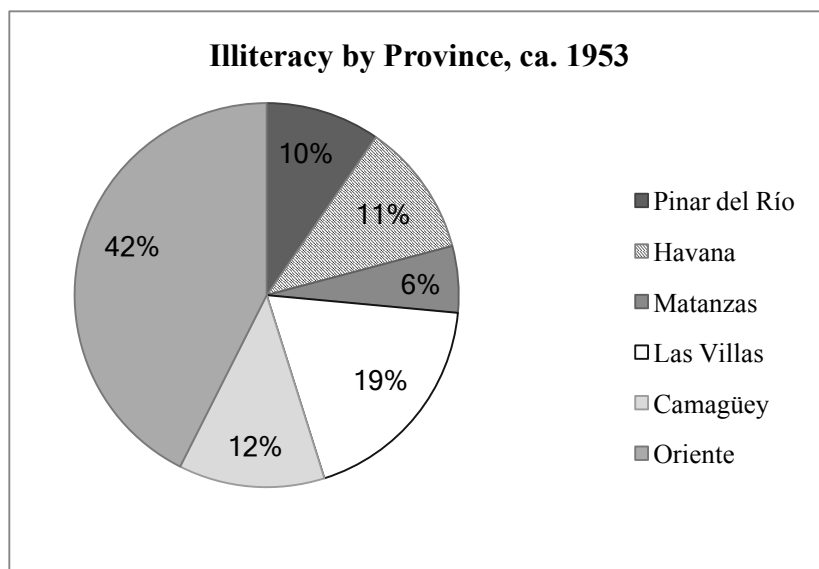


Figure 2: Data on illiteracy rates by province, from the 1953 census. Despite population growth and the disruptions of the guerrilla insurgency later in the decade, a 1960 census of literacy rates found similar literacy rates.

4 million. One quarter of those lived in the city and surrounding province of Havana, where they had access to many of the best schools. Another quarter of the national population lived in Oriente, the poorest province which also had the lowest literacy rates and access to schools, as

shown in Figure 2.⁹ Teachers recruited to work in regions like Oriente would be confronted with some of the most extreme poverty in Cuba in 1961, and bring the skills necessary to begin lifting their fellow citizens out of it.

This dissertation seeks to evaluate the conclusions of scholars like Richard Fagen about the Literacy Campaign from a historical perspective from the vantage point of more than five decades after the 1961 Campaign.¹⁰ Few observers have questioned the overall efficacy of the

⁹ Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 40, p. 143-148.

¹⁰ Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*. Other scholars who have examined the Literacy Campaign from the disciplines of political science include Jorge I. Domínguez, who offered a wider-ranging view of major revolutionary institutions, ranging from the CDRs to the FMC, youth organizations, the Communist Party, and the army in *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1978). This wider scope provides a useful picture of the changes that had affected life in Cuba since 1959, but it could be taken to imply that the Cuban government and all of its associated organizations formed a monolithic revolutionary state. This was not true of Cuba in the early 1960s. Cuban scholars writing on the Literacy Campaign have included Ana Núñez Machín, *La Epopeya: historia de la campaña de alfabetización* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983); Ana Angélica Rey Díaz, *Conrado: primer maestro mártir* (Havana: Editorial Política, 1987); Felipe de Jesús Pérez Cruz, *La Alfabetización en Cuba: lectura histórica para pensar el presente* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2001); Flora B. Lescaille, Alcira M. Sánchez, María M. Rodríguez, and María de las Nieves Fonseca, *Conrado Benítez: Tras las huellas del maestro voluntario* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2002); Águeda Pérez García, *Una proposición cubana de alfabetización desde posiciones de género y ruralidad* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1979); Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, *Hacia una escuela cubana de alfabetización* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y

Literacy Campaign as a project to raise literacy rates in Cuba. Furthermore, comparative studies of literacy campaigns have argued that the 1961 campaign in Cuba may be the most successful literacy campaign since the Protestant Reformation.¹¹ Looking beyond literacy rates, the institutions of Cuban government indicate that the Campaign was a success as well. The Ministry of Education invested heavily in adult literacy classes in the early 1960s, but these courses became largely unnecessary as literacy rates rose and students could transfer into the regular school system. Other institutions also bear out this thesis, and demonstrate that the Literacy Campaign succeeded in other ways as well, gaining influence over daily life in the immediate aftermath of the Campaign.

Earlier scholarship proposed that the Literacy Campaign functioned as a proving ground for the revolutionary government as it sought to gain and maintain the support of the Cuban public despite opposition from the United States and domestic counterrevolutionary insurgents. Fagen, for example, cited the Literacy Campaign, CDRs, and Escuelas de Instrucción Revolucionaria as key institutional sites in the creation and consolidation of support for the revolutionary government. The Literacy Campaign did serve as a crucial test of the revolutionary government's organizational capacity. The role of CDRs in Cuban life has likewise been

Educación, 2007); Luisa Campos Gallardo, Oscar Yanes Álvarez, and Rubén Darío Zayas Montalván, *Yo soy el maestro* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2008); José Suárez Amador, *Maestros de verde olivo* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2009). Jonathan Kozol and, more recently, Mark Abendroth have also examined the Literacy Campaign in the context of the history of education. Kozol, "A New Look at the Literacy Campaign in Cuba," *Harvard Educational Review* 48, No. 3 (1978): 341-377; Kozol, *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978); Mark Abendroth, *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship* (Duluth: Litwin Books, 2009).

¹¹ There are caveats to this analysis from Leiner: many other literacy campaigns have been carried out in larger regions with lower literacy rates and lower levels of economic development that made it more difficult to reach students, or a multi-lingual environment that was more challenging for curriculum designers and teachers. The Cuban case also benefitted from limited expectations: reaching a first-grade reading level is considered relatively easy compared with full functional literacy. Marvin Leiner, "The 1961 National Literacy Campaign," In *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Ed. Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff (New York: Plenum Press, 1987) 190-191.

confirmed, with the committees taking on many roles as needed by the national leadership. This dissertation will begin to examine the ways in which CDRs evolved to meet these needs, focusing only on the immediate aftermath of the Literacy Campaign of 1961 and women, the protagonists of the Literacy Campaign. Escuelas de Instrucción Revolucionaria, in contrast, did not achieve the same levels of influence throughout the Cuban populace as CDRs, the Ministry of Education, or the FMC, other institutions involved in the Literacy Campaign and discussed in this dissertation.

Because he wrote from the United States, many of the young teachers in the Literacy Campaign were quickly caught up in subsequent projects and their own professional careers, and because many of the young adults who were most affected by the Literacy Campaign were women—a gendered component to revolutionary change that Fagen did not address—the familial conflict engendered by the Literacy Campaign and its institutional successors did not appear in early analyses of the project.

Even by the time Fagen wrote about the Literacy Campaign in the late 1960s, Cuban media had moved on from the Literacy Campaign, acknowledging its importance but implying that its relevance was undercut by the strides that had been made since the successful conclusion of the Campaign in December 1961. Scholars conducting research in Cuba found informants happy to discuss their experiences in the Campaign, but these experiences were couched in a litany of other improvements brought about by the Revolution: access to higher education, new housing, employment, and healthcare. The experiences of some *alfabetizados* also suggested that the Literacy Campaign had improved literacy rates, but that the promise of an egalitarian society where one could overcome the social stigma of being raised poor and illiterate was yet to be

realized.¹² Accounts like those of Margaret Randall also suggested that women were particularly impacted by the Cuban Revolution, but feminist scholars debated the degree to which it had actually offered institutional support for women's equality.¹³ As women were both a majority of the teachers in the 1961 Literacy Campaign, the Campaign was a potentially important and overlooked case study in this debate.¹⁴

It is possible and necessary to reevaluate the importance of the 1961 Literacy Campaign in the twenty-first century in part because of the renewed interest in the project from within Cuba. Young adults undoubtedly found some experiences in the Literacy Campaign difficult or "explicitly sanction[ing] the sexual roles and images of men and women consecrated in patriarchal society...[and] traditional rules of conduct," as some scholars argue occurred in daily work in the Literacy Campaign, these elements appear to be outweighed in the narratives

¹² Douglas Butterworth, a North American colleague of Oscar and Ruth Lewis, collaborated with them on an oral history project in Cuba beginning in 1969. Based on his work, Butterworth observed that "most of the former Las Yaguas families [residents of a notorious Havana slum] had not lived up to the ideals of the Revolution," though their lives improved in regards to food security, healthcare, and housing. Douglas Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Postrevolutionary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 140. Some of this research was published in the series *Living the Revolution: Four Men, Four Women, and Neighbors*. These three volumes focused on the biographies of eight individuals and a profile of a small apartment building in the Miramar neighborhood of western Havana. To preserve the anonymity of their research subjects, Lewis and Butterworth used pseudonyms for interviewees and the developments where they lived. This dissertation uses the pseudonyms assigned by Butterworth and Lewis. Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: Four Men* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: Four Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: Neighbors* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

¹³ Like Butterworth, Margaret Randall arrived in Cuba in 1969, but her research and interviews focused on women who were better integrated into the revolutionary project. Maxine Molyneux, meanwhile, studied socialism from a comparative perspective from outside of Cuba, and became more critical of the promise of socialism for women over time. Randall, *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1974); Molyneux, "Socialist Societies Old and New: Progress Towards Women's Emancipation?" *Feminist Review* No. 8 (Summer 1981), pp. 1-34; Molyneux, "Family Reform in Socialist States: The Hidden Agenda," *Feminist Review* No. 21 (Winter, 1985), pp. 47-64.

¹⁴ Scholars like Steve Stern in his reappraisal of Lewis' Tepoztlán study have argued that the wealth of evidence produced in primary source material of this sort allowed them to be read against the grain, offering information about gendered structures of power even when scholars like Lewis himself did not explore those topics in his own work. Steve J. Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men, and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995) 45-46, 321-322.

individuals told in the twenty-first century.¹⁵ Former literacy teachers, many of them women, joined in a general debate about the value of the Cuban Revolution in the 1990s and 2000s, when the “Special Period” led to drastic declines in standards of living on the island. Adults whose careers had been nurtured through scholarships and dedicated to revolutionary projects were confronted with the reality that conditions in Cuba would not continue improving, and that younger generations did not share their idealism or commitment to the Revolution. To explain their commitment to the Revolution and argue for younger generations to dedicate themselves to the same principles, former literacy teachers began to recount their experiences in the early 1960s for a younger audience.

The Cuban government also found new meaning in the Literacy Campaign, employing it as an intellectual antecedent of the “Yo Sí Puedo” literacy program exported to Haiti in 1999, Venezuela in 2003, and subsequently to other countries. As with Cuban medical missions, which formally began in the early 1960s with the dispatching of doctors to Chile in the aftermath of a 1960 earthquake but took on a new importance during and after the “Special Period.” Where scholars like Jorge Domínguez asserted that the Cuban government of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s employed internationalist humanitarian missions of doctors and teachers as a subordinate arm of its military goal of promoting revolution, by the 1990s and 2000s military objectives were no longer feasible.¹⁶ The survival of the Cuban Revolution became linked to the degree to which it could offer a skilled workforce of teachers and doctors to other developing nations. In some cases, as with doctors in Venezuela and Brazil, this exchange was explicitly one for oil and cash

¹⁵ Luisa Campuzano, “Cuba 1961: los textos narrativos de las alfabetizadoras. Conflictos de género, clase y canon,” Reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios* (Leiden: Almenara Press, 2016) 124.

¹⁶ Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba’s Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

to support the Cuban economy. In others, as with Cuban missions of doctors and teachers in Haiti, there is less expectation of direct economic remuneration. Efforts to redefine the Cuban Revolution as a proponent of literacy efforts in developing nations also benefit from real connections between “Yo Sí Puedo” and the Literacy Campaign of 1961, most notably in the person of Leonela Relys, a teacher in the 1961 Campaign and the architect of the curriculum, and other leading educational scholars like Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, another teacher in 1961 who has written extensively on the 1961 Campaign and “Yo Sí Puedo.”¹⁷

In this way, some teachers from the 1961 Campaign have explicitly answered the question posed in the “Special Period” about the importance of the Cuban Revolution as a whole, creating a legacy for the teachers of 1961 in more recent pedagogical scholarship. However, this pedagogical scholarship has also obscured important aspects of the 1961 Campaign’s origins and immediate impact, particularly its origins in the Rebel Army and its role in normalizing a militant revolutionary culture visible in organizations like the FMC and CDRs in the early 1960s. As a result, it is valuable and necessary to reevaluate both the short- and long-term impacts of the Literacy Campaign to understand the varied meanings of literacy education and mobilization in revolutionary Cuba.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation analyzes the Literacy Campaign at two points in time: from its immediate aftermath in the early 1960s, when its institutional origins and effects were most pronounced, and its long-term effects that have become clearer since the 1990s. It opens with an examination of the pedagogical and institutional origins and goals of the Literacy Campaign of

¹⁷ Leonela Relys wrote about the development of the Yo Sí Puedo curriculum in Leonela Relys Díaz, *Yo sí puedo: un programa para poner fin al analfabetismo* (Havana: Casa Editora Abril, 2005); Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, *Desde la alfabetización presencial al yo, sí puedo* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2005).

1961. While propaganda from the revolutionary government promoting the Literacy Campaign emphasized that the Revolution was a break with the past, the beginning of a new era when “we can tell all of the men who died in our struggles for liberty that at last we have arrived at the hour in which their dreams will be realized,” and the goals of nineteenth-century nationalists like José Martí and Mariana Grajales would be fulfilled.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Literacy Campaign drew on older literacy projects like the Triennial Plan organized by Fulgencio Batista in the 1930s and the work of North American Christian missionaries. The Literacy Campaign of 1961 was a far more ambitious project than its institutional and pedagogical forbears, though, recruiting more than 250,000 teachers in an attempt to eliminate illiteracy by the end of 1961 and prepare newly literate Cubans for classes that would bring them to full functional literacy in 1962 and beyond.

Next, I turn to two institutions in the Cuban revolutionary state, the Ministry of Education and the FMC, to analyze how these institutions that played key roles in the 1961 Literacy Campaign approached women’s education and mobilization during and after the Campaign, when women comprised a majority of all professional and volunteer teachers in Cuba. The Ministry of Education and the FMC sought to bring women from all socioeconomic classes into the workforce, and their methods of doing so often relied on gender-specific recruiting. In the case of the Ministry of Education, this meant recruiting domestic workers and offering them training that allowed them to move into white-collar and technical jobs. In the FMC, this took the form of an increase in daycare centers across the country and an emphasis on women’s obligation to work outside the home even if her husband did not support that work. These two institutions shared a similar mission, but their vision of the revolutionary citizen in society was

¹⁸ Fidel Castro Ruz, “Speech given at at Parque Céspedes,” Santiago de Cuba, 1 January 1959. Available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/f010159e.html>.

fundamentally different: where the Ministry of Education mobilized women into education and the workforce on the basis of their individual needs and relationship to the larger society, the FMC addressed women as members of a nuclear family unit that mediated their relationship to the rest of the revolutionary state.

In his 1969 study, Fagen identified the CDRs as site for the creation and propagation of revolutionary political culture. Like the Ministry of Education and the FMC, CDRs were an integral part of the 1961 Literacy Campaign, saw a dramatic increase in membership over the course of the Campaign, engaged in educational activities with a political message, and explicitly encouraged women's participation. However, because they positioned women as teachers and arbiters of revolutionary culture and values, CDRs challenged contemporary gender norms in potentially alarming ways. Where the reputations of ideal middle- and upper-class Cuban woman had once been subject to scrutiny by predominantly male observers, with figures like chaperones safeguarding their honor, after 1960 CDRs empowered these same women to act as gatekeepers of rumor and gossip in the community, observing their neighbors and bolstering or undermining their reputations as good revolutionary citizens. Because the Literacy Campaign was the first major project of the CDRs, it offers a view of both how the Campaign influenced the institutions that worked on it and the ways in which it influenced gender norms among its participants.

While the Literacy Campaign shaped the Cuban revolutionary state and the institutions within it, Cuban society continued to change in response to new projects and challenges in the years that followed. Attention shifted away from the Campaign, and it appeared to be superseded by later work. Individual participants also found the Literacy Campaign a formative experience, though.

In 1961 they responded critically to propaganda for the Campaign, employing it as a means to assert their agency. Patriotism and enthusiasm for the revolutionary project were major motivating factors for teachers and their parents who gave them permission to leave home, but they were hardly the only reason. Often, young adult teachers drew on their budding political consciousness formed around events like the 1960 explosion of *La Coubre* or their experiences in the guerrilla struggle of the 1950s in choosing to volunteer for the Literacy Campaign. They also joined with the expectation that their work would have positive effects on their careers after 1961, offering them access to higher education, professional certification, and employment. Accounts of the Literacy Campaign from these teachers emphasize their role as agents in the revolutionary process and the degree to which the Cuban Revolution nurtured the ambitions of young men and—to an even greater degree—young women.

Since the “Special Period” of the 1990s these young female teachers have reasserted the importance of their work as well. Women and men who taught in the Literacy Campaign of 1961 have expressed a new interest in discussing their experiences in the Campaign and articulated a consensus that their work in the Campaign bolstered their faith in the revolutionary project, gave meaning to their later work, and offered a justification for their continued support for the revolution even as younger generations sometimes questioned its long-term accomplishments. The Cuban government, meanwhile, has found former teachers’ interest in discussing their experiences useful because they support the idea that a key part of the Cuban Revolution is a commitment to internationalist service, whether by doctors or by teachers in the “Yo Sí Puedo” literacy missions. The bridge between these two groups is a group of men and women who began their teaching careers in 1961, and went on to design and work on “Yo Sí Puedo” literacy missions.

CHAPTER 1: “THIS WAS ONLY ACCOMPLISHED BY THE REVOLUTION” REORGANIZING CUBAN SOCIETY THROUGH LITERACY

Introduction

On September 26, 1960, Fidel Castro spoke at the United Nations in New York City. The speech—the longest in the history of the United Nations—was part of a visit that drew international attention to the aspirations of the new government that had taken power in Cuba the year before. Castro and the rest of the Cuban delegation had come to New York on September 18. Just a few days before the Cubans were set to arrive, U.S. officials announced that the entire Cuban delegation would be confined to the island of Manhattan. The restriction reflected the heightened tensions between the United States and Cuba, with New York papers observing that the Cubans would have the same travel limitations as the delegates from the Soviet Union. In light of the tensions between Cuba and the United States, the management of the midtown hotel where the Cuban delegation planned to stay appeared uneasy, and Castro abandoned the hotel on September 19. The majority-white Cuban delegation relocated to the Theresa Hotel in Harlem, far from most of the other U.N. delegations. English-language newspapers described the move as “a dramatic gesture in a campaign for the support” of African Americans, whom Castro described as fellow victims of U.S. domestic and international imperialism.¹ Upon moving to Harlem, Castro arranged meetings with African-American leaders like Malcolm X to illustrate his point about transnational and Third World solidarity to the press and the public, while Cuban

¹ Wayne Phillips, “Castro is Seeking Negroes’ Support: Hotel Shift Seen as Part of Drive Stressing Cuba’s Racial Equality,” *The New York Times*, 21 September 1960, 17.

papers announced that these meetings included heartfelt expressions of “solidarity and support” from Harlem, which was—like Cuba in 1958—a “case of dynamite” created by U.S. policy.²

In the U.N. speech itself, Castro critiqued the international status quo in an “opening salvo in what may be regarded as the death of imperialism.”³ Castro focused on the way wealthy countries held poorer ones in their thrall by controlling access to trade, education, and medical care. Dismantling the imperialist status quo in Cuba, he argued, required changes on all of these fronts. One of the concrete policy proposals embedded in that speech was set to have an immediate impact: Castro proposed to eliminate illiteracy in Cuba before the beginning of 1962. Castro gave few specifics about the Literacy Campaign in his speech in New York, but informed observers recognized that he proposed an ambitious, yet achievable goal for his country.⁴ Cuba had a literacy rate of 76 percent at the time of its last census in 1953, on par with wealthier Latin American countries and higher than many larger and poorer ones.⁵ This placed Cuba in a favorable position relative to many Latin American nations, but still behind wealthier nations. In the United States, for example, 98 percent of the population had attended school.⁶ As Castro acknowledged, bringing basic literacy to the more than 1 million illiterate Cubans would not undo imperialism, but if the Literacy Campaign was successful supporters believed it would

² Max Frankel, “Cuban in Harlem,” *The New York Times*, 20 September 1960, 16; “Organizaciones negras con nuestra Revolución,” *Revolución*, 20 September 1960, 14.

³ Juan Arocha, “Fidel en la ONU,” *Revolución*, 15 September 1960, 2.

⁴ Contemporary pedagogical experts like Paulo Freire estimated that a small class taught by professional literacy teachers could achieve a first-grade reading level within 2 months. While Freire himself was not a direct influence on the Literacy Campaign, he employed many of the same techniques as the eventual Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. His findings on literacy education were later published in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

⁵ Argentina and Mexico, for example, had literacy rates of 86 and 57 percent in 1950, respectively. Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), Table 40, p. 143; Javier Núñez, “Signed with an X: Methodology and Data Sources for Analyzing the Evolution of Literacy in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1900-1950,” In *Latin American Research Review* 40: No. 2 (June 2005): 130.

⁶ *Census of Population and Housing* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1955) Table 44, p. 1-96.

begin to offer all Cubans the opportunity to access primary, secondary, and higher education regardless of race, gender, or economic background. In the process, students would also develop skills that were prerequisites for work as doctors, engineers, and technicians in a modern economy free of foreign control.

In Cuba, meanwhile, the populace had spent the previous nineteen months seeing drastic changes that altered day-to-day life and the terms of political discourse. Castro and his comrades-in-arms were a frequent sight around the country. So too were the young adults recruited into groups like the Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes (AJR), a junior division of the Rebel Army for men and women between the ages of 17 and 19. The Literacy Campaign Castro announced in September 1960, though, was far larger than what current members of the revolutionary government could oversee, with teachers needed in every part of the country. The scope of the Literacy Campaign would also necessitate unprecedented disruptions in the day-to-day life of most citizens, but achieving universal adult literacy would confirm that the revolutionary government that took power in January 1959 had a firm grasp on power in Cuba, with the capacity to reorganize and mobilize Cuban society, and particularly young adults, in ways that previous governments had failed to do.

A Rejection of the Past

The Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961 responded to a longstanding interest in improving rural education, building on ideological features found in earlier literacy projects through its emphasis on establishing “a moral or political consensus” around new, centralizing authorities and its references to a new “cosmology of symbols, martyrs, and heroes” relevant to

contemporary Cuban life.⁷ However, the 1961 Literacy Campaign broke with these examples in its emphasis on achieving universal adult literacy at a first-grade reading level in the space of months, not a steady increase in literacy rates over the course of several years. Teaching 1 million Cubans to read and write between the fall of 1960, when pilot groups of teachers were sent to the first placements, and December 1961, when the Campaign concluded, required the revolutionary government to develop a functional, national ministry of education almost overnight from early work by Rebel Army officers, with investigators and teachers in every community, as well as infrastructure and support personnel to assist them.

One long-term educational project echoed in the 1961 Literacy Campaign was the Triennial Plan, an initiative designed by Fulgencio Batista during the presidency of Federico Laredo Brú in the late 1930s. The plan sent sergeants enlisted in the Cuban Army to villages to teach children and adults to read and write. Cuban men with advanced degrees were recruited into the army to join this selective group of teachers, where they were trained in the latest pedagogical techniques and sent to rural areas to serve out their term of enlistment. In the rural communities, their goal was to requisition materials to build a schoolhouse, then to educate all of the children and adults in the village. Organizers may have anticipated resistance to their plan; sergeant-teachers were authorized to force children into their schools even over the objections of their parents.⁸ Observers from urban areas and abroad viewed the project favorably, but the recruitment of qualified sergeant-teachers was difficult and no plans were made to continue the schools under future governments. A decade later, after the project had been discontinued, rural

⁷ Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, "Introduction," in *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987) 2.

⁸ Frank Argote-Freyre, *Fulgencio Batista: From Revolutionary to Strongman* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 219.

literacy rates remained low, with one sociologist working with the ministry of the interior observing that “Cuba may easily lose its present favorable ranking in the course of the next few years unless efforts are made immediately to improve school attendance for children and to provide new opportunities for adults to learn to read and write.”⁹ While the Triennial Plan showed some promise, it was not a long-term success.

Fulgencio Batista, who had been a part of Laredo Brú’s government, tried to revive these rural education programs in the mid-1950s, with a focus on both existing schools and the construction of new ones. Under his government, rural schools merited special attention and a dedicated government department, headed by Blanca Rosa Urquiaga. Urquiaga oversaw 5,000 elementary schools in rural areas, as well as more than 3,000 adult education centers.¹⁰ These centers were distributed throughout the country, following the number of illiterate Cubans in each region. Oriente, for example, had just a 50 percent literacy rate among residents of its rural areas.¹¹ In the 1953-54 school year, 856 schools were in operation in the province, serving more than 23,000 students. Overall, between 1952 and 1958, his government also claimed credit for building 370 new schools at which 2756 students learned to read and write.¹² These initiatives were laudable, but with more than 1 million illiterate Cubans throughout the country they offered incremental progress in the face of an increasing national population.¹³ Economists also warned

⁹ Lowry Nelson, *Rural Cuba* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950) 244.

¹⁰ 4663 of the 4697 schools listed in the annual report on rural education were classed as *Escuelas de Enseñanza Primaria-Elemental*. *Anuario estadístico de la enseñanza rural: Curso escolar 1953-1954* (Havana: Ministerio de Educación, 1955) 5 and 15.

¹¹ Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 40, p. 147.

¹² “Realizaciones del Gobierno de FBZ: Cultura Popular,” Batista Collection, Series VI, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

¹³ The Cuban population had increased by nearly 900,000 people every decade, increasing from 1,572,797 in 1899 to 5,829,029 in 1953. Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 2, p. 1.

that population growth and the school system were ongoing problems, indicative of “unused potential” in an under-educated Cuban workforce.¹⁴ The same rural teacher shortages that drove the rural education program were a key factor, as were students who were “eager to learn but discouraged by immediate economic difficulties and poor prospects” if they could attend adult education classes.¹⁵ Progress in building and staffing schools was also hindered by the guerrilla insurgency Castro led in the late 1950s, which was focused in Oriente. By early 1958 the guerrilla insurgency enforced a virtual state of siege in Santiago, the largest city in the province, and teachers outside the city were ordered to abandon many of their schools.¹⁶

The 26th of July Movement and the Rebel Army brought a new urgency to these literacy efforts. As early as 1953, Fidel Castro identified education as a major problem, arguing in his speech “History Will Absolve Me” that after the five fundamental revolutionary laws “another series of laws and measures [is needed]...such as agrarian reform, the integral reform of the educational system, the nationalization of the electric trust and telephone trust,” and others.¹⁷ A manifesto from 1955 also identified education as a priority, albeit less urgent than issues like decreasing rents and starting a land reform program.¹⁸ Upon arriving in the Sierra Maestra in December 1956, members of the 26th of July Movement and Rebel Army were often shocked to

¹⁴ Richard Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba: The Economic and Social Revolution*, Ed. Dudley Seers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964) 180.

¹⁵ Richard Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 180.

¹⁶ Observers like the Peruvian journalist Ciro Alegria, who was based in Santiago de Cuba and wrote for *Alerta*, had reported on this siege mentality and frequent sabotage operations since 1957. Alegria and his family were nearly caught in part of the final revolutionary offensive on November 4, 1958. Ciro Alegria, *La revolución cubana, un testimonio personal* (Lima: Ediciones Peisa, 1973) 57-59.

¹⁷ Fidel Castro Ruz, “History Will Absolve Me,” In *Revolutionary Struggle, 1947-1958: Volume 1 of the Selected Works of Fidel Castro*, Ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972) 186.

¹⁸ This statement of intent dealt with three different aspects of education: access for the “children of workers and peasants,” a general program of reforms, and an increase in teacher salaries. Fidel Castro Ruz, “Manifesto No. 1 to the People of Cuba,” In *Revolutionary Struggle, 1947-1958*, 269-270.

discover that illiteracy was “an evil that afflicted almost the entire population,” and official policy proposals became more specific about the tasks ahead.¹⁹ In the Sierra Maestra “Manifesto” of July 1957, eradicating illiteracy in Cuba was the sixth priority of the proposed revolutionary government. That manifesto called for an “intensive campaign against illiteracy, and civic education,” listing it as a higher priority than industrialization or agrarian reform.²⁰ In early 1958, Castro restated this goal in an essay for *Coronet* magazine, adding that a lack of education compounded the problem of malnutrition in the countryside, since “no one has ever taught them how to grow tomatoes, lettuce, or corn. No one has ever shown them how to utilize water. No one has ever taught them how to choose a wholesome diet or how to protect their health.”²¹ Literacy, citizenship, and access to a healthier life were linked in revolutionary propaganda.

Officers arranged impromptu classes for men and women who could not read or write, classes that also incorporated lessons on the goals of the Rebel Army. Accounts from teachers in the Rebel Army observe that it was not uncommon for *campesinos* to “travel more than five kilometers through rivers, with their shoes in their hands...to come to our classes. Every day they made this trek...without even eating lunch because they would have to return home.”²² Teté Puebla, who served as a lieutenant in the all-female combat unit the Mariana Grajales Brigade, was one of the teachers during this part of the insurgency and recalled that “we’d teach reading and writing to the rebels, the peasants, and the peasants’ children...people were taught equally

¹⁹ Asela de los Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (Havana: Ediciones Verde Olivo, 2001), 52.

²⁰ Fidel Castro Ruz, “Sierra Maestra Manifesto,” In *Revolutionary Struggle, 1947-1958*, 347.

²¹ Fidel Castro Ruz, “Why We Fight,” In *Revolutionary Struggle, 1947-1958*, 365.

²² Oral history testimony from Graciela Matos Santos, quoted in Asela de los Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro: Testimonio sobre la Campaña Educativa, 1958* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1998), XVIII.

how to handle weapons and how to read and write.”²³ Asela Santos Tamayo reaffirmed those goals, writing in one account of her work that even “the few rural public schools [in the Sierra Maestra] were almost always in a state of disrepair...and children were not sent to school out of fear for their lives,” so the Rebel Army offered a service to Cuban families that the national government could not.²⁴ Establishing and reestablishing schools in the midst of the Rebel Army—sometimes using teaching materials from the shuttered rural schools—offered children and their families access to social services.

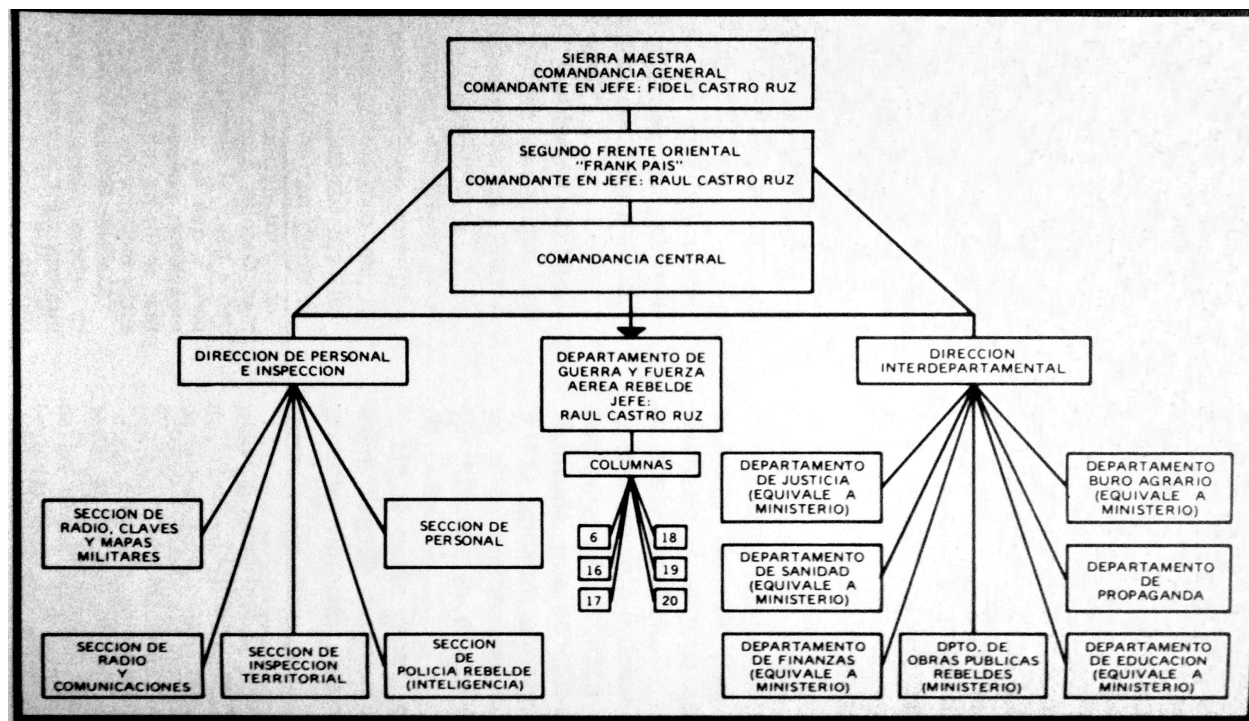


Figure 3: The organization of the Second Front "Frank País" in late 1958, as described by Antonio Núñez Jiménez.

Enlisted members of the Rebel Army joined classes as well, but by late 1958 officers required the men and women under their command to attend. Some Rebel Army officers set up

²³ Teté Puebla, *Marianas in Combat: Teté Puebla and the Mariana Grajales Women's Platoon in Cuba's Revolutionary War, 1956-1958* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2003) 33.

²⁴ Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (2001) 28.

classrooms in the middle of their camps, symbolically placing education at the heart of the Revolution. Enrique Oltuski, the leader of the urban insurgency in Las Villas, observed that on one visit to the Escambray he and his companions noticed “a faint light in one of the houses, and we went in. It was a vast structure of rubble and roof tiles. On one side were the writing desks. By the teacher's table a young rebel, lieutenant Orlando Pantoja, was sitting.”²⁵ Education took place in a central part of the camp, under the direct supervision of officers. Most teachers in Rebel Army schools were combatant-teachers, described as serving “with a rifle in one hand and a book” in the other.²⁶

Military Order 49, issued in October 1958 by Raúl Castro, the leader of the Second Front “Frank País,” codified the requirement. It established a Rebel Army Department of Education, supervising 400 schoolhouses in eastern Cuba. The Department of Education was integrated into the army alongside departments managing propaganda, sanitation, and finance as shown in Figure 3.²⁷ Asela de los Santos Tamayo and Zoila Ibarra were named as heads of the new ministry and assigned a headquarters in Mayarí Arriba.²⁸ Military Order 50, issued in November 1958, further promised that primary education in Rebel Army-controlled zones would be obligatory and free for all.²⁹ In that statement, the Rebel Army also took responsibility for procuring teaching materials. The first textbook published by the new ministry was *Bosquejo de*

²⁵ Enrique Oltuski, *Vida Clandestina: My Life in the Cuban Revolution*, Trans. Thomas and Carol Christensen (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2002) 203.

²⁶ Raúl Castro Ruz, speaking in 1988 on the thirtieth anniversary of the creation of the Second Front in eastern Cuba. Reprinted in Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (2001) 52.

²⁷ de los Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (2001) 28; Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *El Segundo Frente oriental “Frank País”* (Lima: Industrial Gráfica SA, 1974) 38; image from Núñez Jiménez, *El Segundo Frente oriental “Frank País,”* 50.

²⁸ de los Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (1998), 10-11.

²⁹ de los Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (2001) 37-38.

campaña educativa, which laid out the literacy and political education curriculum.³⁰ The Ministry of Education scaled up its operations to deliver textbooks to all of the classrooms it oversaw and distribute students into age-appropriate classes throughout November and December. This work was interrupted by the flight of Fulgencio Batista on December 31, 1958, as the focus of Rebel Army officers turned to securing the country and bringing the literacy project to the rest of the nation. Nevertheless, estimates suggest that between 60,000 and 100,000 students learned to read through Rebel Army courses between 1958 and 1960.³¹

As plans for the 1961 Literacy Campaign were announced, officials organizing the project emphasized that the nation was entering a significant new chapter in Cuban history, despite similarities to the Triennial Plan of the 1930s. Castro in particular had peppered his speeches with allusions to Cuban history, setting the tone for other officials. In Santiago on January 1, for example, he proclaimed that “this time...the Revolution will truly take power. It will not be like in 1895, when the Americans came and took the city of Santiago;” he also concluded his speech saying, “we can tell all of the men who died in our struggles for liberty that at last we have arrived at the hour in which their dreams will be realized.”³² As the victorious Fidel Castro traveled to Havana to take power later that week, he made further references to Cuban history, the coup carried out by Fulgencio Batista on March 10, 1952, the revolution of 1933 carried out against Gerardo Machado, and the election of Ramón Grau San Martín in 1944.³³ Contributions of recent governments like the ones that organized the Triennial Plan and

³⁰ de los Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (1998), 13.

³¹ Richard Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 194.

³² Fidel Castro Ruz, Speech given at at Parque Céspedes, Santiago de Cuba, 1 January 1959. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/f010159e.html>.

³³ Fidel Castro Ruz, Speech given at Plaza de la Ciudad de Camagüey, 4 January 1959. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/f040159e.html>; Fidel Castro Ruz, Speech given at Santa Clara, 6 January 1959. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/c060159e.html>; Fidel

rural education department were minimized. In the process, the new Ministry of Education distanced itself from its institutional antecedents and argued for a new national commitment to education.

In his speech in New York, Castro reviewed some of the recent accomplishments of his government that set the stage for this Literacy Campaign, describing a program of reform designed to make the Cuban people “united and...defending a just cause,” working on “settling our housing and educational difficulties...because otherwise our social problems would remain unsolved.”³⁴ Economic and social development went hand in hand with political unity in his vision of Cuba. These reforms were popular. One North American sociologist, Lloyd A. Free, who had extensive experience working in Cuba, traveled to Havana in the spring of 1960 and conducted a public opinion survey on the changes among residents of the island. The Cubans he surveyed were enthusiastic about the reforms they had seen so far, optimistic about future reforms, and determined not to lose the gains that had already been made. He found 86 percent approval rates for conditions in Cuba overall, with respondents in rural areas around Havana reporting a 93 percent approval rating.³⁵ Furthermore, one of the greatest fears among his interviewees was that Cuba might return to the social and economic conditions of the 1950s, not that the reforms would go too far.³⁶ Free mainly surveyed residents of the Havana metropolitan area, but on the basis of the data he collected in early 1960 and his previous studies of Cuban

Castro Ruz, Speech given at Parque de la Libertad de la Ciudad de Matanzas, 7 January 1959. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/c060159e.html>.

³⁴ Fidel Castro Ruz, Speech at the United Nations General Assembly, 15th Session, 872nd Plenary Meeting, New York, 26 September 1960. Transcript available online at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/PV.872.

³⁵ Lloyd A. Free, *Attitudes of the Cuban People Toward the Castro Regime in the Late Spring of 1960* (Princeton: Institute for International Social Research, 1960), 5.

³⁶ Free, *Attitudes of the Cuban People*, 26

rural life he proposed that the 93 percent approval rating he found in rural areas was a conservative estimate of support for the revolutionary government. Castro and the revolutionary government had already addressed many of the existing grievances of rural Cubans, which helped establish public trust.

Mobilizing Young Adults

National propaganda since 1959 had proposed the Rebel Army of the 1950s as a model for how education should work in contrast with the failures of earlier governments. Details of the guerrilla struggle that were reiterated in public discourse after January 1, 1959 combined an interest in practical education and political values, but with a new emphasis on the need for military-style discipline, social unity, and the effective distribution of social services. These goals grew out of the experiences of Rebel Army commanders like Raúl Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara as they tried to overthrow the government of Fulgencio Batista throughout the late 1950s, and were integral to the design and aesthetics of the Literacy Campaign as well as the ethos and goals of the AJR, an organization founded by Guevara in December 1959 as a junior auxiliary to the Rebel Army.

The AJR was chartered in August 1959, on the orders of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, and under the authority of Joel Iglesias Leyva, an eighteen-year-old who served with distinction under Guevara and learned to read and write from him. Iglesias was the youngest officer in the Rebel Army, and held up as an example of what the Revolution could do for young adults committed to working and studying for their country.³⁷ Its ideological affiliations were simple: its primary purpose was to “defend the Cuban Revolution, which is inspired by the glorious pro-

³⁷ Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez, Ed., *AJR: Documentos para una historia de futuro* (Havana: Editora Abril, 1989) 7.

independence tradition of José Martí and Antonio Maceo, and by the ideology embodied in the Rebel Army.”³⁸ Work, study, cultural production, and economic development were all dedicated to the service of this ideal.

As it was initially chartered, the AJR would induct young adults between the ages of 13 and 18, young adults of “either sex, social background, religion, and ideology” who supported the Cuban Revolution, recruiting them to work with the Rebel Army to implement the agrarian reform of 1959, create libraries for the public, and engage in public health campaigns promoting a healthy diet.³⁹ As a part of the Rebel Army, young adults were also expected to practice sports and other physical activities, with young adults of at least sixteen years of age receiving more intensive training.⁴⁰ Young men and women would be incorporated into separate brigades within the organization, attending classes in geography, history, and the philosophy of José Martí together but receiving military instruction and going on group excursions separately.

The official launch of the AJR was on the anniversary of Martí’s birth, January 28, 1960, and in speeches for the occasion, leaders of the Rebel Army emphasized that Martí was the inspiration for the AJR and the Revolution. Guevara, for example, chastised his audience for crying out “Viva el Che Guevara!” but not “Viva Martí!” despite his status as the “direct inspiration” for the Revolution.⁴¹ Guevara continued on to say that Martí was an example for all young Cubans to follow because “he taught us that revolutionaries and leaders cannot have

³⁸ “Ideas en proyecto para crear la Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes,” In *AJR: Documentos para una historia de futuro*, Ed. Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez (Havana: Editora Abril, 1989) 11.

³⁹ “Ideas en proyecto para crear la Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes,” In *AJR*, 12.

⁴⁰ “Ideas en proyecto para crear la Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes,” In *AJR*, 8-9.

⁴¹ Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Discurso del comandante Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara en el acto conmemorativo del natalicio del apóstol, el 28 de enero de 1960,” In *AJR: Documentos para una historia de futuro*, Ed. Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez (Havana: Editora Abril, 1989) 23.

pleasures or private lives, that we must give our all for the country...[and so] we dedicate every hour of our days and nights to work for our country, thinking of Martí.”⁴²

The Rebel Army appeared in AJR programming as a more recent example of Martí’s ideas in practice, and by the summer of 1960 AJR brigades were deployed to the Sierra Maestra to work with communities from which the Rebel Army had drawn its strongest support. Their base, the former Rebel Army outpost at Minas del Frío, was expanded and refurbished for the new residents. Their tasks in the mountains included forestry work, building schools and roads, and regular ascents of Pico Turquino, a climb Rebel Army veterans described as a formative experience.⁴³ Admission requirements had been adjusted to reflect the harsher conditions in which the young men and women would work: young adults under the age of 18 required the approval of their parents, and men and women under the age of 22 could participate.⁴⁴ Young women were encouraged to participate in less strenuous projects within the AJR, however; they were given sole responsibility for teaching classes on dressmaking, housekeeping, and hygiene.⁴⁵ Despite these different priorities, AJR materials still emphasized that all were welcome to join on an equal footing.

Several months later, the AJR was joined by three groups of young men and women who were training to be teachers. Unlike the AJR brigades, these groups included both young men and young women who received the same instruction. Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, one of these teachers, remembered that “in the first stage [of the Literacy Campaign preparations]...there were

⁴² Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Discurso del comandante Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara,” In *AJR*, 25.

⁴³ Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez, Ed., *AJR*, 51.

⁴⁴ “Solicitud de ingreso en las brigadas juveniles de trabajo revolucionario,” In *AJR: Documentos para una historia de futuro*, Ed. Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez (Havana: Editora Abril, 1989) 56.

⁴⁵ “De la guía del joven rebelde, discutida y aprobada en la plenaria nacional,” In *AJR: Documentos para una historia de futuro*, Ed. Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez (Havana: Editora Abril, 1989) 110.

three contingents, when the first left the second arrived and when the second left the third went and they were sent to placements in different areas.”⁴⁶ Like members of the Rebel Army and AJR, teachers were expected to complete physical fitness tests, including a climb to the top of Pico Turquino in their coed brigades. By October 1960, 50,000 members of the AJR joined these early brigades of teachers. Some accounts suggest that young women were a minority of these first cohorts of teachers, but their enrollment grew as the AJR turned to recruiting members of the general public.⁴⁷ In the subsequent year, the AJR partnered with officials running the Literacy Campaign to provide teachers and logistical support for the project.

By April 1962, when the AJR was dissolved, the Cuban Revolution moved toward an explicitly socialist political stance. The founding principles of the AJR committed it to an anti-imperialist, patriotic political outlook, and so the AJR was “converted” into a civilian “Marxist-Leninist organization in the vanguard of Cuban youth” the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC).⁴⁸ Many of the young adults who were part of the AJR migrated to the UJC by the end of that year. While the two organizations both aimed to recruit a select group of promising young adults into leadership roles, the UJC was founded too late to participate in the Literacy Campaign and did not cite the Literacy Campaign as a major influence on its work. Nevertheless, its predecessor the AJR offered a clear picture of the Revolution’s goals for young adults: political and military mobilization, allusions to Cuban history to explain contemporary politics, and assistance to poor and rural communities.

⁴⁶ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁷ Diana Balboa Hernández, the president of the AJR section at her school in 1961, was the only girl in her unit of ten volunteer teachers when she joined a pilot brigade. Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁸ Inocencia Rodríguez Rodríguez, Ed., *AJR*, 6.

Organizing the Literacy Campaign

Census data from the 1940s and 1950s indicated that literacy rates were 88 percent in urban areas and 58 percent in rural ones, a finding confirmed by studies conducted in 1960.⁴⁹ Teachers and school buildings were overwhelmingly in urban areas, however, so the Literacy Campaign would require the mass movement of teachers to their students in the countryside. This would overburden the 43,000 teachers who were already certified and working in early 1960, so the government began recruiting new cohorts of young men and women into teaching programs with the goal of becoming literacy workers—*maestros voluntarios*—in rural communities.⁵⁰ This recruitment was carried out by administrators in a variety of government departments, including the Ministry of Education and the AJR beginning in the spring of 1959 and continuing into early 1960. The revolutionary government relied on the existing population of teachers to supervise new literacy workers, while designing the curriculum and teaching materials for the Literacy Campaign. Revolutionary organizations helped to recruit new teachers, distribute resources, and offered ideological support for the overall project.

⁴⁹ Census data from 1953 also reported a total of 1,032,849 illiterate men and women across the country, 439,576 of whom resided in Oriente, compared with 192,850 in Las Villas, 127,007 in Camagüey, 116,189 in Havana province, 99,377 in Pinar del Río, and 57,770 in Matanzas. Havana and Oriente were the most populous provinces, with a population of more than 1.2 million each. Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 40, p. 143-148.

⁵⁰ Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 54, p. 204.

In April 1959, the Ministry of Education for the new revolutionary government created a special commission on literacy and basic education to study the “enormous educational task”



Figure 4: An advertisement for *maestros voluntarios*, the first group of literacy teachers, published in *Revolución* in September 1960.

ahead to reach universal adult literacy—phrasing that already appeared to conclude that a national literacy rate of 76 percent was unacceptably low.⁵¹ This commission began running short training courses for volunteer teachers that employed a variety of teaching styles popular with Cuban educators in the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the teachers who worked with the Rebel Army in the rural insurgency of the 1950s.⁵²

From the summer of 1959 to the summer of 1961, the commission oversaw a census of

⁵¹ Speech given by Armando Hart Dávalos, Minister of Education, on November 30, 1959, in Santiago. Reprinted in *Mensaje educacional al pueblo de Cuba* (Havana: Ministerio de Educación, 1960) 49.

⁵² According to Lorenzetto and Neys, UNESCO observers who documented the Literacy Campaign, these teaching methods included an ideophonic system attributed to Ana Echegoyen, a normal words system by Maria Soler, and Frank Laubach’s “each one teach one” approach. Anna Lorenzetto and Karel Neys, “Report on the Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy,” *UNESCO*, 1965, 17. The normal words system had been favored in the Rebel Army during the 1950s, but teachers were dissatisfied with students’ slow progress under the system. Asela Santos Tamayo, *Visión del futuro* (Havana: Ediciones Verde Olivo, 2001) 33.

illiterate adult Cubans, collecting data on educational access for citizens of all ages throughout the country. This census found 985,000 prospective students over the age of fourteen.⁵³ Other estimates based on the census suggested that literacy rates reported in the 1950s were overly generous, with 38 percent of all Cubans assessed described as functionally illiterate, instead of the 24 percent reported in the 1953 census.⁵⁴ The findings of the census confirmed popular beliefs: rural areas were poorly served by the existing school system, and there was stigma around being labeled illiterate.

Once these statistics were gathered, preparations for the Campaign began in earnest, under the direction of experienced, often female teachers.⁵⁵ Pilot groups of teachers known as *maestros voluntarios* were recruited using advertisements like the one in Figure 4 and trained in the literacy curriculum at the old Rebel Army base at Minas del Frío in the Sierra Maestra, then sent to teaching placements in some of the more remote parts of the country. The *maestros voluntarios*’ camp in Minas del Frío was next to the AJR base, whose members had constructed the teachers’ housing. These teachers came from a variety of backgrounds, but many were promising young adults in their early twenties with little chance of attending college because of their socioeconomic background. One of the most important conclusions that organizers drew reinforced the conclusions of Rebel Army teachers: that lessons with an immediate practical benefit were popular and successful with students. When “they wanted to know and they understood very quickly” topics like arithmetic or signing their names.⁵⁶ These *maestros*

⁵³ Richard Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba: The Economic and Social Revolution*, Ed. Dudley Seers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964) 194.

⁵⁴ *La juventud en la revolución* (Havana: Dirección de Exposiciones Internacionales, 1964) 7; Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 40, p. 143.

⁵⁵ Lorenzetto and Neys, “Report on the Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy,” 22-23.

⁵⁶ Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

vountarios were just beginning their work in December 1960, and lessons drawn from their experience would shape the next phase of the Campaign.⁵⁷

The first four months of the Literacy Campaign, from January to April 1961, offered a practical test of the organization and content of the Campaign's materials as well as the first large-scale attempts to recruit young men and women from secondary schools into a new cohort of teachers, the *brigadistas*. Almost immediately, problems arose. On January 5, 1961, counterrevolutionaries in the Escambray Mountains abducted and assassinated a 19-year-old *maestro voluntario* named Conrado Benítez, a member of one of the pilot groups. The kidnapping and assassination was believed to be an attempt to discourage parents from sending their children to teach and to discourage rural Cubans from participating in the Campaign. Official news of his death was released in late January, along with reports that the Cuban military was searching for the perpetrators. The Cuban media and government officials praised Benítez, describing him as a martyr for the Revolution, a young black man who was raised in relative poverty, who tried to help his fellow countrymen, and who was killed as a result of his ambitions. Propaganda for the Literacy Campaign argued that completing his task of teaching illiterate Cubans to read and write would honor his memory and support the revolutionary cause that motivated him. While some parents expressed anxiety about sending their sons and daughters to teach because of this threat of retribution, overall the enrollment of volunteer teachers continued unabated.

⁵⁷ Advertisements for the Literacy Campaign, like the one pictured in the advertisement above, appeared in many newspapers by the fall of 1960. *Revolución*, 15 September 1960, 4.

1.- ¿Qué son las Brigadas "Conrado Benítez"?

Un ejército de alfabetizadores formado por jóvenes estudiantes que erradicarán el analfabetismo de los rincones más olvidados de nuestro territorio.

10 RESPUESTAS a 10 PREGUNTAS

SOBRE LAS BRIGADAS DE ALFABETIZACION CONRADO BENITEZ

2.- ¿Quiénes pueden ser brigadistas?

Los alumnos de sexto grado y de las escuelas secundarias, tanto nacionales como privadas, que sean autorizados por sus padres. Y todas las jóvenes que deseen incorporarse a la Campaña de Alfabetización.

3.- ¿Quiénes acompañarán a las brigadistas?

Los maestros de las escuelas primarias y secundarias, que han renunciado a sus vacaciones y se disponen a acompañar a sus alumnos a librar la gran batalla de la cultura; y los padres, madres o cualquier otro familiar que así lo desee.

4.- ¿Dónde se pueden inscribir las brigadistas?

En sus propios centros docentes. Allí recibirán los planillos que deberán ser firmados por los padres o tutores autorizándolos a incorporarse a las Brigadas.

También podrán inscribirse en los Consejos Municipales de Educación.

5.- ¿Dónde se prepararán las brigadistas?

En Varadero. Durante una semana recibirán instrucción sobre el manejo del Manual "Alfabetizemos" y la cartilla "Venceremos". Además disfrutarán del sol, del mar y de un ameno programa de deportes, cine y diversiones.

Los muchachos se instalarán en Kawama y los jóvenes en Dupont. Estarán bajo la orientación y el cuidado de profesores y maestros.

6.- ¿Recibirán alguna ayuda económica?

Cada brigadista recibirá mensualmente un cheque de diez pesos para atender a sus gastos personales.

7.- ¿Qué equipo recibirán?

Cada brigadista recibirá: 1 par de botas, 2 pares de medias, 1 cinta, 1 botina verde olivo, distintivos, 1 mochila, 1 hamaca, 1 farol, cartilla y manual, 2 pantalones, 2 camisas, Guía del Brigadista, Código de Moral del Brigadista y libros de cuentos de José Martí.

8.- ¿Cómo está formada la Brigada?

Cada brigada está formada por 4 batallones, cada Batallón por 3 Compañías y cada Compañía por 3 pelotones. El pelotón está formado por 26 brigadistas, 2 auxiliares y un responsable que será el maestro.

9.- ¿A dónde irán las brigadistas?

Los varones a las zonas rurales y las muchachas a los poblados y boteyes. Los campesinos ya los esperan dispuestos a recibirlos como a sus propios hijos.

10.- ¿Podrán los padres y familiares visitar a las brigadistas una vez al mes?

Siempre que lo deseen. El INET, en unión de la Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización preparará excursiones para los padres y familiares a precios populares.

Le invitamos a visitar en la Ciénaga de Zapata a las Brigadas Piloto "Conrado Benítez" que desde hace varios meses están allí alfabetizando. Allí obtendrá una respuesta concluyente de cómo viven y trabajan las brigadistas. No le niegue a su hijo esta oportunidad de servir a la Patria. Firma hoy mismo la planilla autorizándolo a unirse al ejército de alfabetizadores!



EJERCITO DE ALFABETIZADORES

Figure 5: An advertisement for the Conrado Benítez brigadistas that ran in *Bohemia* and other national magazines in early 1961.

By March 1961 the scope of the literacy project was becoming clear and Benítez was well established as a revolutionary martyr and the namesake of the Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*. Young men and women were recruited from their secondary schools into units of teachers. Benítez was black, but promotional images often depicted young white men taking up his cause in an allusion to the colorblind solidarity the revolutionary government espoused.⁵⁸ Women were likewise underrepresented in recruitment posters for the Campaign even though they joined in greater numbers than young men. The revolutionary government announced that all schools would close in April, at the end of the regular school year, freeing up more teachers and secondary school students to become *brigadistas* in the Campaign. Tens of thousands of young adults volunteered as Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*, far more than could be trained in Minas del Frío in the Sierra Maestra. Instead, the revolutionary government nationalized hotels in the resort town of Varadero and converted them into training camps for thousands of *brigadistas*. These young men and women received a one-week training course on the literacy curriculum before being sent to their teaching placements elsewhere. Their training would continue at their teaching placements, where experienced teachers ran seminars that built on the material from Varadero. More than 45,000 young men and 55,000 young women joined the Literacy Campaign as Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*.

In mid-April 1961, the progress of the Literacy Campaign was briefly interrupted by the invasion of Playa Girón by US-backed Cuban exiles. The invasion failed, with the bulk of the counterrevolutionary forces captured or killed within days of landing. One militiaman-teacher, Delfin Sen Cedre, was killed in the attack, and several other young adult teachers were briefly

⁵⁸ “10 respuestas a 10 preguntas sobre las brigadas de alfabetización Conrado Benítez,” In *Bohemia* 53 No. 16 (16 April 1961) 66.

captured by counterrevolutionary forces. Domestic news covered the invasion, but quickly turned back to the Literacy Campaign; barely one week after the invasion, for example, the magazine *Bohemia* remained focused on literacy as the ultimate goal: one article emphasized how young adults were safe in a “paradise for the *brigadistas*” in the resort of Varadero, and the Escambray was a “school of heroism.”⁵⁹ Celebrations on May 1 echoed this sentiment, with speeches and news coverage prominently featuring uniformed teachers in parades celebrating the victory.⁶⁰

Individual teachers sometimes volunteered to join in the fight against counterrevolutionaries, but young adults were often told to return to their teaching placements, admonished that “we have to do things correctly, not acting like undisciplined youths.”⁶¹ Small groups of counterrevolutionaries remained active in the Escambray Mountains near Playa Girón, however, where they were an ongoing concern for teachers and administrators, threatening to kill teachers or the families that housed them. Some teachers and their families responded by arming themselves—in the case of one young woman, her fiancée gave her a pistol as an engagement present instead of a ring—but overall teachers and administrators worked to avoid confrontation, sending teachers to live in towns where they had more protection, or evacuating teachers if there was a specific threat.⁶² Teachers generally cooperated with these orders, but when they did not the results could be serious. One young teacher, Manuel Ascunce Domenech, and the father of his host family were assassinated in November 1961 after ignoring instructions to evacuate their

⁵⁹ “Varadero: un paraíso para los brigadistas ‘Conrado Benítez,’” *Bohemia* 53 No. 17 (23 April 1961) 88; Manuel Navarro Luna, “Escuela de heroísmo,” *Bohemia* 53 No. 17 (23 April 1961) 19-21, 98.

⁶⁰ “Primero de mayo en la revolución cubana,” *Bohemia* 53 No. 19 (7 May 1961) 66-68, 71.

⁶¹ Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁶² *Ibid.*

home. Overall, though, Literacy Campaign staff adapted to the danger of counterrevolutionary attacks, and Ascunce was one of three teachers assassinated over the course of the year.

By the summer of 1961, early reports indicated that the project would not be complete by December and the commission overseeing the Literacy Campaign requested more resources from the revolutionary government. This led to the recruitment of 100,000 new teachers called the “*patria o muerte*” teachers on top of the 150,000 who were working by May 1961. These “*patria o muerte*” teachers were adults with no prior pedagogical experience who were sent to communities that were making slow progress toward the goal of universal literacy. This final cohort of teachers was diverse, with teachers ranging from children who taught from their parents’ homes to adult men and women who often taught in their workplaces.

By October of that year, the effects of the 250,000 teachers and increased material resources were evident: communities were beginning to be certified as “free of illiteracy.” Students in these communities had passed a final examination designed around the *Venceremos* textbook and written a letter to Fidel Castro about their experiences in the Literacy Campaign and hopes for the future. Together, the tasks demonstrated that students had achieved at least a first-grade reading level and proficiency at writing. Detractors of the revolutionary government, meanwhile, argued that the letter-writing component created the impression that “this was only accomplished by the Revolution and Fidel,” a departure from the moderate and inoffensive goal of universal literacy.⁶³ Melena del Sur, a small town south of Havana, was the first community whose residents all passed the test, an achievement celebrated with parades and national news coverage. In the process of finding all of the illiterate adults who would learn to read and write,

⁶³ Nilka Georgina Cuevas Durán, a literacy teacher interviewed for *El pueblo dice...vivencias de la Campaña de Alfabetización de Cuba*, Ed. Matilde Serra Robledo, Ana María Rojas Lucero, Sara Legón Padilla, Nilda Sosa Delgado, Antonia Díaz Núñez, Gilberto García Batista, and Horacio Díaz Pendás. (Havana: Asociación de Pedagogos, 1999), 40.

the Cuban government accomplished a survey of which communities would require school buildings, healthcare facilities, and the presence of government administrators, and by sending teachers to those communities it created goodwill and a nascent bureaucracy that could help direct further change. This increased state control would make the revolutionary government's hold on power more secure in the face of threats from abroad or opposition at home.

Ideology of the Literacy Campaign

The Literacy Campaign was motivated by an overarching political ideology that tied practical improvements in the lives of participants to the survival of the revolutionary government and its international anti-imperialist agenda. Students began the literacy classes with modest aspirations like learning how to sign their names and “once they learned to write their own names, they were happier.”⁶⁴ To motivate students to continue beyond these basic achievements, teachers like the *brigadistas* paired literacy education with political education, promoting a vision of Cuban history in which the revolution and Literacy Campaign were the best means of fulfilling generations-old nationalist aspirations for a unified, prosperous, and independent Cuba. Educational materials also served as an introduction to many of the other government institutions promised by the revolutionaries. One of the most significant influences on the structure and form of the eventual Campaign, though, was the guerrilla insurgency of the 1950s, and the Rebel Army in the Sierra Maestra.

Techniques for teaching basic literacy in 1961 were pioneered in the Rebel Army in the late 1950s. However, many teachers like Asela Santos Tamayo, the head of the Rebel Army's Ministry of Education, believed that further work was needed to keep adult students engaged and

⁶⁴ Gerardo González Carmona, interviewed by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD)

learning quickly. The curriculum developed between early 1959 and the beginning of 1961 drew on the themes and political attitudes of the guerrilla insurgency, but its pedagogical techniques echoed a tradition of Christian literacy education by missionaries.

The curriculum and teaching strategies for the Literacy Campaign were refined over the summer of 1959 as the officials in the Ministry of Education settled on a curriculum that drew on the work of Frank Laubach, a U.S. Congregationalist missionary and educator who had worked in the Philippines.⁶⁵ Laubach's teaching philosophy, sometimes described as an "each one teach one" approach, focused on the role of personal relationships as a means of motivating students. Laubach held that every literate person could teach others to read and write without specialized knowledge or professional training, if they had access to appropriate teaching materials.⁶⁶ As a result, his work suggested that many people could learn to read and write in a short period of time even with—as was in the case in Cuba—there were more than 1 million illiterate Cubans and just 43,000 professional teachers in the country. The Laubach model also emphasized personal connections between students and teachers, which could be helpful in garnering support for the government that sent out the teachers, as it called for both teachers and students to establish a rapport based on "genuine love and sympathy."⁶⁷

The political content of teaching materials from the Literacy Campaign was an integral part of the curriculum. The title of the students' textbook, *¡Venceremos!*, announced that there

⁶⁵ Lorenzetto and Neys, "Report on the Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy," 1-17.

⁶⁶ Cuban educators were likely familiar with Laubach because of the many U.S. missionaries working in Cuba and because it was common for Cubans to attend college in the United States. Laubach was a Congregationalist minister, a member of a denomination that sent missionaries to western Cuba before the Revolution. While Laubach himself never worked in Cuba, more information on the denomination's educational work can be found in Louis A. Pérez, Jr. "Protestant Missionaries in Cuba: Archival Records, Manuscript Collections, and Research Prospects," In *Latin American Research Review* 27, No. 1 (1992), pp. 105-120.

⁶⁷ Frank C. Laubach, *Teaching the World to Read: A Handbook for Literacy Campaigns* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947) 113.



Figure 6: The covers of *¡Venceremos!* and *Alfabeticemos*, literacy manuals used in the Literacy Campaign of 1961. The manuals were printed cheaply and, aside from the covers, entirely in black and white.

were obstacles to be overcome by the revolution, and that Cubans working together could do so. Its cover featured a Cuban flag being waved in front of a diverse crowd.⁶⁸ The

teachers' textbook, *Alfabeticemos*, was

more somber, but no less political—its cover was olive green, the color of Rebel Army uniforms, with a black and white photo of a teacher and his students in the countryside. Both publications were intended to evoke an emotional reaction and invite readers to invest in the work of the government that had them printed. Lessons focused on current events and other topics of immediate use while breaking down the elements needed to read and write. The first lesson in the resulting textbook, *¡Venceremos!*, for example, taught vowels through a condemnation of the Organization of American States (OEA in Spanish), which voted to expel Cuba on the recommendation of the United States. The agrarian reform, meanwhile, was the subject of the first sentences students would read after learning consonants, asserting that “the Agrarian Reform was born in the Sierra. The Agrarian Reform gives land to the peasants.”⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *Alfabeticemos* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961), front cover; Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961), front cover.

⁶⁹ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!* 10.

Most of the sentences students were asked to write, however, were simple and designed to build on their ever-expanding knowledge of the alphabet. Their first writing assignment was to copy the words “*el ala, la ola, el lee*”—“the wing, the wave, he reads”—followed by a writing assignment that included one more consonant: “*el río, Lola reía, Raúl ríe.*”⁷⁰ Teachers observed that students were sometimes skeptical of the political content of the curriculum, “a little distrustful of the political material, not willing to believe it easily...it was difficult because in the mountains we had very little to work with, no cameras or anything” to help illustrate how different life could be in cities like Havana, or how much world affairs could affect life in Cuba.⁷¹ Thus, the quotidian work of teaching and helping host families in their work legitimized the political content of the lessons.

The accompanying manual for teachers, *Alfabetizamos*, emphasized the need to enter conversations with students about the political material as a means of making the academic lessons more memorable. Observers skeptical about the intentions of planners found ample cause for concern in the materials and their potential to further a very specific political agenda—in between model sentences like “you drink your coffee,” and “René visits his fiancée,” students also learned sentences like “Mario cleaned his weapon” and “we win our liberty guided by Fidel.”⁷² The curriculum celebrated international support for the Literacy Campaign and the revolutionary government, informing students that “all countries help us. United we can overcome aggressions. The aggressions cannot impede the Revolution. Cries of liberty come from all countries.”⁷³ This paralleled media coverage, which trumpeted each delivery of lamps

⁷⁰ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!*, 11

⁷¹ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interviewed by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁷² Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!*, 35, 27, 26, and 82.

⁷³ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!*, 96.

(for use in communities without electricity) from China, pencils, and financial support.

Alfabetizamos presented the Literacy Campaign as a process of secular, revolutionary evangelization, though not at the expense of practical skills like basic literacy.

The evangelizing attempted in texts like *Alfabetizamos* and *¡Venceremos!* reflected the methodological roots of the Campaign in Christian literacy education. However, the Literacy Campaign removed overt religious references from the material, focusing on anti-imperialism and national independence as the guiding principles for a country trying to eliminate illiteracy. To connect the mechanics of reading and writing explored in the textbooks to these larger themes of Cuba's place in the world, the men and women designing the literacy curriculum and propaganda employed new narratives of Cuban history that portrayed the Literacy Campaign as the culmination of decades of hopes.

Allusions to the past continued in promotional material for the Literacy Campaign that was set to begin on the 108th anniversary of the birth of José Martí on January 28. Martí and his contemporaries from the nineteenth century wars of independence were a particular source of inspiration in promotional literature, where they were framed in opposition to recent history. The rhetoric from the revolutionary government condemned the Cuban government of the early twentieth century, mining it for cautionary tales of how liberation could be stymied by insufficient zeal, corruption, or the machinations of foreign powers while omitting some of the progress made by previous governments. Some of his importance can also be gauged by his prominence in materials about the Literacy Campaign. One poem by Nicolás Guillén, which was printed in the textbook of the Literacy Campaign, began with the phrase “Fidel came and completed that which Martí promised.”⁷⁴ Guillén went on to explain that by fulfilling the

⁷⁴ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!* 107.

promises of Martí, Castro had “cleansed [Martí’s] flag,” restoring honor to the Cuban nation. Martí was also a familiar piece of visual iconography. One drawing published in 1961, for example, portrayed Martí holding the lamp of knowledge above the road of liberty, lighting the way for a figure wearing a straw hat associated with Cuban peasants. The caption to the drawing read “to be cultured is to be free”—a sentiment reiterated in many other materials associated with the Campaign.⁷⁵ Martí featured in these promotional materials because leaders expected his image and words to resonate with the general public, including those who might not be convinced of the need for a national literacy campaign.



Figure 7: An illustration of José Martí from 1961, holding the lamp of knowledge to illuminate the road to liberty. The quote at the bottom left reads: “To be educated is to be free.”

Mariana Grajales, another nineteenth-century patriot, also played a notable role in many promotional materials for the Literacy Campaign. One typical example from the Literacy Campaign showed Grajales pointing a young literacy teacher—a young white man who bore little resemblance to her own children—toward the mountains he would climb to teach.⁷⁶ Other discussions of Mariana Grajales and the organizations that bore her name emphasized her example as a mother figure to young Cubans, who “was born to care for [her] children” and do work for the nation.⁷⁷ In these allusions from 1961, Grajales

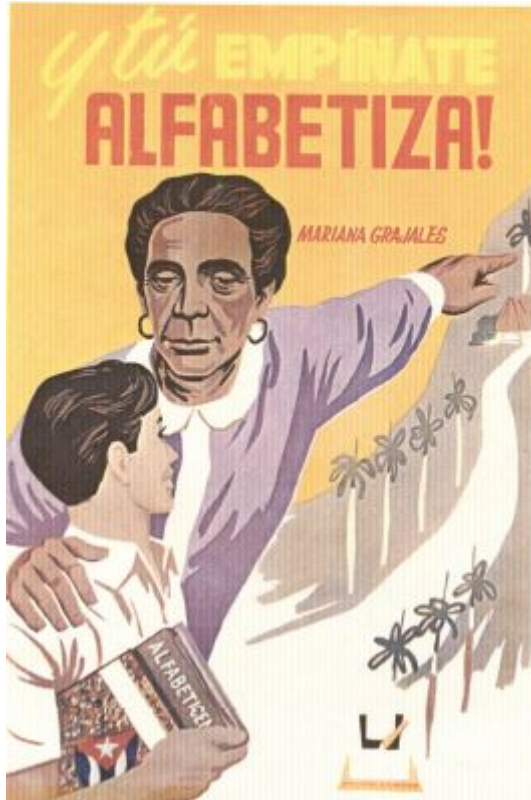
resembled earlier descriptions of patriotic Cuban women.

⁷⁵ *¡Cumpliremos! Temas sobre la revolución para los alfabetizadores* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961) 11.

⁷⁶ Poster from 1961 reprinted in *Cuba: Territorio libre de analfabetismo* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1981) Frontispiece.

⁷⁷ Santiago Cardosa Arias, “¡Aquí vienen las Mariana Grajales!” *Revolución*, 16 September 1960, 3.

Since the nineteenth century wars of independence, women like Grajales had been portrayed as the moral core of Cuban nationhood, exhorting their husbands and sons to sacrifices in the name of the *patria*. Men—the traditional political actors—were responsible for the day-to-day public life of the family while providing for women and children. Women, who presided



over the wholesome domestic sphere, complemented men's role in society by serving as the symbolic embodiment of and repository for virtue. This virtue was essential to the rearing of new citizens within the home, but even as adults men could draw upon these values by taking direction from their mothers.

Mothers could also claim moral authority in public discourse by drawing analogies between the family and the Cuban state, placing themselves as the moral compass of the nation as well as their nuclear family.⁷⁸ Women in the patriotic Cuban family were

Figure 8: A promotional poster for the Literacy Campaign picturing Mariana Grajales sending a young man to teach.

⁷⁸ Women, in the tradition of the Virgin Mary, from whom the term *marianismo* is derived, were praised for sacrifices made on behalf of their *machista* male relatives. Early analyses of the *marianismo* like Evelyn P. Stevens' 1973 article coining the term emphasized the role of *marianismo* in legitimizing and perpetuating the subjugation of women by praising women who suffered infidelities, economic hardship, or domestic abuse at the hands of their husbands. Watching the hardships faced by their mother in caring for the family, children were encouraged to revere their mother and care for her in turn when they were adults. More recent work on this topic has complicated these gender roles, exploring the many variations in socially acceptable male and female behavior over time and in different regions. More recent research by scholars including K. Lynn Stoner often emphasizes the ways in which women publicly cite this ideology as a means of claiming moral authority and effecting political change outside the home. Cuban feminists and women's activists of the early twentieth century often fit more effectively in this activist trend. Other examples of this trend include the mothers of disappeared dissidents in Argentina and Chile in the 1970s and 1980s as well as the mothers of Sandinistas studied by Lorraine Bayard de Volo in her *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs*. Evelyn P. Stevens, "Machismo and Marianismo," *Society* 10 (September/October 1973): 6, 57-63; K. Lynn Stoner, "From the Houses to the Streets: Women's Movement for Legal Change in Cuba, 1898-1958" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1983); Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

like Grajales: helpmeets and cherished prophets of the nation, sending young teachers into the countryside in 1961.

Conclusion



Figure 9: Young *brigadistas* in the Havana Carnival parade.

Following their victory in January 1959, members of the Rebel Army re-emphasized this militant past, wearing their uniforms everywhere—including to the United Nations—to conduct official business and alluding to their time in the Sierra Maestra. Before relocating to the Theresa Hotel in September 1960s, for example, Fidel Castro remarked that “he was willing to ‘go any place, even Central Park. We are mountain people...we are used to sleeping in the open air.’”⁷⁹ The trappings of the Literacy Campaign echoed this militant theme, with the first groups of literacy teachers receiving instruction in Minas del Frio in the Sierra Maestra. Literacy teachers

⁷⁹ Frankel, “Cuban in Harlem,” 1.

also adopted the visual cues employed by the Rebel Army, wearing army uniforms that marked them as members of an “Army of Educators” when at their teaching placements and in public events like the Havana Carnaval, where a group of *brigadistas* appeared on a parade float.⁸⁰ Together, elements like the training of new teachers and their uniforms marked the teachers as representatives of the new, militant government.

By invoking these recent precedents, revolutionary leaders seeking to promote the Literacy Campaign outlined the patriotic reasons why all Cubans should follow their example and support universal literacy. Citing their experiences in the Sierra Maestra, leaders could point to concrete improvements in the lives of their allies to demonstrate that their promises would be fulfilled. This intellectual justification for the authority of the revolutionary government applied to the Literacy Campaign and other educational endeavors, but painting Fidel Castro as the intellectual and moral successor to José Martí also suggested that his authority should extend far beyond educational policy. As a result, these historical allusions should be viewed as major part of an effort to consolidate the power of the revolutionary government and its leaders.

When Fidel Castro spoke at the United Nations on September 26, 1960, he proposed an ambitious project: to eliminate illiteracy before the beginning of 1962. Castro and the trappings of the speech he gave were the focus of intense media attention in the United States, but in Cuba attention turned to the project itself. As it took shape in late 1960, the Literacy Campaign drew on common views about the national heroes, figures like José Martí and Mariana Grajales, contrasting their values with those of more recent governments, and proposing the Rebel Army as a model for how Cuban society could be reshaped to achieve the goals that helped found the Cuban nation. Literacy and citizenship education were fundamental to this view of how Cuba

⁸⁰ O. Salas y Ozon, “El Carnaval en el año de la educación,” In *Bohemia* 53 No. 9 (26 February 1961) 31.

should be improved. By focusing on these issues first, the revolutionary government could offer Cubans expanded access to education and the promise of a more socially developed nation, uniting public opinion behind them in the process. Even as the Literacy Campaign took shape as part of a militant, radical departure from educational norms of the 1950s, propaganda and personal connections helped to encourage young adults to see the Campaign as an adventure, and to encourage the rest of society to support them with all the zeal of a nation supporting their army in a time of war.

CHAPTER 2: THE WORK YET TO BE DONE CONSOLIDATING SUPPORT AFTER THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN

Introduction

On December 22, 1961, at the closing festivities for the Literacy Campaign, Fidel Castro gave a speech to the assembled Conrado Benítez *brigadistas* and other teachers. Praising them for striking a blow for Cuban independence, he also called on them to continue their work, saying “you have asked me many times what new tasks are ahead for all of you... There are many tasks, there is work for all and we will see if we accomplish them all.”¹ He continued on to outline the tasks before the young teachers: 5,000 of their number were needed as industrial technicians, 1,500 as art teachers, 4,000 as secondary school teachers, and on through the ranks of the teachers, calling for the young men and women to do their patriotic duty as the first generation of young professionals in the Revolution. Scholarships would be offered to these young people to support their training so they could “continue ahead; but continue ahead rigorously, continue ahead with a sense of urgency” now that they had seen what the Revolution could accomplish.² Their accomplishments were impressive, but there was far more work to be done, and by maintaining the quality and dedication to their work, “in very little time we can achieve solutions to all of our problems.”³ Outside observers shared this sense of optimism; UNESCO observers of the Literacy Campaign, for example, were struck by the way that the

¹ Fidel Castro, Speech given at the closing of the 1961 Literacy Campaign on 22 December 1961, Havana, Cuba. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1961/esp/f221261e.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Literacy Campaign fostered “human relationships...intellectual, sentimental, and psychological chain reactions” that facilitated the inclusive, adaptable organizational “masterpiece” that was the Literacy Campaign.⁴

Organizations within the Cuban state, particularly the Ministry of Education and the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) as well as individual teachers received this message that the Cuban Revolution must continue because there was still work to be done. These organizations finished 1961 with the mandate of institutionalizing the Cuban Revolution, building a state that would further the anti-imperialist goals of the Revolution while working to bring the entire Cuban population under the purview of the revolutionary government.⁵ The Literacy Campaign demonstrated that Fidel Castro and other members of the revolutionary leadership were committed to bringing social services to all Cubans. However, the form that those social services would take and the method by which they would be delivered had yet to be fully decided. The Cuban revolutionary government and its agents could attempt to mobilize marginalized groups—women and those excluded from primary and secondary education before 1959—along several possible lines.

⁴ Anna Lorenzetto and Karel Neys, “Report on the Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy” *UNESCO*, 1965, 73.

⁵ By the early 1960s, the creation of a national curriculum and nationwide school system were widely accepted strategies for consolidating the power of a national government and opening regions to further development. Mary Kay Vaughan, in her work on the Mexican Revolution, points to Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Eugen Weber, and Victoria de Grazia as theorists of culture and education in nation-building. De Grazia in particular deals with the conflict between modernity and the state driving a trend toward increasing state control over education. By the early twentieth century, José Vasconcelos’ work as Minister of Education in Mexico also illustrated the goals for universal education, beginning with a Literacy Campaign in 1922 and following it with an effort to create a central administration for education, as described in Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989*, Trans. Luís Alberto Fierro (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Elise Rockwell, “Schools of the Revolution: Enacting and Contesting State forms in Tlaxcala, 1910-1930,” In *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, Ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 170-208; Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

Both the Ministry of Education and the FMC took direction from Fidel Castro and the central leadership of the revolutionary government, allowing them to be analyzed as component parts of the new revolutionary state. In the aftermath of the Literacy Campaign, the two shared a interest in gender and education: their leaderships sought to mobilize women as a distinct class of Cuban society that could be “liberated” into the workforce. However, the Ministry of Education and the FMC adopted very different conceptions of how women existed in society: where the Ministry of Education addressed women as autonomous individuals in a direct relationship with the state, the FMC sought to mobilize women as members of a nuclear family, headed by a husband. In the process, the two organizations illustrated the ambivalent views the Cuban state held of women and their role in society.⁶

Seguimiento: Lifelong Learning for Men and Women

Inside the front cover of the Literacy Campaign teachers’ textbook *Alfabetecemos*, the authors of the Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización included a dedication with a quote from Fidel Castro saying, “the essential thing is to establish the place and create the school. The school is not, of course, the building. The school is really the communion between teacher and student.”⁷ Students were expected to learn from their teachers, but teachers were also expected to learn about the lives of poor Cubans, developing “some appreciation of the hardships and

⁶ This conflict between addressing women as individuals and as members of a patriarchal nuclear family appears in other leftist governments across Latin America. In *Partners in Conflict*, Heidi Tinsman outlines this process of mobilization through family structures in Chile, where agrarian reform distributed titles to land and increased access to education and medical care. Land reform efforts by Salvador Allende and, to a lesser extent, those under his centrist predecessor Eduardo Frei gave land titles to male heads of households. Thus, while women benefitted as part of a family unit and mobilized in support of the government, the nuclear family structure was reinforced and women’s subordination to male heads of household increased. Her recent findings echo the results of earlier scholars like Maxine Molyneux, who also observed that this practice of mobilizing women as members of a nuclear family was a common feature of many socialist states, notwithstanding any official commitments to liberate women from the “bourgeois” nuclear family. Heidi Tinsman, *Partners in Conflict: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Labor in the Chilean Agricultural Reform, 1950-1973* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Maxine Molyneux, “Family Reform in Socialist States: The Hidden Agenda,” *Feminist Review* No. 21 (Winter, 1985), 47-64.

⁷ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *Alfabetecemos* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961) frontispiece.

sacrifices of rural life.”⁸ Both sets of individuals were also expected to learn the political and organizational goals of the revolutionary government through the literacy curriculum. Basic literacy—the most publicized goal of the 1961 campaign—was embedded in a curriculum of political norms and attitudes that encouraged citizens to join in the revolutionary project in the years that followed. Sometimes, this took the form of lessons about new government programs like cooperative farms, fishermen’s collectives, or house-building initiatives—initiatives highlighted in the literacy textbook *¡Venceremos!*⁹ In the years that followed, men and women were expected to learn about these initiatives through a collection of educational initiatives known as the *Seguimiento*, which mobilized individual men and women in support of the revolutionary government.

The *Seguimiento* included programs for both men and women, as the Literacy Campaign of 1961 had done, but there were also programs with a gender-specific focus, like the night classes offered for members of the predominantly male Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR, the successor to the Rebel Army), or the largely female workforce of maids and domestic servants that existed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Citizens who knew what the revolutionary government sought to do for them were expected to improve themselves as well, working for professional certifications and a deeper understanding of good revolutionary practice as a means of repaying the government for its investment in them—and gaining access to other programs that could improve their lives in the future. Men and women who did not choose to continue their education, meanwhile, might be suspected of disagreeing with the Revolution.

⁸ Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) 68.

⁹ Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, *¡Venceremos!* (Havana: Imprenta Nacional de Cuba, 1961) 19-20, 27-38, 51-52.

This focus on lifelong education and integration indirectly addressed one of the potential design flaws of the Campaign as it was originally proposed: as critics of the 1961 Literacy Campaign were quick to mention, the universal first grade reading level achieved that year was not sufficient for *alfabetizados* to read a newspaper, fully understand legal documents, or express sophisticated concepts in writing. Furthermore, *alfabetizados*' knowledge of basic written Spanish was likely to atrophy and be lost without practice, leading the country back to the literacy rates that were unacceptable in the 1950s.¹⁰ The 1961 Literacy Campaign as it was proposed and carried out could never have brought all Cubans to functional, universal adult literacy. To address this, the *Seguimiento* campaigns were intended to bring all men and women to at least a sixth-grade reading level under the direction of the Ministry of Education. These campaigns were not heralded with the same fanfare as the 1961 campaign and portrayed it as a past success, with the real achievements of the Cuban Revolution yet to be completed.

The *Seguimiento* campaigns created a system of adult education on an unprecedented scale. In one UNESCO survey of world education, for example, the Cuban government reported that in the 1953-1954 school year it had 421 adult education schools, employing 1,714 teachers and serving 50,077 students.¹¹ These adult education programs were in addition to the rural education programs that focused on the regions where most illiterate Cubans lived; rural education programs typically focused on children and young adults. In the 1953-1954 school year, the rural education division of the Ministry of Education reported a total of 216,853 students in its classes, 6,023 of whom were fifteen years of age or older.¹² This represented a

¹⁰ Richard R. Fagen addresses this concern in *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*.

¹¹ Quoted in Richard Jolly, "Education," In *Cuba: The Economic and Social Revolution*, Ed. Dudley Seers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964) 207.

¹² *Anuario estadístico de la enseñanza rural: Curso escolar 1953-1954* (Havana: Ministerio de Educación, 1955) 66-67.

substantial investment of resources by the pre-revolutionary government, but it was dwarfed by the resources invested after 1959, as shown in Figure 10. By late August of 1962, the Ministry of Education reported that 43,180 adult education courses had been organized, with a total of 455,831 students—far more students than the pre-revolutionary government had reached.¹³ These courses were broken into four types: continuation classes for the newly literate students of 1961 and adult education courses for their peers with less than a third-grade education, traditional night schools, classes in the FAR, and training courses for domestic workers.

The continuation courses were divided up into two categories: classes for the *alfabetizados* of 1961, and classes for their peers who had less than a third-grade education before 1959—listed as “New *Alfabetizados*” and “Other Continuation Course Students” in Figure 10. The course materials focused on basic Spanish and math education, albeit with political messages embedded in the same way it was in the 1961 curriculum and *¡Venceremos!* textbook. As a result, students who attended either type of *Seguimiento* course would become increasingly tied to the revolutionary state, aware of the norms it sought to promote for Cuban citizens and equipped with the knowledge necessary to take on more skilled careers.

New *alfabetizados*, who had been introduced to revolutionary culture through the Literacy Campaign, were the largest group of students in 1962. The Ministry of Education reported that by mid-August there were 14,386 classes for new *alfabetizados*, staffed by 13,821

¹³ Quoted in Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 214.

teachers and serving 313,569 enrolled students.¹⁴ Their courses were less professionalized and

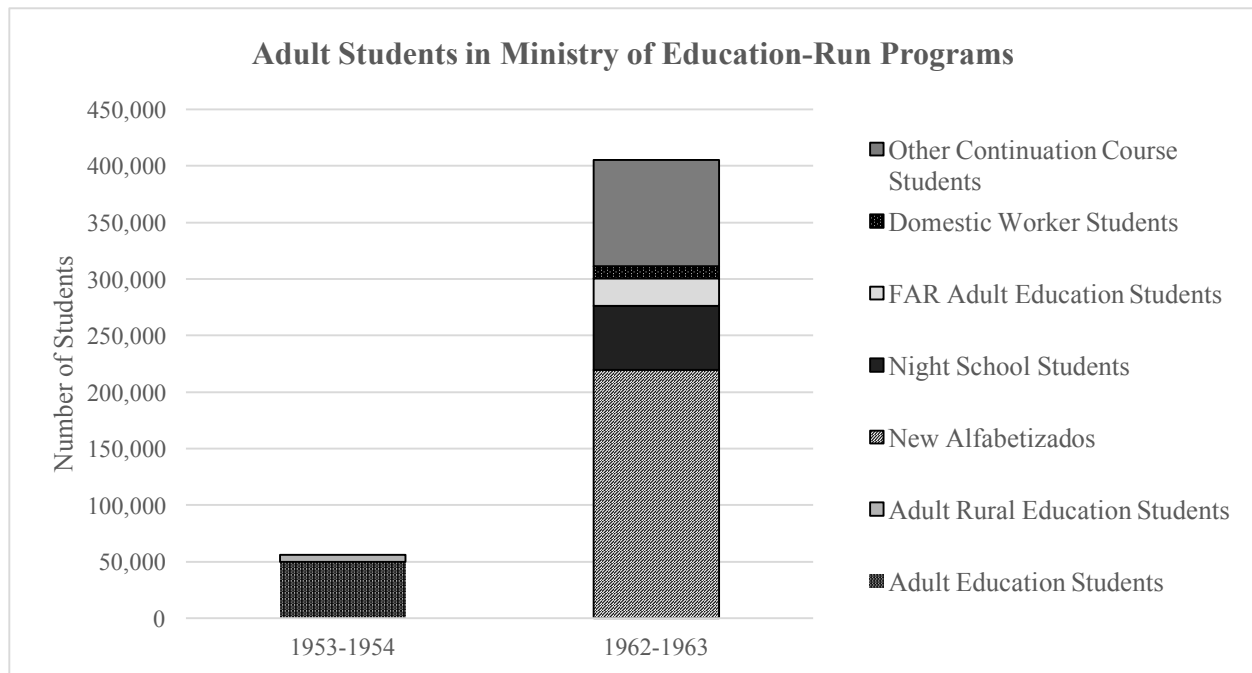


Figure 10: Adult Education students by type, 1953-4 and 1962-3.

systematic than their 1950s counterparts—on average, just 46 percent of enrolled students attended their classes on a daily basis and 83 percent of the teachers were not professional educators, like the Conrado Benítez *brigadistas* of 1961.¹⁵ One of the goals of the program was to capitalize on the relatability of these volunteer teachers, telling students that they should emulate their more learned peers. As in the Literacy Campaign of 1961, this also drew on the work of Frank Laubach, who encouraged teachers to “sell yourself...the chief obstacle is not indifference,” but fear that teachers would condescend to their students.¹⁶ Anecdotal evidence suggests that emulation could be extremely effective—one man who returned to school as part of the *Seguimiento* campaigns recalled that one colleague was a particular source of inspiration: “he

¹⁴ Quoted in Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 213.

¹⁵ Data from the Ministry of Education, quoted in Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 213.

¹⁶ Frank C. Laubach, *Teaching the World to Read: A Handbook for Literacy Campaigns* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947) 111.

was very intelligent and already married too! He had two or three children at that time...he liked to study and he was excited when I began down that road as well.”¹⁷ As in 1961, personal relationships between teachers and students were key, but they were being expanded to include a larger cohort of students. In the process, entire families were incorporated into the revolutionary state, but in cases like the one above participants often described a desire to emulate individuals, rather than primarily acting as a representative or leader for their families.

Courses for Cubans who had less than a fourth-grade education before 1961 adhered more closely to older teaching practices, with students expected to accept more traditional learning formats rather than the close teacher-student relationships of the 1961 Campaign. These courses had 93,741 enrolled students, and a teaching staff of 3,759—a ratio that mirrored pre-1959 teaching norms.¹⁸ More experienced and professional teachers were more numerous there, constituting 46 percent of the teaching staff. The curriculum included a wider range of subjects, with geography, history, and explicit discussions of politics in addition to the math and Spanish that recent *alfabetizados* learned. These courses also had slightly higher average attendance rates, with 52 percent of all students attending on a daily basis.¹⁹ Because students were already familiar with the Cuban school system and the subject matter was more advanced, officials in the Ministry of Education likely felt less pressure to retool the class format, instead adapting it to convey a new political message.

Night schools and classes in the FAR included fewer students and often occurred in partnership with other government ministries, but they also drew upon established pedagogical strategies to reach students. Night schools had an enrollment of 56,231 students by late August

¹⁷ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 24.

¹⁸ Data from the Ministry of Education, quoted in Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 216.

¹⁹ Ibid.

1962, and the curriculum ranged from basic literacy work for 16,907 students to more advanced study that required at least a sixth-grade reading level for the remaining 39,324 students. Based on data he collected from the Ministry of Education, the British economist Richard Jolly concluded that the night school program attracted the most experienced teachers, many of whom received salary bonuses for their time in the profession. Education in the FAR, which had 24,668 registered students in August 1962, was less open to outside analysis, though it likely continued using similar methods to those employed by the Rebel Army and Ministry of Education and a mostly male student body.²⁰

Classes for domestic workers, in contrast, were a new phenomenon designed to undermine existing structures of gendered labor in the homes of wealthy Cubans. These *Seguimiento* classes were overseen by Elena Gil, a founding member of the FMC, had an enrollment of 10,646 in August 1962. In them, teachers aimed to teach domestic workers, most of whom were women, skills they could use to seek employment in other fields. While domestic service was one of the fields where women routinely found employment before 1959—in 1953, 35 percent of all women in the workforce were employed in domestic or personal service—jobs in that field were not considered desirable by many in the field.²¹ Maids, cooks, and housekeepers were sometimes expected to live in the homes of their employers, putting them under near-constant supervision, on call throughout the day. Despite these close living situations,

²⁰ Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 215.

Richard Jolly and Dudley Seers write that Cuban government officials were reluctant to volunteer internal data on the *Seguimiento* program during their visit to Cuba in 1962. However, information about programs run entirely through the Ministry of Education was more readily available than programs run in partnership with other ministries. Information about the internal workings of the FAR was also severely limited through the late 1960s, when Oscar Lewis conducted his research in Cuba. Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 214.

²¹ Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 50, p. 195.

women discussing their experiences in domestic service in the 1950s often described working in seemingly interchangeable “houses of some whites who had money.”²² As early as the spring of 1959, women began leaving the profession, informing their employers that Fidel Castro “is going to find work for all the maids, and that everyone has to be equal...he’s going to turn all the maids into secretaries, teachers, and doctors,” apparently relishing the threat to the pre-1959 social order.²³ By undermining traditional upper-class household management, the revolutionary government suggested that women could have more privacy and freedom, and that they were not limited to cooking and cleaning for others.

Seguimiento administrators like Elena Gil likely encouraged these views, describing their students as members of one “of the most backward groups” before the Revolution, needing “permission to leave the house where they worked and lived” to attend classes, among other challenges.²⁴ Gil did not explicitly draw any comparisons between this wage work and the unpaid labor women might be expected to do for their families, but individual women likely drew their own conclusions about seeking permission to work or take classes. Schools for domestic workers continued until 1967, when few women remained in the profession. Interviewed after the close of the schools, Gil observed that former maids were ideal recruits into understaffed government ministries.²⁵ Other women also appeared pleased at this outcome—one of the most common remarks from women interviewed about their work prospects in the late 1960s was that they were glad to have a broader range of career options available to them.

²² Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 2.

²³ Pedro Pérez Sarduy, *The Maids of Havana*, Trans. Jonathan Curry-Machado (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2010) 104-105.

²⁴ Elena Gil, quoted in Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1974) 206, 207.

²⁵ Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 209.

The *Seguimiento* campaigns did not incorporate all of the *alfabetizados* who learned to read in 1961—contemporary estimates suggest that 64 percent of the *alfabetizados* were registered for *Seguimiento* classes by September 1962.²⁶ Reasons for leaving school included lack of time, practical concerns, and social pressure. Without the national interest that accompanied the 1961 Campaign, for example, some *alfabetizados* did not enroll in further literacy classes and moved on to work on other projects instead. Others succumbed to medical issues; on 1961, more than 100,000 pairs of reading glasses were distributed to older Cubans diagnosed with poor eyesight, some proud supporters of the Revolution later remarked that eye care had lagged behind access to teachers and education, preventing them from continuing their studies.²⁷ Social norms also affected access to education, with women sometimes reporting that their parents discouraged them from seeking an education, telling them that “you aren’t going to study anything, girl, you would not be suited to” studying nursing or teaching.²⁸ By 1974, the Ministry of Education found that nearly 40 percent of workers had less than a sixth-grade education, and launched the “Battle for the Sixth Grade” to continue the work of the 1961 Literacy Campaign and *Seguimiento*.²⁹

Despite these challenges, the Ministry of Education and its *Seguimiento* campaigns succeeded in raising functional literacy rates in Cuba, reiterating education was both a right and

²⁶ According to Lorenzetto and Neys, the Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización calculated that 707,212 students had completed the course and achieved at least a first-grade reading level by the end of 1961. The next year, 455,000 students enrolled in *Seguimiento* classes for newly literate Cubans with less than a third-grade reading level. Anna Lorenzetto and Karel Neys, *Methods and Means Utilized in Cuba to Eliminate Illiteracy*, 2nd Ed. (New York: UNESCO, 1965) 27; Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 182.

²⁷ Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 199; Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 7.

²⁸ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 49.

²⁹ The 1974 educational census found that 39.3 percent of 1,864,816 workers had less than a sixth-grade education. These workers were the target of the “Battle for the Sixth Grade” between 1975 and 1980. Rosario Fernández Perera, Raúl Ferrer Pérez, Teodomira Aguiar Abreu, Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, and Lorenzo Rabre Álvarez, *La Batalla por el sexto grado* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1985) 19.

an obligation, and encouraging women to leave jobs as domestic workers for positions where they were more useful to the revolutionary state. Though the overall student-to-teacher ratio in adult education classes increased from 3 students per teacher in 1961 to 20 to 25 students per teacher during the *Seguimiento*, education and adult education in particular remained a priority for the government. In the Ministry of Education, the adult education division had a budget of \$25.7 million in 1962, nearly 11 percent of the total budget for the Ministry and more than 4 times the percentage of the budget adult literacy received before 1959.³⁰ The ongoing presence of teachers in communities across the island reinforced the message that the revolutionary government wanted universal literacy even when individuals did not continue their education. Despite the “Battle for the Sixth Grade” carried out in the late 1970s, there were noticeable improvements in educational access in the 1960s as well; where 42 percent of the students in the 1961 Literacy Campaign were residents of Oriente Province, by 1980 the region comprised 32 percent of the students in the Battle for the Sixth Grade.³¹

Ultimately, Ministry of Education succeeded in mobilizing individual men and women to seek education. These efforts occurred within social and family networks, but did not cite family as the primary reason to seek education. The *Seguimiento* campaigns also made a special effort to reach individual women and help them qualify for work that was more “useful” than cooking or cleaning for others—an initiative that ex-domestic workers themselves described as rewarding. In the process, working-class women who were overrepresented in domestic service and had been relatively marginalized before 1959 were encouraged to see themselves as eligible

³⁰ Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 185.

³¹ Richard Jolly reported 411,000 students in Oriente Province in 1961, out of a total of 985,000 found in the census of illiterate Cubans. By 1980, the Ministry of Education found 233,191 students in the corresponding area out of nearly 733,000 students nationwide. Jolly, “Education,” In *Cuba*, 203; Rosario Fernández Perera, Raúl Ferrer Pérez, Teodomira Aguiar Abreu, Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, and Lorenzo Rabre Álvarez. *La batalla por el sexto grado* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 1985) 58.

for higher-status white collar work. Women's obligation to work in the home, for their own families or those of others, was not essential to being a good revolutionary.

FMC: Emulating Earlier Generations

During the guerrilla insurgency of the 1950s, both the Rebel Army and the 26th of July Movement's urban insurgency accepted women into their ranks. In the Rebel Army the number of women was limited, with just enough women to form one all-female combat unit, the Mariana Grajales Brigade. Nevertheless, women played an important role in education in the Sierra Maestra, with women like Asela de los Santos Tamayo overseeing literacy classes, and others playing a crucial role in negotiating with other anti-Batista groups, espionage, and supplying the Rebel Army with weapons and supplies. In the urban insurgency women were more prominent as organizers and combatants, working in cells alongside men and comprising more than half of all combatants by some estimates.³² Women were crucial to spreading petitions, organizing boycotts, arranging peaceful protests, creating alliances with other leftist anti-Batista groups, spying, acting as messengers, and generally providing the resources needed to support an armed insurgency in the Sierra. Likewise, in the 1961 Literacy Campaign women formed a crucial part of the workforce as discussed in Chapter 4, comprising more than half of all teachers and often overcoming opposition from family members to work autonomously.

Nevertheless, for years there was little effort to mobilize women around their shared interests as women or prospects of women's equality with men.³³ In fact, Michelle Chase found

³² See for example Gladys Marel García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution: Armed Struggle in Cuba, 1952-1959*, Trans. Juan Ortega (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); Julia E. Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution: Fidel Castro and the Urban Underground* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Michelle Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

³³ Women were largely ignored in official 26th of July Movement declarations, and women do not appear as a major topic of interest in the collected works of leaders like Fidel Castro. Scholarship on the guerrilla insurgency has established the crucial role that women played in the guerrilla insurgency, particularly in funding, organizing, and running the urban insurgency, but women as a group were not specifically courted in the revolutionary program. For

that in the 1950s, 26th of July activists consistently avoided terms like “liberation” or “equality” in favor of ones like “integration” or “incorporation,” apparently seeing liberation and equality for women as divisive topics that might undercut their support in the population as a whole.³⁴ Chase concluded that this only changed in 1960 and 1961 the revolutionary leadership sought to appeal to women out of necessity, competing for “their political loyalties...[seeking] to mobilize women due to anxiety over women’s purported social isolation and susceptibility to counterrevolutionary sentiment.”³⁵ The FMC became the vehicle for mobilizing women in the 1960s, focusing on what the Federation and national government deemed “women’s” issues—guarding against sabotage and ensuring access to jobs, childcare, and participation in special projects like the 1961 Literacy Campaign. In the process, it sought to create “a new woman” in the new revolutionary society.³⁶ However, the FMC was not founded to be a fully autonomous organization or to advance the individual autonomy of women: it focused on liberating wives and mothers through initiatives like daycare centers, enabling women to participate in revolutionary projects desirable to the revolutionary state. As a result, women could expect some improvements in access to childcare, professional resources, or a focus on Cuban women as a

a representative sample of 26th of July Movement declarations and policies, see Fidel Castro Ruz, *Revolutionary Struggle, 1947-1958: Volume 1 of the Selected Works of Fidel Castro*, Ed. Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972). Studies of women’s role in the guerrilla insurgency include Nicola Murray, “Socialism and Feminism: Women and the Cuban Revolution, Part One,” *Feminist Review* No. 2 (1979) 57-73; Nicola Murray, “Socialism and Feminism: Women and the Cuban Revolution, Part Two,” *Feminist Review* No. 3 (1979) 99-108; K. Lynn Stoner, “From the Houses to the Streets: Women’s Movement for Legal Change in Cuba, 1898-1958” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1983); Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*.

³⁴ Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*, 115.

³⁵ Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*, 7.

³⁶ Vilma Espín used this term in an address at the first national congress of the FMC, but it was widely recognized as the feminine equivalent of Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s “New Man” only in the late 1960s. Guevara himself popularized the term “New Man” in his 1965 *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones R, 1965); Vilma Espín Guillois, “Informe General ante el I Congreso Nacional de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas” (speech given at the first national congress of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, Havana, Cuba, 27 September-1 October 1962). Reprinted in *Memoria del 1er congreso nacional de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*. Havana: Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, 1962.

moral compass to the family and nation, but other issues that did not directly relate to the role of women in the family were often overlooked.

The FMC was founded by Vilma Espín in late August 1960 at the behest of Fidel Castro. Their goal was to use the FMC to “elevate the level of ideological, political, cultural, and scientific” consciousness of Cuban women so they could engage

more effectively with a revolution that sought to help them.³⁷ As shown in Figure 11, the emblem of the new organization was a uniformed woman with a rifle and a child, symbolizing women’s expected role as defenders and nurturers of the Revolution.³⁸ Espín was married to Raúl Castro, the head of the FAR, but she was also a revolutionary hero in her own right, one of the leaders of the 1950s urban insurgency who helped to bring funding and supplies from abroad. This choice of leader helped to ensure the organization would attract national and international attention, as well as suggesting that Espín should be a model for aspiring revolutionary women. Marriage and childbearing were encouraged—Espín and Castro would have four children together—as was a rejection of the idea that “the woman is supposed to attend to household matters” and nothing more once they had married.³⁹

One of the first tasks of the FMC was to assist in the Literacy Campaign. In 1962, Espín summarized the contributions saying, “our organization became a loving mother to the young



Figure 11: The logo of the FMC—a uniformed woman with a child in one arm and a rifle in the other.

³⁷ Espín Guillois, “Informe General.”

³⁸ The FMC used this logo from the early 1960s until the death of Vilma Espín in 2007, when Espín replaced the anonymous woman. Image available online at www.ecured.cu/Archivo:Logo_antiguo_de_la_FMC.jpg. (Accessed 6 March 2017).

³⁹ Interview with a young woman, Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 2.

literacy teachers,” with 91,000 women affiliated with the FMC joining the Campaign in some capacity.⁴⁰ In January 1961 the FMC recorded just 17,000 members, but by January 1962 it had nearly 240,000 members, suggesting that the FMC’s work on the Literacy Campaign was played a role in women’s decision to join the Federation even if they did not volunteer for the Campaign through FMC projects. “Motherly” roles in the Campaign that likely influenced women to join the Federation included organizing mail service so teachers could write to their families, working as nurses, supervising younger teachers, arranging housing for teachers, and participating as “housewives teaching their maids” to read and write.⁴¹ In short, in the immediate aftermath of the Literacy Campaign, the leadership of the FMC described its work as fitting neatly into traditionally feminine gender roles.

FMC publications came to favor a similar message as well. In the early 1960s, the FMC and its platform were articulated through two periodicals, *Vanidades* and *Mujeres*. *Vanidades* was in its twenty-fourth year of publication in 1961, and following a change in its senior leadership in late 1960, its editorial line appeared compatible with the revolution. The longtime editor of the magazine, Herminia del Portal, left Cuba for the United States, and in January 1961, Asela de los Santos Tamayo—now a member of the executive committee of the FMC—briefly took over editorship of the magazine.⁴² Under the direction of de los Santos Tamayo, the magazine greeted 1961 as a year that opened with “the Cuban merchant marine sails the seas, the

⁴⁰ Espín Guillois, “Informe General.”

⁴¹ Espín Guillois, “Informe General.”

⁴² In the program of the first national congress of the FMC, Asela de los Santos Tamayo was listed as a member of both the Consejo Nacional de la FMC and the nine-member Buro Nacional. De los Santos Tamayo was also the vice president of Cuban delegations to the Primer Congreso Latinoamericano de Mujeres in Chile in 1959, and its Cuban successor, the 1960 Congreso de Mujeres Cubanas por la Liberación de Latinoamérica. Elena Gil, her successor as editor of *Vanidades*, was also a member of the FMC’s Buro Nacional, and a member of the delegation to the 1960 Congreso de Mujeres Cubanas por la Liberación de Latinoamérica. *Memoria del 1er congreso nacional de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, (Havana: Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, 1962) 79-80; “FMC antecedentes de su fundación.” ND, Centro de Documentación de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, 3, 7.

factories thrust their chimneys into the sky...science, technology, and art have become the patrimony of all Cubans...and books are in every hand and no one in Cuba cannot read.”⁴³ The new editorial staff shifted the focus of the periodical, continuing regular features on fashion, short fiction on topics like “a marriage without love,” and pieces on movie stars like Ava Gardner, but leavening it with cover art by the photographer Alberto Korda and articles on “Cuban Women: Vanguard of the Threatened Fatherland” in the January issue.

Vanidades continued this new tone under the editorship of Elena Gil, who would go on to run the domestic worker education program in the *Seguimiento*. Under her direction, *Vanidades* celebrated developments like the creation of daycare centers, women enrolling in literacy classes, and the work of the FMC in the Literacy Campaign.⁴⁴ Though *Vanidades* was not an official publication of the FMC, the affiliations of its editorial staff and focus on celebrating the work of the FMC indicate that after the departure of Herminia del Portal, it existed as an unofficial propaganda arm for the federation. *Vanidades* was closed in November 1961 and reorganized as *Mujeres*, the official magazine of the FMC. *Mujeres* also placed a heavy emphasis on women’s fashion and political development, juxtaposing “women in production and study” with lengthy features on fashion for adult and adolescent women and a lesson on the development of a Communist society.⁴⁵

Ideologically, in the early 1960s the FMC positioned itself as a “feminine” organization working for the “liberation of women” working in solidarity with other parts of Cuban society,

⁴³ “Año Nuevo,” *Vanidades* No. 1 (1 January 1961), 3.

⁴⁴ Carmen R. Alonso, “Círculos infantiles: otro triunfo de la Revolución,” *Vanidades* No. 11 (1 June 1961) 10-12, 120-121; Nora Lin, “Una madrina va a su escuela,” *Vanidades* No. 17 (1 September 1961) 4-5, 117-119; O.A. “Un esfuerzo más de nuestra Federación,” *Vanidades* No. 19 (1 October 1961) 26-27.

⁴⁵ Material from the FMC was often published as part of a regular section, “Círculos de estudios FMC,” as in the December 1964 issue of the magazine *Mujeres* Año 4, No. 12 (December 1964) 64-65.

not a feminist organization that was necessarily responsible for problematizing interpersonal relations.⁴⁶ This stance distanced the FMC from the vibrant, largely middle- and upper-class feminist movement of the early twentieth century. Organizations like the Comité de Sufragio Femenino, Federación Nacional de Asociaciones Femeninas, and Alianza Nacional Femenista discussed the differences between being “feminine” and “feminist,” with members arguing that their agenda of liberalizing divorce laws, securing the right of women to own property, and the successful effort to expand the franchise to women in the election of 1940 were all feminist causes. Nevertheless, the work of the FMC and earlier feminist organizations often revolved around the same set of social welfare projects to assist Cubans from modest backgrounds.

One representative figure in the later decades of that Cuban feminist movement was Elena Mederos, an activist who was involved in creating the University of Havana’s school of social work in the 1940s. She was independently wealthy, and worked with groups like the Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club, which ran night classes for poor Havana residents who wanted to learn to read and write. She traveled across Latin America in the 1940s and 1950s representing Cuba and Cuban women at international conferences and by the mid-1950s she came to see the government of Fulgencio Batista as an impediment to Cuban social development.⁴⁷ In her writings, Mederos described herself as one part of a long line of Cuban feminists, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through the creation of feminist and women’s organizations in the 1920s. These feminists “emphasized women’s functions as mother, spouse,

⁴⁶ One early example of this was the Congreso de Mujeres Cubanas por la Liberación de Latinoamérica, held at the Havana Riviera Hotel as part of a “week of solidarity” in early 1960. Declarations from the congress announced that its primary domestic goal was to enact the policies of the revolutionary government at home and to work for peace, solidarity, and self-determination abroad. Georgina Duvalion, “Congreso de mujeres cubanas por la liberación de Latinoamérica,” *Verde Olivo* Año 1, No. 11 (29 May 1960) 56-58.

⁴⁷ Mederos’ biographer María Luisa Guerrero writes that in 1956, Mederos joined the Movimiento de Resistencia Cívica, but she was not a leading organizer in the group. María Luisa Guerrero, *Elena Mederos: Una mujer con perfil para la historia* (Washington, D.C.: Of Human Rights, 1991) 133-135.

and zealously vigilant defender of social morals,” invoking women’s role as mothers to justify their inclusion in government.⁴⁸

Her interests also corresponded with the early goals of the Revolution: to institute much-needed reforms to improve life for the poorest Cubans. In January 1959, she joined the revolutionary government as Minister of Social Welfare, with the hope that she could bring help to “vulnerable groups and protect the family.”⁴⁹ Mederos was the only woman in the cabinet. Access to healthcare, education, “social rehabilitation” of prostitutes, and rural development were all key priorities of the organization.⁵⁰ However, Mederos resigned from the government its move toward radical changes became clearer, and she left Cuba for the United States in 1961. As she described the situation later, the revolutionary government between 1959 and 1963 attempted to undo the “double exploitation of women under neocolonialism,” educating and politically engaging women by eliminating prostitution, increasing literacy rates, and expanding access to education overall.⁵¹ However, the ministry was a “project that died as it was born,” and while “the first moments were very interesting...[but] it was a fantastical illusion,” the revolutionary government’s shift toward socialism under the leadership of Fidel Castro were incompatible with Mederos’ goals for her country.⁵² Many of her colleagues from the Lyceum and feminist

⁴⁸ Elena Mederos González, “La Mujer en la revolución,” unpublished lecture dated 31 January 1980, Elena Mederos Papers, CHC0344 Box 1, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

⁴⁹ Elena Mederos González, “Informe sobre la labor realizada por el Ministerio de Bienestar Social del primero de Abril al quince de Junio de 1959,” Elena Mederos Papers, CHC0344 Box 1, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

⁵⁰ “Ministerio de Bienestar Social,” undated chart outlining the Ministry’s organizational structure, Elena Mederos Papers, CHC0344 Box 1, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

⁵¹ Elena Mederos González, “La Mujer en la revolución,” unpublished lecture dated 31 January 1980, Elena Mederos Papers, CHC0344 Box 1, Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami.

⁵² María Luisa Guerrero, *Elena Mederos: Una mujer con perfil para la historia* (Washington, D.C.: Of Human Rights, 1991) 140, 161.

organizations also left Cuba; thereafter, they and the founders of the FMC found little common ground.⁵³

In the early 1960s, the projects carried out by the FMC were often in line with the concrete goals of feminists like Mederos, even though these women had often left the country. Literacy, family planning services, access to childcare, access to municipal cafeterias, and access to job training and placement services all promised poorer Cuban women tangible improvements in their lives, and echoed projects like those carried out by the Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club. These initiatives were likely a factor in the Federation registering 17,000 members four months after its founding in 1960, and 240,000 members in 1961.⁵⁴ In some cases, women seeking employment and job training through the FMC reported extraordinary results—one young woman requested a job placement through an FMC office at 8am one morning. She had to provide proof that she had at least a sixth-grade education, but before the end of the day the FMC had dispatched her to a nearby hospital where she was enrolled in a training program for new employees. At the time of the interview, she worked as an assistant medical technician, but she was continuing her training in the hope of getting a promotion.⁵⁵ She considered her experience

⁵³ Scholars like Maxine Molyneux have elaborated on the divisions that developed in the 1960s; though FMC representatives like Vilma Espín self-identified as feminists by the 1980s, in preceding decades they often argued that Cuban feminists had emphasized issues of gender over those of class, reinforcing pre-revolutionary inequality by focusing on superficial concerns. Feminists like Margaret Randall, meanwhile, attempted to resolve the differences between FMC activists and U.S. feminists by describing their goals and views of women's liberation as differing and related to the distinct social conditions in the two countries. Maxine Molyneux, "State, Gender, and Institutional Change: The Federación de Mujeres Cubanas," In *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, Ed. Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) 291-321. Randall, *Cuban Women Now*; Margaret Randall, *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1981). Since the late 1960s, when Randall conducted her interview project, other scholars have also hypothesized that the focus on a "feminine" role within the family and the Cuban Revolution limited practical gains by reinforcing an essentialist view of gender in the family and society, as in Molyneux, "Family Reform in Socialist States," *Feminist Review* No. 21 (Winter 1985) 47-64; Muriel Nazzari, "The 'Woman Question' in Cuba: An Analysis of Material Constraints on Its Solution," *Signs* Vol. 9 No. 2 (Winter 1983) 246-263; Maxine Molyneux, "Socialist Societies Old and New: Progress Towards Women's Emancipation?" *Feminist Review* No. 8 (Summer 1981) 1-34.

⁵⁴ Espín Guillois, "Informe General."

⁵⁵ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 21.

typical: “we women have more opportunities than the men...[women] can go to the Federation, and in the office they give you a letter to take to the job center. By the end of the day, you are able to start working.”⁵⁶ Her brother, meanwhile, waited five days for a work placement. In her experience, men could expect to wait a week or more, visiting the job center and various government ministries to learn about job opportunities.

The Federation also took stands on issues perceived as matters of public morality, particularly sexual morality, one issue that was not explicitly addressed in the Literacy Campaign curriculum. A good *federada* was expected to be heterosexual, monogamous, and motivated by the welfare of her children, in addition to her general dedication to the Revolution. Prostitution in particular was condemned as work for women “if they were a little shallow and weak-minded” who were alleged to see the profession as a source of easy money.⁵⁷ One of the first projects for the FMC was a partnership with the Consejo Superior de Defensa Social to eradicate prostitution. Members of the Consejo would “talk with the prostitutes, have a conversation with them and persuade them to leave that lifestyle, that terrible lifestyle.”⁵⁸ After that, the FMC took over their education, training them to work in industry, agriculture, or trades as part of a larger national commitment to improving public morals.⁵⁹ The crackdown on prostitution was so enthusiastic that one young woman interviewed in the late 1960s recounted that she was sent to a juvenile detention center for three months after a dispute with her mother: the young woman was

⁵⁶ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 21.

⁵⁷ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 94.

⁵⁸ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 143, Folder 95.

⁵⁹ Sandra Levinson and Carol Brightman, Eds., *Venceremos Brigade: Young Americans Sharing the Life and Work of Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971) 247. The link between prostitution and imperialism is particularly explored in Carrie Hamilton, *Sexual Revolutions in Cuba: Passion, Politics, and Memory* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2012).

staying out late with her boyfriend, a member of the Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes, but her mother reported her to the police for prostitution.⁶⁰

FMC: Women in a New Era of Cuban History

While projects like these addressed the concerns of mid-twentieth century Cuban feminists and suggested a degree of ideological continuity, the FMC joined other parts of the revolutionary government in positing that the Cuban Revolution was a rupture in the history of the nation, which would require a new role for women in the national family. Following other revolutions, women could return to their homes and the care of their families. The FMC, however, claimed that the evolving circumstances in Cuba required women to step outside the home to fulfill their obligations to the nation. In public statements and publications, the leadership proposed that women should work outside the home while caring for their husbands, children, and households—unless the Revolution needed her elsewhere, and then her husband and community should help to make up for her absence.⁶¹ Scholars including K. Lynn Stoner, Louis A. Pérez, and others have observed that as early as the nineteenth century, women and women's sacrifice was perceived as especially potent in the fight against Spanish colonialism since they were effective actors on their own, but by transgressing and leaving the home to work for independence they also spurred their fathers, husbands, and sons to fight harder for the cause.

⁶⁰ The Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes was a youth organization that existed from 1959-1962, and it is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 1. Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 2.

⁶¹ Scholars including Lois Smith and Alfred Padula have argued that this role for women indicated that the revolutionary government saw women as surplus labor who could be mobilized to achieve particular results, not an under-served group that it sought to emancipate for altruistic reasons. Other scholars, particularly Maxine Molyneux, have added to this argument, charging that women were expected to take on new work in and outside the home, but men were not, increasing levels of inequality in work and free time between the genders. These work and time constraints also limited women's access to leadership roles at work or in organizations like CDRs or the FMC. Smith and Padula, *Sex and Revolution*; Molyneux, "State, Gender, and Institutional Change," In *Hidden Histories of Gender and the State in Latin America*, Ed. Elizabeth Dore and Maxine Molyneux, 291-321.

Stoner particularly argued that women acquired this moral standing because the fight for independence was seen as an extraordinary need, a cause requiring extraordinary sacrifice.⁶² Under ordinary conditions, women would be exempt from the need to work and fight outside the home.⁶³ The FMC and the revolutionary government proposed that the revolution itself was an extraordinary period, the culmination of national desires for self-actualization. Therefore, women could be called into service, leaving parents, husbands, and children during the Literacy Campaign in 1961 to serve the larger national community. Things did not return to normal the next year, though; there were more victories to be achieved to ensure that the Revolution was irreversible.

According to revolutionary propaganda, women who did not work outside the home were presumed to be counterrevolutionaries insensitive to “imperialist aggressions, each time more insulting to our national sovereignty” or oppressed by authority figures around them so they could not make “interesting discoveries” about their own abilities.⁶⁴ Individual men and women, however, suggested that overwork and social norms encouraged them to become housewives. Men frequently told Oscar Lewis’ assistants that they did not want their wives working outside the home; their job was to make the home a comfortable place so men could relax when they returned home from work at a factory, as a policeman, or as a military officer. Lewis’ assistants noticed this attitude so frequently that it was noteworthy when a man “helps occasionally with

⁶² Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *To Die in Cuba: Suicide in Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); K. Lynn Stoner, *From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Women’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁶³ K. Lynn Stoner, “Militant Heroines and the Consecration of the Patriarchal State: The Glorification of Loyalty, Combat, and National Suicide in the Making of Cuban National Identity,” *Cuban Studies* 34 (2003): 71-96.

⁶⁴ Elena de los Santos, “Las mujeres cubanas: vanguardia de la patria amenazada,” *Vanidades* No. 1 (1 January 1961) 10, 12.

the cooking,” let alone childcare.⁶⁵ Sometimes, the very same men who observed that the Revolution had made men and women equals fully capable of doing the same jobs would later insist that *their* wife should not work in a factory, that in some homes it created “problems” to have wives in the workforce.⁶⁶ Despite the existence and high profile leadership of the FMC, men did not appear to agree with its work on the Revolutionary goal of bringing women into the workforce. Young men with few memories of the years before the 1959 revolution also volunteered to outsiders that “I wouldn’t want the woman I was going to marry working outside the home. I don’t know exactly why, but I wouldn’t like it.”⁶⁷ The prospect of men and women working side by side seemed especially upsetting, with one man allowing that if his future wife could find employment in an all-female workplace “I would let her work.”⁶⁸ His expectation that he could prohibit or permit his wife to work outside the home coexisted with his years in the revolutionary school system and his assertions that he was a patriotic supporter of the Revolution and its works.

Women confirmed these attitudes in their interviews, with one young divorced woman complaining that “a woman can be liberated if she wants...[but] men’s attitude toward women, that has not changed.”⁶⁹ She preferred to be “married to my mother, my father, and my work,” suggesting that while the FMC may have made progress convincing women that they were best served by having careers and working on projects like the Literacy Campaign, their prospective

⁶⁵ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 97.

⁶⁶ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 4. Margaret Randall recorded similar opinions in her contemporary study, *Cuban Women Now*.

⁶⁷ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 10.

⁶⁸ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 10.

⁶⁹ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 23.

spouses were less receptive.⁷⁰ Other women were more sensitive about the subject of work. In Oscar Lewis' oral history project with former residents of the Havana neighborhood of Las Yaguas, his interview script instructed assistants to ask how Cuban men and women had changed since 1959. However, this question could raise tensions if juxtaposed with the wrong topics. One FMC member who explained that she supported a woman's right to work outside the home as a "very good thing; a woman doesn't have to depend on her husband," but snapped at her interviewer that "girl, I don't have any opinion about 'the men' because I've only been married once," and apparently did not want to comment on men in the workforce and their interactions with women.⁷¹ Interactions between men and women remained a tense subject in the Lewis interviews, with some Cubans conflating the idea of interacting and working with members of the opposite sex and inevitably becoming romantically involved.

The 10 Cuban amateur ethnographers working under Oscar Lewis often pushed back against these views, challenging men to explain how their desire for a wife who did not work was compatible with the "liberation of women," which the interviewers saw as a fundamental goal of the Revolution. Lewis and his North American collaborators viewed these interviewers as talented but "'babied' by the revolutionary regime" and the revolutionary system—all but one were teachers in the 1961 Literacy Campaign who were judged by their teachers and supervisors as worthy of the opportunity of studying with a renowned foreign researcher.⁷² As a result, these disputes between interviewer and interviewee in Lewis' project suggest that parts of Cuban society fully assimilated the FMC's message that women were essential to the work of the

⁷⁰ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 20.

⁷¹ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 38.

⁷² Douglas Butterworth, *The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Postrevolutionary Cuba* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) xviii.

Revolution, but others remained stubbornly outside the reach of the Federation and its messaging. Examples like these suggest that the FMC faced entrenched gender norms in trying to “liberate” women, but there is little evidence that it or the national government addressed the degree to which its goals were unevenly adopted by the rest of the population.

The FMC was also less responsive to many issues than its stated ideology or previous participation in the Literacy Campaign might suggest, another factor that likely impeded the growth of its membership in some neighborhoods. In Oscar Lewis’ study of Buena Ventura, a Havana suburb built for former residents of the Las Yaguas shantytown, families often diverged from the ideal of a stable, male-headed household. Residents frequently complained about the Federation, particularly its inaction and unrealistic expectations for members. One woman, a member of the Communist Party before 1959, a founding member of the local Comité de Defensa de la Revolución (CDR), and a volunteer militia member during the invasion of Playa Girón, ran afoul of the regional FMC leadership because she kept arriving at meetings late. She observed that “I was running there [from work], and it took a lot of effort to join the Federation at first,” as she needed to balance the demands of the Federation with her other commitments.⁷³ In contrast, she observed that CDRs were necessities, an integral part of modern life, “something we must have...anything I could tell you about the CDRs is not enough!”⁷⁴ Another resident complained that the FMC merely collected membership dues and never returned to offer programs on her block. For her, “it is not like before...now things are different,” but she was extremely reticent about how life had improved when the interviewer pressed her on that point; the FMC was not responsible for concrete improvements in her life.⁷⁵

⁷³ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 6.

⁷⁴ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 6.

⁷⁵ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 47.

One younger woman of the same generation as many *brigadistas* from 1961 who was raised in Catholic orphanages and, after 1959, state schools, observed that the “Revolution has treated us [poor Cubans] very well,” but she had not been able to attend school for as long as she would have liked because “with my children I could not go; when you have no other family you have to concentrate on your children, you have no time for anything else in your life.”⁷⁶ Without family or a government-run daycare center, she could not work or attend school, limiting her contributions to the revolutionary project. The FMC, meanwhile, had run daycare centers in other neighborhoods for more than half a decade.

The FMC and its difficulties incorporating all Cuban women reflected a larger uneasiness about the role of women in revolutionary Cuba during and after the 1961 Literacy Campaign. The Federation emphatically supported women’s political integration, but it also helped to reinforce a model of revolutionary femininity in which a woman should model themselves on leaders like Vilma Espín, marrying, having children, working on behalf of their families, and working on behalf of the Revolution—a proposition that required resources that many Cuban women did not have.

Individual women interviewed in the late 1960s, meanwhile, occasionally insisted that they would select a partner based on his commitment to the revolutionary goal of women’s liberation, “a working man, who is conscious of truth, who is conscious of the meaning of the Revolution, who is not one of those men who stops women from working or studying,” but these women described little institutional support for their goal of creating egalitarian families.⁷⁷ Instead, some women expressed the opinion that in 1960s Cuba the institution of marriage “is a

⁷⁶ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 99.

⁷⁷ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 49.

disgrace,” in one’s personal life “happiness does not exist,” and love “is bad because we had parents who taught us about righteousness and love the way those things were when they were young...it was different then.”⁷⁸ More privileged Cubans like Oscar Lewis’ assistants expressed their approval at the first woman’s expectations for a partner, but appeared horrified by the less optimistic views of men, marriage, and family life.

Conclusion

By the late 1960s, Cuban public discourse and official propaganda discussed the Literacy Campaign mainly as something that “no other country has been able to improve upon—to give an education to all in so little time,” a precursor to the *Seguimiento* campaigns at home, or an example other countries could emulate.⁷⁹ The Ministry of Education and the FMC expressed a sense of pride in their early literacy work, but the structure, activities, and messages of the Literacy Campaign were still present: the Ministry of Education ran schools in areas first reached in 1961, and the FMC worked to incorporate women into the workforce using the skills they developed in 1961. Across Cuban society, there was also an attitude that “no longer can anyone get away with saying that he does not participate in revolutionary activities...nonparticipation has tended to become...tantamount to failure to want to participate.”⁸⁰ However, the methods used to mobilize women differed between the two organizations. Where the Ministry of Education-run *Seguimiento* continued to emphasize the relationship between individual men and women and the revolutionary state, the FMC sought to mobilize women as wives and mothers—one part of a family unit. In the process, the FMC diverged from the individual autonomy and

⁷⁸ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 91; Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 91; Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 50.

⁷⁹ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 143, Folder 97.

⁸⁰ Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, 84.

relationship to one's fellow citizens and the Revolution that the Literacy Campaign of 1961 espoused. This contrast is especially stark in contrast with organizations like CDRs, which will be discussed in the following chapter, and the relationship between individual teachers and the Cuban state, which will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

CHAPTER 3: THE “SYSTEM OF COLLECTIVE VIGILANCE” EDUCATION, COMITES DE DEFENSA DE LA REVOLUCION, AND THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

Introduction

The oldest student in the Literacy Campaign of 1961 was María de la Cruz Sentmanat, an Afro-Cuban woman born in 1855, who lived in the western Havana neighborhood of Santa Fe. Under the tutelage of Angela Ruzt Despaigne, and with a new pair of reading glasses from an ophthalmologist, de la Cruz learned to read and write in two months. When one journalist from the official magazine of the national land reform program, the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA) visited her to report on her achievement, de la Cruz shared stories from her early life, including her memories of the explosion of the *USS Maine* and the war of independence. De la Cruz concluded her interview by summoning her daughter with the day’s mail, which she opened in front of the journalist and began to read: “Distinguished *compañera*...we, the members of the Comité de Defensa de la Revolución ‘Paco Cabrera’ hope that we find you in much-deserved good health. We also wish to extend a warm embrace and congratulations for your help in striking a blow against imperialism” by learning to read and write.¹ Her interviewer remarked that he was surprised to hear de la Cruz read the entire letter aloud without hesitation because it included vocabulary that was not covered in the basic curriculum; she had graduated from the *¡Venceremos!* textbook and begun practicing to read and write with any reading materials available to her. As a result, she was well acquainted with current events and a member

¹ Manuel Navarro Luna, “A los 106 años María de la Cruz aprendió a leer,” *INRA* Año II, No. 7 (July 1961) 18.

in good standing of the local Comité de Defensa de la Revolución (CDR) chapter. De la Cruz concluded the interview by expressing an interest in contributing to the Literacy Campaign under the direction of the local mass organization.

CDRs like this one are a common feature in accounts of day-to-day life in revolutionary Cuba following their founding in September 1960. The committees spread rapidly across the island, incorporating most of the population by 1965, and insinuating themselves into family and neighborhood relations. When they were explicitly remarked upon, CDRs were often described as “local citizens organized...as militant informers against possible counter-revolution,” committees for “the enemies of people who like to commit sabotage,” designed to “integrate, socialize and mobilize the masses, to implement revolutionary policies and programs,” or busybodies who might report their neighbors to state security if they were suspected of engaging in counterrevolutionary thoughts or actions.² In order to gain this pervasive influence on Cuban life, in the early 1960s CDRs worked to inculcate the populace in revolutionary culture, then selectively empowering individuals to enforce revolutionary norms by monitoring their neighbors. In the process, CDRs became ubiquitous, controversial, and a proponent of changing gender norms.

Often, the CDR officials (also known as *cederistas*) empowered to enforce revolutionary norms in their neighborhoods were women. Women comprised more than 80 percent of all teachers in Cuba in the 1950s, they comprised a majority of all of the teachers involved in the 1961 Literacy Campaign, and they remained a majority of the teaching workforce in the years

² Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Pan Books, 2002) 899-900; Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 11; Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) 80.

that followed even as the definition of “teaching” expanded to include revolutionary vigilance.³ Their status as public authority figures outside of traditional school settings could lead to conflicts due to their gender. By leading local CDRs that took on educational work, women moved from the feminine domain of the “home” to the masculine domain of the “street,” engaging in activities traditionally regarded as the domain of women like education, but also acting as armed guardians of public order—work that had no clear analogue to women’s traditional role in the patriotic imaginary.⁴ Particularly in the rapidly changing society of revolutionary Cuba, this created fertile ground for conflict where women described their work as necessary and for the benefit of the community, while men were sometimes reluctant to take direction from a woman in stereotypically male-dominated spaces. In some oral histories collected by researchers in the 1960s, men remarked that “it seems to me that the two [sexes] are not equal; on a ship you can only have one captain and not two, otherwise the ship will sink for

³ In the census of 1953—the last census taken before the 1959 revolution—there were 34,485 female and 7,726 male teachers. Women comprised a majority of all university instructors (1,611 out of 3,137), secondary school teachers (2,120 out of 2,361), and primary school teachers (31,038 out of 36,815). Men were more prominent in specialized fields, comprising nearly half of all university instructors and a majority of all agronomists and biologists (66 out of 70), mathematicians and physicists (32 out of 41), and social scientists (84 out of 147). Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), Table 54, p. 204.

⁴ Michelle Chase identifies these spheres of influence as a “bastion of midcentury Cuban culture,” with women’s protests acquiring particular resonance in the public imagination when they employed the “home as a symbolic protest vehicle.” Michelle Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015) 27. K. Lynn Stoner also highlighted the role of gender in claiming authority in the “house” versus the “street” in her book *From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Women’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). In Stoner’s analysis, women were successful in influencing public policy when they drew analogies between women’s motherly role as a nurturing moral center for the family and social welfare policy where female activists could feed, educate, and serve as a moral compass for the nation. When women took up arms, as in the wars of independence from 1868-1898, it was portrayed as an extraordinary sacrifice rather than a desirable or natural role for women. In the aftermath of independence, men were tasked with protecting the nation so their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters would not need to take up arms again.

sure.”⁵ These *cederistas* could appear poised to overturn the larger social order—the “ship” of Cuban society—all with the tacit approval of the revolutionary government.

As Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern argued in their 2004 study *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, rapid changes to society and challenges to gender norms like these can spark waves of gossip and accusations of illicit or unnatural behavior, even when specific activities would otherwise appear innocuous and in keeping with social norms.⁶ In 1960s Cuba, this meant that women who took on leadership roles in their communities through the CDRs inverted existing channels of gossip, becoming gatekeepers rather than the targets of gossip. As a result, they could become targets for resentment by individuals who opposed the Revolution. Through the CDRs, furthermore, female *cederistas* became filters for rumor and gossip, able to direct the attention of other parts of the state to reward good revolutionary behavior or punish disloyalty. The threat of gossip ruining a woman’s reputation based on her ability to conform to gender norms, meanwhile, appeared diminished in comparison.

Social Norms Before 1959

Writing about the social conventions that persuaded parents to send their children to the United States in the early 1960s as part of Operation Peter Pan, Yvonne Conde wrote that she and her fellow middle- and upper-class Cuban women “led sheltered lives, chaperoned until their wedding day. The thought of young women living alone, unsupervised among strangers was not

⁵ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 26.

⁶ Stewart and Strathern argue that rumor, gossip, and witchcraft are interrelated widespread cultural practices, though the terms used for each may vary with place and time. Rumors of inappropriate behavior, for example, they cite as a modern form of “witchcraft” that can have adverse effects like keeping an employee from securing a promotion at work. Particularly in Europe and the Americas, women have been vulnerable to these accusations when they were socially isolated, and engaged in a conflict with neighbors who refused to offer assistance in times of need. Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

culturally acceptable.”⁷ While many scholars have suggested that women’s substantial legal rights and protections granted them autonomy in their personal lives as well as social conventions allowed women to participate in public life, the ideal Conde alluded to was also prevalent and reflected the social norms.⁸ CDRs would bring these norms and rights into conflict by making women’s power to supervise others, rather than being supervised by them, explicit.

Accounts of life in early twentieth century Cuba often regard chaperones as a fixture of middle- and upper-class young womanhood. Often, chaperones were expected when young women traveled alone or moved in mixed-gender social events. Margaret Paris, one of the young adults who left Cuba as part of Operation Pedro Pan, recalled that when she enrolled in the coeducational Ruston Academy in Havana, the presence of boys was exciting: “every week there would be some activity—a mixer, a dance, or a movie.”⁹ Dances were especially popular with the young women in her social circle; they were hosted at the houses of young women and “well chaperoned by at least three mothers,” a “typical” level of supervision.¹⁰ Paris regarded her own upbringing as slightly more sheltered than those of her peers. Before coming to the United

⁷ Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 18.

⁸ Scholars studying women’s agency in Cuban political life early and mid-twentieth century include Stoner, *From the House to the Streets*; Chase, *The Revolution Within the Revolution*; Anita Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children: The Politics of Childhood in Havana and Miami, 1959-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). Studies of Operation Pedro Pan, a project to bring mainly middle- and upper-class Cuban children to the United States to avoid having them indoctrinated in revolutionary schools, meanwhile, emphasize the sheltered upbringing many middle- and upper-class young Cubans had, as well as their lack of agency when their parents chose to send them to boarding schools in the United States. Studies of the children in Operation Peter Pan have been led by members of that group, notably Yvonne Conde’s *Operation Peter Pan* and María de los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003). *Operación Peter Pan: cerrando el círculo en Cuba*, based on materials from Estela Bravo’s 2011 documentary of the same name, examines the project from a Cuban, rather than Cuban-American, perspective. Estela Bravo and Olga Rosa Gómez Cortés. *Operación Peter Pan: cerrando el círculo en Cuba* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 2013).

⁹ Margaret L. Paris, *Embracing America: A Cuban Exile Comes of Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002) 9.

¹⁰ Paris, *Embracing America*, 9.

States, she and her sister “had never spent even one night away from home. Sleepovers weren’t done” because her mother did not approve.¹¹ In other cases, chaperones were invited into professional environments as well, as in the office of Julio Lobo, one of the wealthiest men in Cuba in the 1950s. In 1939, he sought to hire a female secretary by the name of Carlotta Steegers. At the time, Steegers was nineteen years old, “prim” by the standards of the day and her aunt served as a chaperone at her interview.¹² Working with Lobo, Steegers became a trusted part of his business empire and virtually a part of his family, making her aunt’s presence as a chaperone unnecessary.

Having a chaperone was supposed to prevent young women from acquiring a bad reputation or, more seriously, becoming pregnant out of wedlock. As a result, one of the first charges brought against the revolutionary government in its mobilization of young women was that it allowed young women to go away to the countryside, have affairs with men there, and return home pregnant. One typical story was of a “seventeen-year-old girl next door [who] had come back pregnant from her alphabetizing journey into the Cuban countryside. The child’s father was the soldier in charge of the student-teachers’ care.”¹³ Few accounts like this can be confirmed, however.¹⁴

¹¹ Paris, *Embracing America*, 7.

¹² John Paul Rathbone, *The Sugar King of Havana: The Rise and Fall of Julio Lobo, Cuba’s Last Tycoon* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010) 123.

¹³ Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan*, 37.

¹⁴ Female teachers in the Literacy Campaign who have participated in subsequent oral history projects have not corroborated these accounts, and those who did have children often did so in the late 1960s, after finishing their education. María de los Angeles Torres, another woman sent to the United States as part of Operation Peter Pan, described the rumors of pregnancies among young literacy teachers as part of an environment rife with rumor and disinformation that left her with “no way of establishing” the truth of the rumors. De los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple*, 120.

Efforts to control the environment in which young women lived also helped to define social status in 1950s Cuba. Previous scholarship has argued that Cuban middle- and upper-class society was enmeshed in North American culture, and adherence to North American—often U.S.-based—gender norms and childrearing techniques helped to isolate young women from the larger society and shape their horizons for political activity.¹⁵ By the 1950s, just half of all young people under the age of 15 attended school, and more than one-third of those attended private elementary schools.¹⁶ Parents also regarded private secondary schools as a valuable investment, a means of getting their children a college preparatory education and English proficiency, a useful skill in a country where the United States was the largest trading partner.¹⁷ Beyond these private schools, young women were also marked and supervised in after-school programs like the Girl Scouts—an import from the United States—and at private country clubs. These institutions allowed middle- and upper-class Cubans to demonstrate their wealth and position in society while also ensuring that young women were protected from gossip, educated and entertained in spaces where their reputations and those of their families were secure.

Fears about the reputations of young women shaped the opportunities that adult women seized to claim a place in Cuban political life before 1959. In *Revolution Within the Revolution: Women and Gender Politics in Cuba, 1952-1962*, Michelle Chase outlines how women

¹⁵ Yeidy M. Rivero made this case for the medium of television, particularly given Cuba's large television market in the 1950s and the large degree of overlap in programming between the United States and Cuba, which included news from Cuba being broadcast in the United States and U.S.-based shows broadcasting from Cuba. Anita Casavantes Bradford argues that penetration by U.S. culture went further, including children's comics, parenting manuals, and school textbooks. Rivero, *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*.

¹⁶ The Cuban census of 1953 recorded 748,433 young people between the ages of 5 and 15 attending school, and 751,206 who were not. Anita Casavantes Bradford estimates that as many as 35 percent of the elementary school students attended private schools. School attendance data from *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), Table 34, Page 99; Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*, 35.

¹⁷ Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*, 35.

participated as “important actors...[without sharp] distinctions between women’s and men’s roles in the anti-Batista opposition” for much of the 1950s.”¹⁸ One such opposition action was carried out by female students from the University of Havana: they stood on street corners offering black ribbons to pedestrians, which could be “tied around the arm to symbolize bereavement” at the loss of Cuban constitutional government.¹⁹ Other protests called on women to stay at home rather than going about their normal business or refusing to attend parties. These actions mobilized women through socially acceptable, even traditional, feminine gestures of mourning like withdrawing from society and voluntarily secluding themselves in the home. Normal networks of gossip and social interchange were also mobilized, with women participating in chain letter-writing campaigns and phone chains to spread news about other anti-Batista actions. Because these actions took place in the privacy of the home, they were difficult for the authorities to monitor or halt. As a result, by the late 1950s the urban insurgency of the 26th of July Movement could rely on these methods of news dispersal to reassure its supporters that Fidel Castro was alive in the Sierra Maestra and continuing the fight against Fulgencio Batista.²⁰ These acts of resistance and protest against the government in the 1950s mobilized adult women through established patterns of mourning and social networks to challenge the government.

Young Cuban women before 1959—particularly middle- and upper-class women—expected their actions to be observed by authorities from their own community in the form of chaperones or teachers and staff at private schools. Refusing that supervision could carry risks, as rumor and gossip might emerge, alleging that young women who lived without appropriate

¹⁸ Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*, 20.

¹⁹ Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*, 26.

²⁰ Chase, *Revolution Within the Revolution*, 29.

supervision were behaving inappropriately, even becoming pregnant outside of marriage. When adult women engaged in political action against the Batista government, the forms their activism took were shaped by this environment, prioritizing the spreading of rumor to assist the 26th of July Movement and employing traditional demonstrations of mourning like wearing black or refusing to attend parties. These actions did not overtly challenge the status of women as the subjects of observation, rather than observers policing the behavior of others. The role of women in CDRs would call this into question.

CDRs and Education

CDRs developed concurrently with the Cuban Revolution's educational program, and they were an integral part of it, working to organize and promote classes, as well as monitoring attendance at classes once they began. CDRs' educational work was so prominent that in September 1962, on the second anniversary of their creation, Fidel Castro remarked that one of their main achievements to date was "work[ing] on problems of education and public health in the countryside."²¹ This work increased awareness of CDRs across the island and helped increase the membership of committees from 70,000 in April of 1961 to more than 2 million on the fifth anniversary of their founding in 1965, when they were fully integrated into government operations and represented in the Central Committee of the Communist Party.²² The education they sought to bring about included explicitly anti-imperialist political education and education on the social services Cuban men and women could expect—access to literacy classes, vaccines against diseases, and protection from invasions. By defining "education" broadly to include all of

²¹ Fidel Castro Ruz, Discurso pronunciado en el acto celebrado con motivo del segundo aniversario de la creación de los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, en la Plaza de la Revolución, September 28, 1962. Accessible online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1962/esp/f280962e.html>.

²² The CDRs reported a total membership of 2,011,276 in 1965 *Resumen estadístico de los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, 1960-1975* (Havana: Editorial Orbe, 1977) 5.

these topics, CDRs and *cederistas* were able to assert that organizations founded with the goal of preventing counterrevolutionary activity could also claim education as a central part of their mission. They also laid some of the groundwork for women to seek employment outside the home, as they were the majority of the teaching workforce whose profession was being redefined.

Nevertheless, this intervention into gender roles in revolutionary Cuba was not an official goal for CDRs as they were initially proposed. In late 1960, the creation of the first CDRs was the culmination of months of discussion about the need for “urban-based civil defense against sabotage and counterrevolutionary terror” to prevent further incidents like the March 1960 explosion of the ship *La Coubre*.²³ On Fidel Castro’s return from the United Nations in September 1960, he reaffirmed the goals of his government to an audience and announced the creation of CDRs as a “system of collective vigilance” to prevent future sabotage so that “in the face of these campaigns of imperialistic aggression, we...will know who lives on each block, what they do, and what relationship they had to the” old government.²⁴ These collective vigilance committees were described as a militia, groups of armed men in every community “so that it is possible to have perfectly formed and trained militias” whenever they might be needed.²⁵ Even as Castro outlined these plans, two bombs exploded near the presidential palace, echoing the security concerns he discussed. The audience responded with shouts of “*paredón*,” “we shall overcome,” and “unity”—defending against sabotage and terrorism appeared to be the

²³ Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, 71.

²⁴ Fidel Castro Ruz, speech given at the presidential palace in Havana, September 28, 1960. Accessible online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1960/esp/f280960e.html>.

²⁵ Ibid.

primary concern, not education. José Matar, a member of the 26th of July Movement, was named the head of the new organization.

In the following months, hundreds of CDRs took shape as committees formed by groups of neighbors across the island, and their purpose began to diverge from the original mission statement. Especially in 1960 and 1961, committees were formed with little central control on how many members they could have, the gender of members, what officials in Havana they reported to, or what priorities they should emphasize in their activities. CDR membership increased rapidly over this period, suggesting that the organization's stated purpose and early work, which centered on the Literacy Campaign of 1961—were popular and many Cubans viewed them as a positive force despite the lack of organization.

CDRs first participated in preparations for the Literacy Campaign by carrying out a census of illiterate Cubans. The most recent census, from 1953, suggested that nearly one quarter of the population was illiterate, but nearly a decade later these records were not sufficient for the task at hand. Between November of 1960 and August of 1961, CDR members were tasked with identifying and registering their illiterate neighbors, a task they were told could be difficult—many illiterate Cubans were believed to hide their condition from their friends and neighbors. Nevertheless, by April of 1961, the 70,000 CDR members had registered 546,000 Cubans, and by August the number had risen to 985,000 illiterate Cubans, most of whom lived in rural areas like the Sierra Maestra and Escambray Mountains.²⁶ Pilot groups of teachers dispersed across the island in late 1960, and in January 1961 the Campaign officially began. As census results arrived from CDR sections, the Ministry of Education put out calls for more teachers—by the summer,

²⁶ Richard Jolly, "Education," In *Cuba: The Economic and Social Revolution*, Ed. Dudley Seers (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964) 192-194.

they had recruited 250,000—and for other volunteers to manage transportation and housing for the teachers. *Cederistas*, meanwhile, were lauded for their work promoting and facilitating literacy education, an essential part of the revolutionary program.

Having identified potential students for the Campaign, CDRs were ideally placed to volunteer in these day-to-day operations and help protect participants. Vigilance about the safety of teachers and students was a special priority in the Escambray Mountains, one of the regions with the highest concentrations of illiterate Cubans and a site of active counterrevolutionary resistance—three literacy teachers were killed in the region over the course of the year. One *cederista* by the name of Zenaida González who lived in the Escambray Mountains, for example, received an anonymous note that threatened that all of the teachers in her region would be killed by counterrevolutionaries; first the men, then the women like the young female teacher in González’s village, and finally teacher’s host family. González recalled later that she took the threat to her superiors, who gave her two Czech-made rifles to help defend the young woman. González then brought the young woman to live in her own house, and the teacher and her students finished their work, living “safe and sound” under the supervision of the CDR.²⁷ More

²⁷ Zenaida González, quoted in Lucía González Hernández, *Hombres sin fusiles* (Havana: Editorial ORBE, 1977) 64.

commonly, though, CDRs were involved in tasks like distributing food, medicine, and mail in their communities using the information they gleaned over the course of the census.

In mid-April 1961, the Literacy Campaign was interrupted by the invasion of Playa Girón by U.S.-backed Cuban exiles. CDRs were credited with helping to round up as many as 100,000 suspected counterrevolutionaries and detaining them.²⁸ The reality is more complex, however. Because the committees had 70,000 registered members in April 1961 and little centralized control by officials like Matar, scholars like Richard Fagen have argued “it is not at all certain” that CDRs were instrumental in extirpating members of the “sparse, poorly organized, and

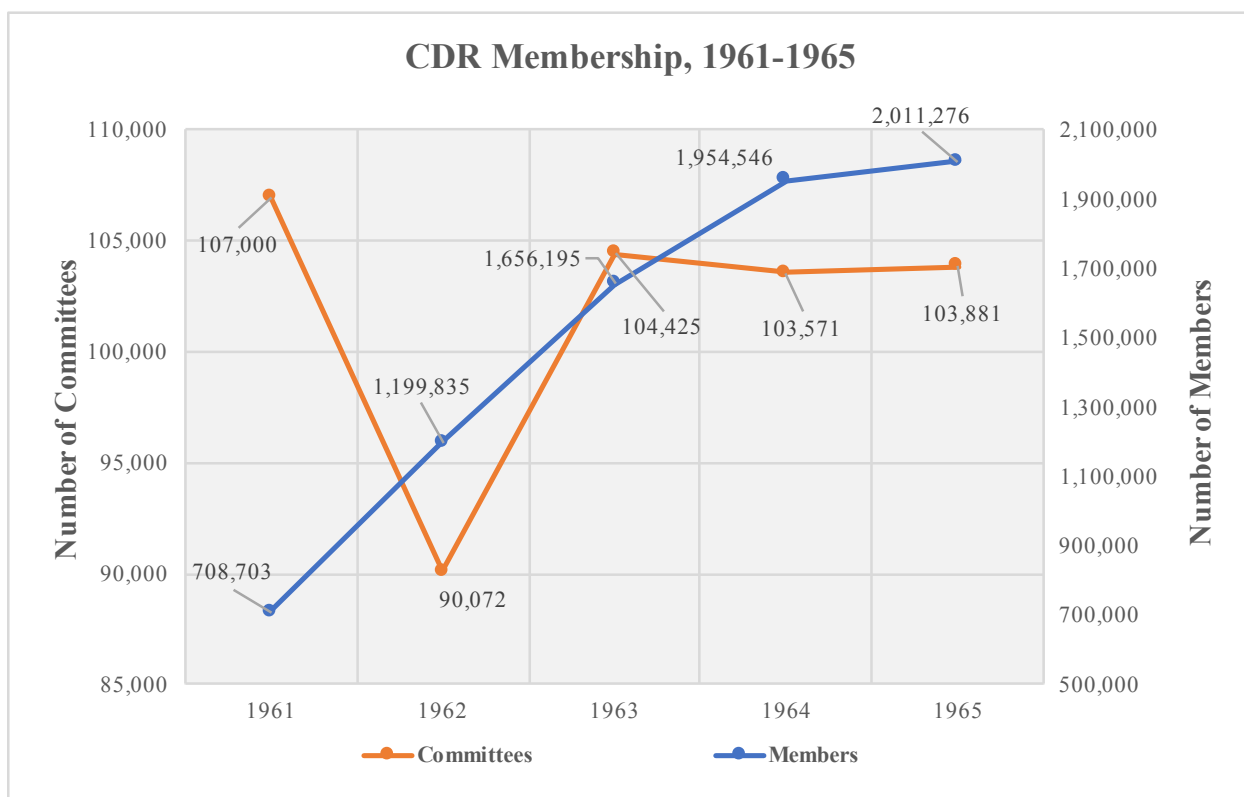


Figure 12: CDR membership and number of committees, 1961-1965, as reported by the national leadership in 1977. Membership tallies compiled by Richard Fagen from 1960 and early 1961 suggest that by April 1961 the total membership of the CDRs was just 70,000, and rose to more than 700,000 over the course of the year. The drops in the number of committees in 1962 and 1964 correspond with the period in which the national leadership standardized membership rules and gained control of CDRs nationwide.

²⁸ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 4th Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 252.

ideologically fragmented” opposition that existed in early 1961.²⁹ Contemporary periodicals affiliated with the former 26th of July Movement and new revolutionary government like *INRA*, *Orientador Revolucionario*, *Arma Nueva*, and *Verde Olivo* did not highlight the work of *cederistas* during or in the aftermath of the invasion. In fact, information from the central leadership about the activities of *cederistas* only found a regular outlet in October 1961, when the magazine *Con la guardia en alto* began publication. This was slightly later than other mass organizations: officials from the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) had run the magazine *Vanidades* since January 1961, and the land reform agency INRA began publishing its eponymous magazine in January 1960. Observers also speculate that national control of CDRs was not fully consolidated until at least 1962, when membership rules were first enforced. This led to the apparent drop in membership in 1962 and 1964, as shown in Figure 12, something not seen in organizations with more centralized control like FMC.³⁰

Nevertheless, CDR activities increased across the island in the second half of 1961 as the number of sections and members increased. By February 1962, CDR organizers announced “now the Committees are a bulwark of the Revolution, and if in April 1961 we could crush the fifth columnists, when we had just 7,000 committees, now that we have 100,000 more we cannot even

²⁹ Richard Fagen calculated a total CDR membership of 70,000 in April 1961 based on data published in the newspaper *Revolución*, Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, 74.

³⁰ As shown in Figure 1, CDR membership grew steadily in the early 1960s, but the number of committees varied from year to year as membership rules were enforced. The data in the chart was reported in *Resumen estadístico de los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*, 5. Richard Fagen recorded slightly higher membership numbers over the same period in *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, using publications including *Revolución* and *Cuba Socialista*, Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, 77. The FMC, meanwhile, was founded in August 1960 and recorded a membership of 17,000 in January 1961. By January 1962, it had nearly 240,000 members, as reported in the first national congress of the FMC. Membership continued to grow through the mid-1960s, with the organization reporting a membership of more than 480,000 in 1965 and more than 580,000 in 1966, Vilma Espín Guillois, “Informe General ante el I Congreso Nacional de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas” (speech given at the first national congress of the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, Havana, Cuba, 27 September-1 October 1962); *Memoria de la cuarta plenaria nacional de la Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (Havana: Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, 1966) 18.

think of failure,” an implicit acknowledgment that the CDRs were not fully ensconced in most neighborhoods at the time of the invasion.³¹

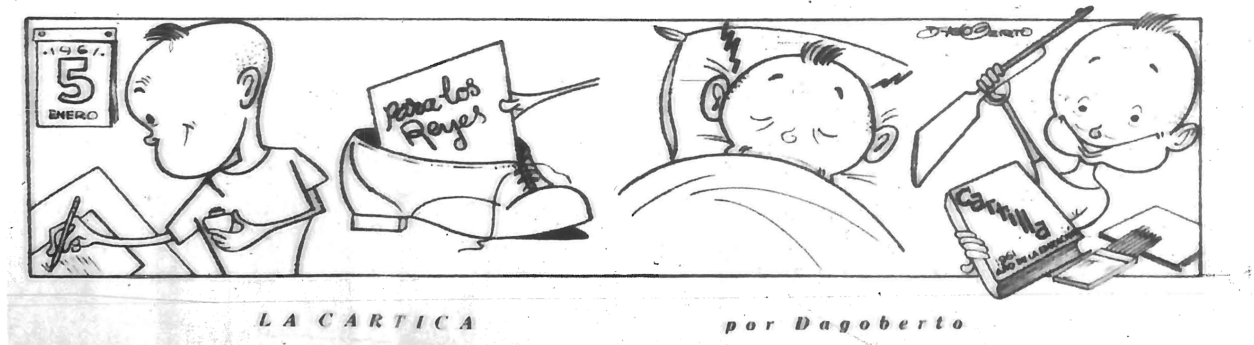


Figure 13: One typical caricature from the weekly periodical *Bohemia*, showing a child asking for a rifle to defend the country and a cartilla, or literacy textbook, to teach.

When the CDRs' magazine *Con la guardia en alto* began publication in October 1961, literacy and revolutionary vigilance went hand in hand in coverage of contemporary events. The Literacy Campaign was featured prominently in the biweekly magazine, which exhorted CDR members to continue supporting the Campaign by “contributing our vigilance, so all of the students learning to read and write do not miss a single class,” a patriotic call to prevent adult truancy.³² *Con la guardia en alto* included a survey form in every issue, where members were asked to give feedback on the work they completed over the previous two weeks. Participation in the Literacy Campaign was one of the main topics of the survey; CDR members were asked to tally the number of members in their section volunteering as teachers, learning to read, or helping in a support capacity.³³ Regional teachers' conferences, graduation ceremonies, and other events were featured in the pages of the magazine as “Activities of the CDRs” in subsequent issues. Meanwhile, other major national publications like *Bohemia* also concurred

³¹ “Vigilancia,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 2 No. 7 (1 & 15 February 1962) 6.

³² “Alfabetizando,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 1 No. 2 (1 November 1961) 3.

³³ This was a regular feature of the survey in every 1961 issue, appearing first in “Informe sobre actividades,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 1 No. 1 (1 November 1961) 15.

that vigilance and literacy education were inextricably linked in modern Cuba, even for young children like the one shown in Figure 13.³⁴

In the December 1 issue of *Con la guardia en alto*, the editors also featured a letter from a newly literate CDR member, Nancy Naranjo, of Oriente Province. Naranjo wrote to the editors that she was proud of her accomplishment, grateful to the Revolution for giving her this opportunity, and eager to give back through her work in her local CDR. As she recounted, she and her fellow students had already begun: “with my teacher and several other students, I went to cut cane for two days. It was a great experience!”³⁵ Thus, while the CDRs were not officially responsible for the administration of the Literacy Campaign, they and at least some of their members took the work of the Campaign as an integral part of their mission. Furthermore, literacy work facilitated other forms of activism.

The rhetorical equation of education and revolutionary vigilance, with one necessarily requiring the other, was in keeping with the tone of the Literacy Campaign itself—political education was a prominent component of the Literacy Campaign, and speeches by figures like Fidel Castro and Armando Hart, then the Minister of Education—praised *cederistas* for their educational and vigilance work. The national leadership of the CDRs appeared to agree that political education was vital for their members as well. Alongside features on the progress of the Literacy Campaign and collective vigilance operations, *Con la guardia en alto* also ran a regular section titled “Revolutionary Instruction,” featuring lessons about the history and geopolitical situation of Cuba by the Communist politician Blas Roca. Roca retold the history of Cuba as one of progress from colonization, slavery, and feudalism to the liberation of the Revolution. In late

³⁴ Dagoberto, “La cartica,” *Bohemia* Año 53 No. 2 (8 January 1961) Supplement p. 16.

³⁵ “Nos dicen...” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 1 No. 4 (1 December 1961) 6

December, the editors of *Con la guardia en alto* added another dimension to this progress, arguing that “learning to read and write, fighting for liberty, revolution, and socialism, there are fundamentally the same struggle: illiteracy denotes slavery; countries that fight for liberation must also erradicate illiteracy; it is an extricable part of a revolution.”³⁶ Furthermore, the success of the Literacy Campaign—and the past three years of the Revolution—were due to the creation of an “army of culture,” an “army of the nation” that brought hope, security, and education.³⁷

Individual CDR sections took the lead on other educational projects, particularly political education seminars and classes. CDR sections hosted a number of study sessions for adults, including *charlas*, “chats” about topics of the day, Círculos de Estudios, study groups, and Círculos de Instrucción Revolucionaria, schools for aspiring CDR officials, all of which were designed to inculcate revolutionary values in the neighborhoods where they took place. Círculos de Instrucción Revolucionaria were formally inaugurated first, with schools of revolutionary instruction beginning to operate by February 1962.³⁸ One theme of the seminars that year was a polio vaccination campaign. In Santiago, for example, two regional CDR conferences were called to publicize thirty new schools for 600 prospective students and “greatly boost the progress of the anti-polio campaign” by educating the public about the need for vaccinations.³⁹ Articles in *Con la guardia en alto* explained the need for universal vaccinations further, frequently describing vaccines as a scientific advance, a weapon for the body’s “armies” in the “struggle against sickness.”⁴⁰ Caricatures of the projects, like those shown in Figure 14 below,

³⁶ “Vigilancia,” *Con la guardia en alto* 1 No. 5 (15 December 1961) 5.

³⁷ “Vigilancia,” *Con la guardia en alto* 1 No. 5 (15 December 1961) 29.

³⁸ The first day of classes at schools in Jiguani, Niquero, and Marianao, for example, were announced in the February issue of *Con la guardia en alto* Año 2 No. 7 (1 & 15 February 1962) 11.

³⁹ “Plenarias: Santiago de Cuba,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 2 No. 8 (March 1962) 9, 10.

⁴⁰ “Salud pública: Que es la vacunación,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 2 No. 8 (March 1962) 20, 21.

also highlighted this similarity.⁴¹ Education—both basic literacy education and the scientific literacy represented by vaccinations—were essential to the success of the Revolution and an integral part of “vigilance” as the CDRs’ leadership conceived it.

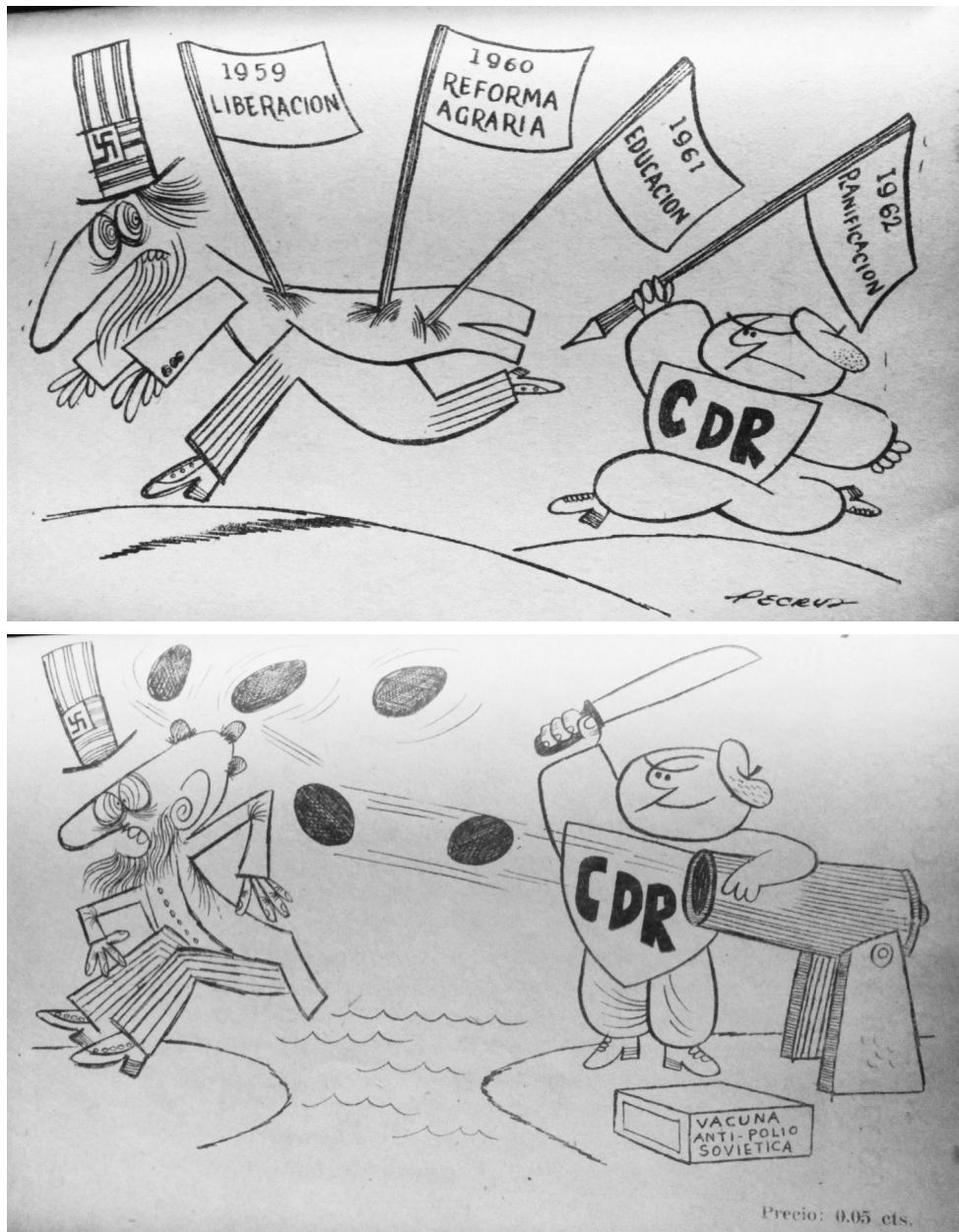


Figure 14: As in the Literacy Campaign of 1961, official CDR publications described their work as part of a national struggle for self-determination against foreign powers like the United States.

⁴¹ *Con la guardia en alto* Año 2 No. 6. (1 & 15 February 1962) back cover; *Con la guardia en alto* Año 2 No. 8 (15 March 1962) back cover.

After 1961, the focus on education continued. The Literacy Campaign was declared a resounding success, and “martyrs” of the Campaign—the young men assassinated by counterrevolutionaries—remained touchstones of CDR literature, evidence of “imperialists...[and] their bestial hatred of the country” as well as namesakes for individual CDR sections.⁴² The first issues of *Con la guardia en alto* from 1962 celebrated the work of *cederistas* in the Literacy Campaign, but began to pivot to the next project, the *Seguimiento*. Where the Literacy Campaign of 1961 aimed to bring all Cubans to a first-grade reading level, the *Seguimiento* sought to bring all Cubans to full functional literacy—the point at which men and women could read books and newspapers and communicate fluently in writing—and to bring civics education to all citizens of the revolutionary state. Like the Literacy Campaign, the *Seguimiento* was partly implemented through a close partnership with CDRs, which helped organize and host classes. The regular survey of CDR section activities was updated to include questions about the number of *cederistas* participating in this phase of the educational project, and responses were compiled into dedicated section on CDR *Seguimiento* news.⁴³ Often, this took the form of announcements about school openings, graduations, and volunteer work projects.

From their beginning in late 1960, CDRs took responsibility for far more than just the prevention of sabotage; they sought to instruct all citizens in revolutionary conduct and sought to bring them to a fully “revolutionary” lifestyle. As a result, in the latter half of the decade Oscar and Ruth Lewis found that *cederistas* acquired informal authority among their neighbors as “a

⁴² This condemnation referred to the assassination of the 16-year-old literacy teacher Manuel Ascunce Domenech in November 1961. Later in the same issue, there was a report on the creation of a new library at a Havana CDR section named for the young teacher. His parents attended the ceremony. “Vigilancia,” *Con la guardia en alto* 2 No. 6 (1 & 15 January 1962) 5, 11.

⁴³ The first of these updated surveys appeared in *Con la guardia en alto* 2 No. 6 (1 & 15 January 1962) 37-38.

respected person” who could mediate disputes and offer informal education about good revolutionary conduct.⁴⁴ One such case was a “problem with a pig” experienced by one of the *alfabetizados* in 1961, who at the time of the incident was in the midst of an ugly divorce with his wife.

The man and one of his friends had acquired a piglet and planned to raise it in his house and garden. However, they soon realized that it would be illegal to keep the pig—public health regulations mandated that livestock be kept on a farm, not in private homes or gardens. The two men resolved to slaughter the pig, thereby solving the problem. The homeowner told his friend, “Listen, we have to get permission to kill the pig—we do not want to have problems with the police.”⁴⁵ His friend objected: “since the pig is just for the residents of this house [and the meat is not for sale], why would we need permission?”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the homeowner went to a representative of his local committee, and she agreed that butchering the pig and eating it would be the best way of dealing with the problem and keeping the men on the correct side of public health codes. The two men butchered the pig, divided it between themselves, and began curing the meat because neither had a refrigerator. Suddenly, the police appeared at the house, accusing them of trying to run an illegal butcher shop. The charges were false—the man suspected his wife was the source—and he was released late that night after the police discussed the matter with the local CDR representative.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 35.

⁴⁵ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 45.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

CDRs and Women

The CDR representative who offered this legal advice was a young woman in her mid-teens, the daughter of a local CDR official. Subsequent interviews with her revealed that interviewers found her to be intelligent, committed to the Revolution, and knowledgeable about the work of the local Committee, but hardly an authority figure in her own right. While CDRs were intended to prevent and thwart sabotage attempts, examples like this one suggest that they took on a much larger role in the minds of many participants, serving as an arbiter of revolutionary values, a site for education about those values, and an institution that lent importance to anyone respected enough to be affiliated with it.

However, *cederistas* were not held in high regard by all, and women were a particular target for complaints. Cubans dissatisfied with the revolutionary government often complained that CDRs silenced dissent by encouraging neighbors to report one another for suspicious behavior, rather than interceding on their behalf with the police. In one study of Cuban men who left the country between 1959 and 1962, for example, CDRs were among the most commonly cited reasons to leave.⁴⁸ When asked for specific details that influenced their decision to leave Cuba, interviewees downplayed ideological concerns like communism, focusing instead on disruptions to daily life, the overall climate, and their unwillingness to “integrate” appropriately into the revolution.⁴⁹ One interviewee recalled that CDR “committees watched us day and night. Because we refused to cooperate with them, we were called counterrevolutionaries, which made

⁴⁸ This study surveyed nearly 60,000 working-age heads of households who registered for assistance with the Cuban Refugee Emergency Center in Miami by the beginning of 1963. Study subjects disproportionately came from the best-educated and middle- to upper-classes of Cuban society, with 36 percent of those surveyed having at least a high school diploma, compared with 4 percent of the entire Cuban population. Richard R. Fagen, Richard A. Brody, and Thomas J. O’Leary, *Cubans in Exile: Disaffection and the Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968) 17-19.

⁴⁹ 17 percent of respondents cited communism as a key factor in their decision to leave. Fagen, Brody, and O’Leary, *Cubans in Exile*, 90.

our lives impossible.”⁵⁰ Female *cederistas* were a particular source of dissatisfaction, appearing “worse than the men” to many discontented Cubans.⁵¹ Women comprised half of all CDR members by 1975, and housewives were particularly well represented in the organization, comprising 32 percent of total membership, likely due to early recruitment drives run through organizations like the FMC and the ease with which housewives could participate in CDR projects and carry out their other work.⁵²

Often, women were disproportionately concentrated at lower levels of the organization like block captaincies or zone, municipal, and sectional committees, and less prominent at higher levels of the organization. Thus, even as the national leadership of the CDRs remained largely male, ordinary Cubans’ interactions with female *cederistas* were common and frequently inflected by their views on women’s right to police the behavior of others and their willingness to take direction from women outside of traditional classroom settings. Particularly in Cuban exile complaints, these local female CDR officials could appear transgressive and even offensive, with young women like the one discussed in the previous section perceived as usurping men’s role as the “captain” of the home, neighborhood, or workplace. Women’s attention to mundane details was likewise transmuted from what the women themselves described as a wholesome interest in their neighbors’ wellbeing, into a sinister power to amplify rumors of counterrevolutionary behavior and bring Cubans who were not fully enthusiastic about revolutionary project to the attention of state security.

For female *cederistas*, their descriptions of revolutionary activities often took the form of good neighborly behavior and personal advancement. One young mother described a common

⁵⁰ Quoted in Fagen, Brody, and O’Leary, *Cubans in Exile*, 81.

⁵¹ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 145, Folder 74.

⁵² *Resumen estadístico de los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución*, 13, 16.

pattern: she joined her local CDR section as part of her political education in the early days of the Revolution. Members of the local section seized on her interest, and “I was integrated more and more,” with fellow *cederistas* voting to promote her within the local CDR section.⁵³ By the late 1960s, she worked for the CDR, and “I go to one house with a pad of paper and a pencil, taking note, if the *compañera*...lacks anything. I go to the patio and if they have a leak [I record that], if they need a sofa [I record that], everything that they need, and so on to the next house.”⁵⁴ Once she had collected a list of what was needed, “what is needed most we deal with first, but everything is addressed, little by little.”⁵⁵ By taking an interest in leaks and household furnishings, she gained authority in her neighborhood.

Fellow *cederistas* also encouraged her to work in a laundry so she could have extra income to help support her family—a factor that mollified her husband, who “did not like that she worked.”⁵⁶ By the time of the interview, she also attended adult education classes in the laundry where she worked and hoped to qualify for a place in a laboratory technician training program where she could indulge her newfound enthusiasm for “analysis, using microscopes to analyze things; things like that interest me.”⁵⁷ CDRs facilitated her entry into the workforce, offering a socially acceptable reason to challenge gender norms. Routine committee work, though, was not explicitly ideological; in her account, it meant recording the problems of neighbors so they could be solved and the life of the community improved.

⁵³ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 138, Folder 74.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Margaret Randall, interviewing Cuban women in 1970, recorded a similar trajectory of incorporation into the CDRs from Teresa Sánchez. At the time, Sánchez was 38 years old and the head of propaganda and solidarity in the national directory of the CDRs. Randall described Sánchez as a wholesome character, “one of those rare people with whom one immediately feels at ease,” sincere in her concern for her fellow Cubans.⁵⁸ Sánchez first became involved in mass organizations through the FMC, which helped to recruit women into militias in her hometown in Havana province. Sánchez and her then-husband sympathized with the revolution and “when the war ended, in a kind of spontaneous disorganized way, we just joined up with the first organizations that were being formed.”⁵⁹ In her case, this meant the FMC. Once in the FMC, “One day I was at the FMC, and someone said, ‘We’re all going to join the Militia.’ ‘O.K., so we’re going to join the Militia.’ We all went over...and joined the Militia: we learned how to take guns apart and reassemble them.”⁶⁰ From there, she became involved in CDR patrols during the invasion of Playa Girón, followed by work with the army in the Escambray Mountains.

Based on her work in the Escambray Mountains, Sánchez was eventually promoted into the national directorate of the CDRs. Reflecting on her work history and political education, Sánchez described the process of revolutionary mobilization as one that “opened my eyes...I was born with the Revolution.”⁶¹ But for the Revolution and its instruments like the CDRs, Sánchez speculated that she would have remained “a housewife, miserable, without any kind of future, without opportunities of any kind.”⁶² In the Revolution, it seemed, patriarchal gender roles were

⁵⁸ Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1974) 268.

⁵⁹ Teresa Sánchez, quoted in Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 274.

⁶⁰ Teresa Sánchez, quoted in Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 275.

⁶¹ Teresa Sánchez, quoted in Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 277.

⁶² Ibid.

open to reinterpretation, with women even taking up arms and finding self-fulfillment in the process.

The rest of Cuban society did not change at the same rate, however. Sánchez's husband joined the army and was stationed in Havana, so he could not take care of their daughter while she was on guard duty with the CDR. Sánchez asked her mother to care for their young daughter, a common practice for women who worked outside the home and did not have access to childcare. Sanchez's mother, though, expressed disapproval at her daughter's goal of patrolling the Escambray Mountains, but agreed to care for her granddaughter nonetheless. As Sánchez reported later, though, her mother "never did understand or approve of the fact that I went off and left my daughter...she never understood that I wore pants and boots and walked around with a pistol in my belt"—familial pressure that likely would have sounded familiar to other young female revolutionaries.⁶³

In particular, Sánchez credited education in the CDRs with encouraging her aspirations and inspiring her to challenge more conservative Cubans like her mother. She cited the writings of Blas Roca from *Con la guardia en alto* as a particular influence on her early development.⁶⁴ *Con la guardia en alto* encouraged women to join CDRs, describing them as a fundamental part of the Cuban revolutionary struggle since at least the nineteenth century. Furthermore, though women fought "side by side with men, often at the hour of triumph they were credited with a

⁶³ Teresa Sánchez, quoted in Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 281. Anti-Castro activists described this manner of dress and behavior in much less flattering terms, with one memoirist writing that the Revolution changed women's fashion, with one "prototypical" example wearing a "fatigue uniform...with an automatic rifle over the back of her chair...[a] mannish, aggressive female," Antonio Navarro, *Tocayo* (Westport: Sandown Books, 1981) 92.

⁶⁴ Teresa Sánchez, quoted in Margaret Randall, *Cuban Women Now*, 275.

lesser role in the victory,” something successive articles promised would not happen again.⁶⁵ Instead, writers for *Con la guardia en alto* encouraged women to see themselves as victims of exploitation, struggling for “the emancipation of women,” a struggle “more difficult than the struggle for men, because our field of battle has been in the lack of understanding of our fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons.”⁶⁶ This explicit focus on women as a distinct oppressed class was more pointed than the rhetoric in women’s magazines like *Vanidades* or *Mujeres*, both of which were affiliated with the FMC.

It also suggested a different path to alleviating that oppression: instead of joining women-only organizations like FMC, women could join with men in CDRs to build an egalitarian, revolutionary society together. The writers further posited that CDRs were the best way to effect change, as they were “a movement that arises from the needs and yearnings of the public, and in them the meaning of the Revolution is studied. Those studies are one of the phenomena that necessarily and spontaneously arise in nations in the revolutionary process.”⁶⁷ In the process, they also suggested that women’s equality was a necessary and spontaneous component of a legitimate revolution—an ominous message for socially conservative Cubans.

Opponents of the Cuban Revolution also played on the threat posed by female CDR officials. The Cruzada Femenina Cubana, a Miami-based organization founded in 1961, for example, highlighted the dangers of *cederistas* in a Spanish-language pamphlet collection called

⁶⁵ “La importancia de la mujer en los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 1 No. 1 (1 November 1961) 15.

⁶⁶ “La importancia de la mujer en los Comités de Defensa de la Revolución,” *Con la guardia en alto* Año 1 No. 1 (1 November 1961) 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Casos Humanos.⁶⁸ In one issue, a son turned his parents in to the CDR because of lessons he learned at school, using revolutionary justice to upend power relationships in the family.⁶⁹

Another pamphlet featured a woman named Estrella and her son living in Cuba; her husband opposed the Revolution and lived in the United States, while Estrella supported herself and her son by working as a laundress. One day, the head of the local CDR section visited



Figure 15: Estrella and the local CDR representative from "El niño dormido." The *cederista* is presented as a stranger, not a neighbor to Estrella.

Estrella and demanded that her son be sent to a *círculo infantil*—a government-sponsored daycare center—to ensure that the boy received a proper education and care. Estrella was outraged at the intrusion of the *cederista*, a stranger, and vowed that she would rather stop working than turn her son over to “spies and informers.”⁷⁰ This confrontation led Estrella and her husband to try escaping Cuba with their son, a five-day voyage in a small boat. Estrella and her husband survived the journey, but their son died during the voyage. Though the authors of *Casos*

⁶⁸ The Cruzada Femenina Cubana also published *Juana Castro Ruz acusa: la hermana de Fidel Castro, testigo de mayor excepción, denuncia los crímenes del Castro-comunismo*, Ciudad México, junio 29, 1964, a condemnation of the course of the Cuban Revolution by Castro’s sister, as well as other works warning against the dangers of Cuban Communism. The organization dissolved by the late 1960s. Juana Castro Ruz, *Juana Castro Ruz acusa: la hermana de Fidel Castro, testigo de mayor excepción, denuncia los crímenes del Castro-comunismo*, Ciudad México, junio 29, 1964 (Miami: Cruzada Femenina Cubana, 1964).

⁶⁹ The theme of patriarchal families upended by CDRs appears in Cuban exile publications like Luis Ricardo Alonso’s novel *Territorio Libre*, in which one young boy creates a “children’s CDR” to spy on potentially disloyal parents. Later in the book, adult men also joke that the CDR had recruited so many women that there was “a Committee for Defense in every bed” Luis Ricardo Alonso, *Territorio Libre*, Trans. Alan Brown (London: Peter Owen, 1966), 22-24, 188. In her memoir *A Cuban Story*, Marcia del Mar recounts how her cousin Roberto threatened to report his parents for their political views, and claims that she heard a story about female *cederista* attacked by a young man who complained about waiting in line for rations Marcia del Mar, *A Cuban Story* (Charlotte: Heritage Printers, 1979) 26, 32-33.

⁷⁰ “El niño dormido,” *Casos Humanos* No. 2 (Miami: Cruzada Femenina Cubana, 1961) 2. Cuban Heritage Collection Books (CHC Vf 2.C65 C36).

Humanos did not claim to base their stories on the lives of real people, they expected the bleak portrait of Cuba painted in pamphlets like “El niño dormido” to strike a chord with Cubans who had recently left the island, and this portrait often included the elevation of women to positions of power where they could harass women like Estrella.

Opposing women like the *cederista* who threatened Estrella with daycare, Teresa Sánchez, or the young women Oscar and Ruth Lewis interviewed entailed an attack on the Cuban revolutionary state. Each woman, whether fictional or real, had the authority to report on the needs of their neighbors—including the need for police intervention if one were suspected of counterrevolutionary activity, though individual *cederistas* did not always describe their role in those terms. In the process, they became responsible for the distribution of goods and services in their neighborhoods and arbiters of rumor and gossip, empowered to redraw “the boundaries of the community...in circumstances where group cohesion is fragile.”⁷¹ As women, these *cederistas* sparked particular resistance when taking on these new powers, with some of their neighbors likely seeing a deference to older gender norms as a way to “maintain a semblance of equilibrium at times of stress.”⁷² Instead, the revolutionary government sought their assistance out of necessity and convenience, allowing women to become a fixture of local CDRs without deliberately promoting them into the upper echelons of the national leadership.

Conclusion

When Fidel Castro announced the creation of the CDRs, he appeared to discuss an organization of “perfectly formed and trained militias” comprised of men who could take up

⁷¹ Stewart and Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, 12.

⁷² Stewart and Strathern, *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*, 27.

arms without undermining gender norms.⁷³ However, citizens like the 106-year-old *alfabetizada* María de la Cruz Santmanat helped form the backbone of the committees. These men and women did not fit stereotypes of militia members, often for reasons of age or gender. Nevertheless, women were an integral part of CDRs when they are examined from the perspective of the projects they undertook in the early 1960s like the Literacy Campaign, the *Seguimiento*, and the polio campaign encroached on traditionally female and female-friendly fields like education and healthcare where they could comprise a majority of the workforce. These projects encouraged women to join CDRs, and over time many of them were encouraged to pursue their political work further, working outside the home, seeking education, and taking on guard duty, among other tasks. In the process, they challenged gender norms at a time when their more conservative neighbors may have been less inclined to tolerate the change, making female *cederistas* a focus of complaints and indicating a larger role for women in determining the course of their own lives.

Regional and national leaders of the CDRs—most of whom were men—did not uniformly call for a coherent, unified agenda to promote women’s equality with men in all aspects of CDR work. One profile of rural CDRs published in 1965, *Los CDR en granjas y zonas rurales*, rarely addressed the gender of CDRs’ membership, describing them as “members,” “workers,” “neighbors,” and “*compañeros*” who participated in educational projects, vaccination campaigns, and revolutionary vigilance.⁷⁴ When regions reported the gender makeup of their membership, however, women comprised between one quarter and half of all *cederistas*,

⁷³ Fidel Castro Ruz, speech given at the presidential palace in Havana, September 28, 1960. Accessible online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1960/esp/f280960e.html>.

⁷⁴ *Los CDR en granjas y zonas rurales* (Havana: Ediciones con la Guardia en Alto, 1965) 24-25.

suggesting that women were less well represented in rural areas than in urban ones.⁷⁵ Some CDRs appeared to follow more traditional gender norms, reporting that in times of crisis male *cederistas* were called up into army service and women “substituted for their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons in vigilance.”⁷⁶ However, opinions of women’s militia participation varied across the country, with one Camagüey section writing that women took guard duty alongside men and “were not lacking in the performance of their duties.”⁷⁷ Out of necessity, women could be recruited to teach or even to take up guard duty. Men and women who opposed women’s “performance of their duties,” meanwhile, could come to the attention of *cederistas* as potential counterrevolutionaries.

In 1971, Hugh Thomas observed that “as important as the [Communist] Party in organizing the country and stimulating the public have been the neighborhood Committees for the Defense of the Revolution...every street has one and everyone may join, so that it is not surprising that on paper there are over 3 million members...these committees are really the core of the new Cuban society, creating a new culture of propaganda, participation, conformity and labor in a country which in the past was such a curious mixture of private endeavor and private suffering”⁷⁸ Women took on a significant role in these organizations, managing much of the day-to-day business of local chapters and drawing ire and resistance as a result.

⁷⁵ Seccional 10 of Contramestre in Oriente, for example, reported 78 women out of a membership of 318. Seccional 4 of Guane in rural Havana province, meanwhile, reported 186 women out of a total membership of 392. *Los CDR en granjas y zonas rurales*, 44, 238.

⁷⁶ *Los CDR en granjas y zonas rurales*, 59.

⁷⁷ *Los CDR en granjas y zonas rurales*, 73.

⁷⁸ Thomas, *Cuba*, 996

CHAPTER 4: IMPELLED TO LEARN AND TEACH YOUNG ADULTS IN THE LITERACY CAMPAIGN

Introduction

In early 1960, María Téllez Márquez was 15 years old and a student at the William Soler Secondary School in central Havana. She and her classmates had heard of preparations for the Literacy Campaign, but few of them planned to join. Their school was close to the Havana harbor, and on the morning of March 4 their class was interrupted by the explosion of *La Coubre*, a French cargo ship bringing munitions for the revolutionary government. The students “flooded into the street to see what happened...[that afternoon, Téllez] returned home very concerned and very upset. I told my mother that I would sign up to teach.”¹ Her parents, “humble but very conservative” Cubans, were reluctant to let her go and dissuaded her from signing up until the assassination of Conrado Benítez in early 1961.² Finally, Téllez convinced her parents that “the attacks against Cuba, against us Cubans” impelled her to teach.³ They signed her permission slip, and Téllez enrolled in the one-week teacher training course at Varadero.

After completing her training, Téllez received a teaching placement in the mountains outside Manzanillo, in Oriente province, where she lived with the president of the local *campesino* organization and his wife. The transition was not easy. Even though she did not grow up “with many comforts or anything like that in [her] parents’ humble lifestyle,” life outside

¹ María Téllez Márquez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

major cities like Havana was difficult and teachers like Téllez had to “adapt” to the lifestyles of their hosts, who often lacked electricity, running water, and easy access to medical care.⁴ The conditions also disconcerted her parents, who would have preferred that she live close to her mother’s family and teach in the city of Manzanillo, a less challenging environment. Téllez’s mother was so concerned about her daughter that

she came to see me because she received news that I was sick and that I wanted to come down [from the mountains], but I had said I didn’t want to leave, that I wouldn’t crack. And so she went to look for me. She was heavy, even fat, a graceful and beautiful *mulata*, but fat. But the *maestro voluntario* who guided us and oversaw our work was skinny, tall, and my mother fell many times at the river crossings. That was quite a party because [when Téllez’s mother saw her in person she asked]... ‘After I’ve gotten wet so many times, you don’t want to come with me?’ I told her, *mima* I can’t go, I gave my word and I have to finish my work here.⁵

Four of her adult students in Providencia passed their final examination during the eight months that Téllez worked there. Téllez planned to stay in Providencia through the end of the year, but she became ill and had to return to her family in Havana before she could take on any more students. Nevertheless, she qualified for a scholarship based on her work, ensuring that she could continue her education and seek employment as one of a new generation of white-collar professionals.

Téllez and her family exemplified attributes common among the young teachers of the 1961 Literacy Campaign: her parents agreed with the goals of the Campaign but were uneasy seeing their daughter leave home, Téllez was motivated to join by recent events, by the end of the year she had asserted her independence from her family, and she had laid a foundation for her professional career. Young teachers like her illustrate how young adults selectively responded to propaganda for the 1961 Literacy Campaign that were discussed in Chapter 1, portraying their

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

decision to teach as part of a process of maturation that drew on their personal experiences more than national history. Nevertheless, teachers were well integrated into the revolutionary state by the end of their work in December 1961, having scholarships that started them on a promising professional path and being familiar with important elements of the revolutionary state like the Ministry of Education, the FMC, and CDRs as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Parental Approval

Frank Laubach, the North American missionary who pioneered the teaching techniques used in the Literacy Campaign, predicted that patriotic appeals would be particularly effective in convincing literate people to join Christian missionaries' literacy campaigns as teachers or facilitators. In his guidelines for literacy campaigns, Laubach wrote that appeals should "be sent through newspapers, radio, letters directed to educated people, schools, industries, churches, and social and labor organizations...[the appeal] should say that illiteracy is enemy number one of the progress of the country and that there is no more patriotic service than to do one's bit toward wiping it out."⁶ In the process, organizers of the literacy campaign could attempt to persuade skeptics about the need for literacy education and the need for them to participate in literacy education, rather than leaving the work to experts.

Cuban propaganda omitted Laubach's Christian theology, but echoed his patriotic messaging to appeal to young adults and their parents, attempting to preclude the belief that professional teachers would be sufficient to address the issue of illiteracy in revolutionary Cuba and to discourage parents from listening to counterrevolutionary propaganda about the Revolution undermining parents' authority over their children. Framing the Literacy Campaign

⁶ Frank C. Laubach, *Teaching the World to Read: A Handbook for Literacy Campaigns* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947) 118.

as a war against ignorance, the revolutionary government also echoed the values of leftist Cubans who were longstanding supporters of reform and radical change. For parents who were leftists or who had worked as teachers, the Literacy Campaign was a call send their children to expand upon their own patriotic work; Castro's January 1961 declaration that "we can tell all of the men who died in our struggles for liberty that at last we have arrived at the hour in which their dreams will be realized" was in the process of being fulfilled in the field of education.⁷

Counterrevolutionaries operating in Cuba sought to raise doubts about the intentions of the revolutionary government in the minds of parents. Since at least early 1960, anti-Castro activists working through outlets like Radio Swan had spread rumors that the revolutionaries would end the right of *patria potestad*—parents' authority over their children—to send promising young adults to school in the Soviet Union or in the countryside, where "love toward their mothers, brothers, or any relative were feeling they should suppress."⁸ Programs like Operation Peter Pan, which brought 14,000 children and young adults between the ages of 6 and 18 from Cuba to the United States between 1960 and 1962, employed this rhetoric to encourage parents to send their children abroad, away from the Literacy Campaign. Recent scholarship argues that these rumors were fabrications, but the tumult of the Revolution in 1959 and 1960 as well as these rumors made parents uneasy about the revolutionaries' plans for their children.⁹

Arrangements made to ensure the safety of teachers in the Literacy Campaign—especially young women—was a clear priority, and likely helped to allay parental concerns.

⁷ Fidel Castro Ruz, Speech given at at Parque Céspedes, Santiago de Cuba, 1 January 1959. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1959/esp/f010159e.html>.

⁸ Anita Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children: The Politics of Childhood in Havana and Miami, 1959-1962* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014) 109.

⁹ Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*, 109-110; María de los Angeles Torres, *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) 137.

After the death of Manuel Ascunce in the Escambray Mountains in November 1961, organizers took the unusual step of temporarily moving all of the teachers into the region into Trinidad for their safety, and there were no more assassinations.¹⁰ This concern with keeping young adults out of combat contrasted with anti-government propaganda that “all Cuban students would learn to bear arms,” a claim that helped sway some parents to send their children abroad in the early 1960s.¹¹ Overall, teachers reported that organizers went out of their way to help ensure their safety even if they worked in dangerous areas. One teacher and supervisor recalled that even in the Escambray Mountains where counterrevolutionaries threatened government supporters, “we did not receive military training. We were young people who were there to teach...we were expressly ordered [not to fight, and] we could be disciplined and sent back to Havana if we became involved in that sort of thing. We were very well cared for.”¹² Teachers were outfitted in military uniforms and presented as part of an “Army of Teachers,” but they were not trained to use firearms or other weapons.

Given the rumors and threats to the safety of young teachers, it is perhaps unsurprising that the children of Cuban leftists joined the Literacy Campaign. Diana Balboa Hernández, for example, was 15 years old in 1961 and her mother and grandfather were members of the Communist Party, a commitment they took very seriously: “in other families, they were Christians or Protestants or whatever. In my family, my mother was in the Communist Party and she had been a member of the Young Socialists, and my grandparents [were Communists] as

¹⁰ Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹¹ Casavantes Bradford, *The Revolution is for the Children*, 97. This claim also appears in Yvonne M. Conde, *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹² Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

well.”¹³ They supported the Revolution as a means to solve many of the country’s problems, but due to her parents’ concerns about her age and gender, she “did not have the chance to go to the Sierra Maestra” in the 1950s.¹⁴ By 1961 she had begun to join in the family commitment to leftist politics, and she was chosen as the head of her local chapter of the Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes. Her parents supported the work but did not closely follow the news; when Balboa Hernández approached them to get permission to teach in the Literacy Campaign, her father signed her permission slip but her mother’s first response to the news was, “the only thing I want is that you not fight.”¹⁵ Once Balboa Hernández and the principal of her school clarified that the Literacy Campaign would not involve combat, her mother was appeased and Balboa Hernández received both her parents’ blessing to teach in Pinar del Río. Her fiancée, however, was less sure she could avoid combat: instead of an engagement ring he gave her an 8mm Spanish pistol to bring into the mountains.

Other young women had similar experiences, with parental reluctance turning to acceptance as young adults framed their goal of teaching in terms of family politics. Adria and Ivon Santana, sisters who were 13 and 16 years old in 1961, respectively, hailed from a “communist family, absolutely all of us...until my grandmother died at the age of 104, her house was the office of the Communist Party of Las Tunas.”¹⁶ Their parents resisted letting both daughters—and particularly Adria, the younger of the two—leave home, but “my family could not say no... [even though] they were afraid.”¹⁷ Ivon also observed that in 1961, “a communist

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹⁷ Ibid.

could not say no” if their daughters wished to teach.¹⁸ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, who joined one of the first groups of literacy teachers in 1961, also had family ties to the Revolution. Her mother had studied law at the University of Havana at the same time as Fidel Castro and joined the Ortodoxo political party with him. By the late 1950s her family was also “part of the clandestine struggle, and part of a revolutionary cell.”¹⁹ These and other oral histories suggest that the children of Cuban leftists may have used their nascent political consciousness to argue that they should be allowed to teach.

Adult teachers who were parents faced a similar set of pressures if their children wanted to join the Literacy Campaign. One of the youngest teachers in 1961, Griselda Aguilera Cabrera, was 7 years old and the daughter of a teacher and a regional organizer for the Literacy Campaign. She was too young to volunteer as a Conrado Benítez *brigadista*, but found herself “bored with the other children, playing every day” and argued that “coming from a ‘family of revolutionaries’” she had a responsibility to teach if she was able.²⁰ As a compromise, her parents agreed to sign her permission slip, on the condition that she would live at home and teach in their Havana neighborhood—an option available to volunteer teachers but not the young adults who volunteered as Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*, who committed to going wherever they were needed.

Recruitment for the Literacy Campaign acknowledged the importance of parental authority, but in practice officials in the revolutionary government welcomed young adults—

¹⁸ Ivon Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹⁹ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

²⁰ Griselda Aguilera Cabrera, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

particularly young women—who openly defied their elders to join the Campaign. In the process, officials reaffirmed the importance of formal education in revolutionary indoctrination, circumscribed parents’ authority, and supported young women who sought greater autonomy. Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, for example, was one of four daughters raised partly by her single mother and partly by her uncle’s family. She helped care for her sisters while they were studying in a Catholic school in Marianao. For her, “the regimen in my house was worse than military discipline,” with Navarro Morán and her sister required to travel together at all times, “regardless of whether I finished first or if she did, it did not matter.”²¹ Furthermore, she was a rebellious student, who “chastised often by the nuns, and every time it made me more rebellious.”²² Navarro Morán volunteered for one of the first cohorts of teachers, the *maestros voluntarios*, to escape from this situation. Her family complained that she “lacked respect” for her elders for signing up to teach in the countryside without their permission.²³ She initially trained in Minas del Frío, but was forced to return to Havana after contracting appendicitis. Nevertheless, she rejoined the Literacy Campaign shortly after surgery, compromising with her family and her doctors by teaching in the Ministerio de Industrias in Havana.²⁴

Events in 1960 and 1961 also radicalized parents, making even conservative parents like those of María Téllez Márquez amenable to sending their young adult children to teach. Less conservative parents like Ana Margarita Vielsa González were also encouraged to do more for the cause. In early 1961, Vielsa González signed permission slips for her three oldest children to

²¹ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

teach, leaving only her youngest child, Sixto José Jiménez Vielsa, at home.²⁵ In March 1961, Jiménez Vielsa tried to appeal to his mother to sign his permission slip as well, as he was thirteen years old and qualified to join the Conrado Benítez *brigadistas*. Vielsa González refused, saying he was “too little and that it was dangerous.”²⁶ Her son recalled that after that, she refused to listen to any further appeals from him. In mid-April, however, the invasion of Playa Girón convinced her to reconsider. As her son remembered it, “I do not think I said anything else, but [in mid-April] she told me ‘you’re leaving’” and signed his permission slip to become a *brigadista*.²⁷ Vielsa González herself recalled that it became clear to her that her son “had to go to the front...[he] had to become a man,” and that meant participating in the Literacy Campaign.²⁸ Parents were affected by the logic of Literacy Campaign propaganda, which encouraged women like Vielsa González to send their young adult children to teach in response to foreign military threats.

Patriotic appeals helped to overcome the concerns of parents and other adults who were reluctant to send young men and women to teach in the Literacy Campaign. Young adults like Diana Balboa Hernández and Griselda Aguilera Cabrera, for example, were raised in families that were more likely to trust the revolutionary government. In other cases like that of Sixto José Jiménez Vielsa and his mother Ana Margarita Vielsa González, parents became more supportive of the Cuban Revolution as it was challenged, making them willing partners in revolutionary change rather than reluctant authority figures to be convinced by their enthusiastic children. In

²⁵ Ana Margarita Vielsa González, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

²⁶ Sixto José Jiménez Vielsa, interview conducted by Jessica English, 8 July 2013 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ana Margarita Vielsa González, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

the process, they chose to trust the revolutionary government rather than rumors like the ones that circulated about parents' right of *patria potestad*.

Young Adults Inspired by Revolution

As discussed in Chapter 1, propaganda for the Literacy Campaign often alluded to Cuban history and the unfulfilled promises of independence, part of a larger, “all-encompassing paradigm for revolution” based on the readings of Cuban history.²⁹ However, its allusions to the nineteenth century wars of independence, failures of the early twentieth century, and even national heroes like José Martí appeared less effective with young adults than allusions to recent events. Most of the 250,000 teachers in the Literacy Campaign of 1961 were between the ages of 12 and 30, students and aspiring young professionals who often cited participation in the Literacy Campaign as a way to deepen their commitment to the Cuban nation and take their rightful place in the Revolution. Recruiting materials for the Literacy Campaign resonated the most when they referred to recent events like the guerrilla insurgency of the 1950s, the explosion of *La Coubre*, Conrado Benítez, or the invasion of Playa Girón in mid-April 1961. These events were shaped by the older history—the 26th of July Movement, for example, “looked back as much as it looked forward...[drawing] inspiration and motivation from the past,” but for these young adults recent events—particularly those since January 1, 1959—appeared to supersede earlier events in motivating them to participate in the Literacy Campaign.³⁰ Overall, they articulated a belief that their generation was uniquely summoned to serve the nation, surpassing the achievements of their parents and grandparents.

²⁹ Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *The Structure of Cuban History: Meanings and Purpose of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013) 196.

³⁰ Pérez, *The Structure of Cuban History*, 191.

Young adults had been a noteworthy part of the Revolution since the guerrilla insurgency of the 1950s. Hugh Thomas, a British scholar, observed with concern that young people were becoming more involved, as in one case “on 7 July [1957, when] an eight-year-old girl was arrested placing a bomb in Guantánamo. The old gangsters of the days of Prío had thus given way to idealistic gunmen in their teens or even younger. It was as if delinquency had been articulated into street fighting.”³¹ By 1961, “delinquency” had transitioned into enthusiasm for the Literacy Campaign, as some young adults came to see illiteracy as a greater evil than the pre-revolutionary government. Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, for example, joined the Revolutionary Directorate (DR) in her Havana secondary school. She helped distribute clandestine publications from the DR and 26th of July Movement in the city and collect medicine and supplies for the rebels in the countryside. After hearing news of the Literacy Campaign, Navarro Morán vowed that nothing would stop her from joining—not even if she had to teach “with boots, without boots, with backpack, without backpack, however [she] could, [she] would go.”³² She was part of the first cohort of teachers trained at Minas del Frío. Other young adults framed their radicalization in similar terms, offering explanations like “when the Revolution triumphed [in January 1959] I was still young and did not have the opportunity to take action against the tyrants...[until] I joined the Literacy Campaign.”³³ Furthermore, by working in regions of the Sierra Maestra like Minas del Frío—as the Rebel Army and members of the 26th of July

³¹ Hugh Thomas, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* (London: Pan Books, 2002), 636-637.

³² Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

³³ José Blanco Ramos, *brigadista* from Granma province, in *El pueblo dice...vivencias de la Campaña de Alfabetización de Cuba*, Ed. Matilde Serra Robledo, Ana María Rojas Lucero, Sara Legón Padilla, Nilda Sosa Delgado, Antonia Díaz Núñez, Gilberto García Batista, and Horacio Díaz Pendás (Havana: Asociación de Pedagogos, 1999) 24.

Movement had done—young adults argued they could emulate these national heroes and further their work.

For others, the Literacy Campaign was their first opportunity to contribute meaningfully, putting their ideological commitment to the Revolution into practice. Silvio Rodríguez, for example, described the Literacy Campaign as an important means of emulating the 26th of July Movement revolutionaries since “we had not liberated the country in the armed struggle, but we could liberate the country from the scourge of illiteracy...with pencils and textbooks.”³⁴ Gerardo González, another Conrado Benítez *brigadista*, was part of a band as a young man, a hobby that garnered him positive attention before 1959. Revolutionary work quickly became the more fashionable occupation, with “many young people, especially young men, who participated in the [Literacy] Campaign already adopting revolutionary values.”³⁵ The *Patrullas Juveniles*, informally organized “groups of young men with uniforms” were an early manifestation of this for young men who dreamed of “at least being a part of [the Revolution]. And this did not happen after 1959 until the call summoning us to become literacy teachers.”³⁶ In the training camp at Varadero, González and his neighbors began to write songs about the adventures they planned to have, merging their interest in music and the Revolution.

Young teachers expected admiration and enhanced social status as a result of their work. While young adults were expected to work autonomously, they continued socializing with one another in their free time, devising games and songs to entertain themselves and their hosts. Many young teachers did not have regular access to television or radio, and they amused

³⁴ Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 18 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

³⁵ Gerardo González Carmona, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

themselves at night by telling stories and singing songs about the Revolution that often focused on topics like Fidel Castro's promise to send teachers into the countryside. One song recalled by a former *brigadista* went "when I climb [to the peak of] Turquino, climbing up and down hills, I looked like a dove together with the *campesinos*. [Together, they sang] 'the Revolution, Fidel, Fidel, we have teachers already.'"³⁷ Another teacher who worked in Los Vergeles, Mayajigua, recalled that her students "became accustomed to seeing us [the teachers] joyfully marching down the roads in the afternoons in our *brigadista* uniforms, vain and singing popular songs of the day in unison, and they joined in with us in that serene countryside."³⁸

By early 1961, organizers of the Literacy Campaign found so many young people eager to go to Oriente that they had to turn many young adults away, telling them that the real struggle was elsewhere—a major propaganda victory since Oriente was home to nearly half of all illiterate Cubans in the 1950s.³⁹ Silvio Rodríguez, another teacher, observed that when he joined the Literacy Campaign in 1961, "I did not ask to go to the mountains of Oriente because they told me that many people had already asked to go to Oriente and Oriente was practically covered [with teachers]."⁴⁰ Instead, he was sent to the Escambray Mountains of central Cuba, where he was farther from the origins of the Revolution but closer to the front lines of the ongoing fight against counterrevolutionary guerrillas. His first students were members of a unit that saw action

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cándida Rosa Orizondo Crespo, a *brigadista* from Santa Clara in her *testimonio* in *El pueblo dice*, Ed. Serra Robledo, et al., 25.

³⁹ Census data from 1953 reported that 42 percent of all illiterate Cubans—439,576 men and women out of a total of 1,032,849—resided in Oriente, compared with 192,850 in Las Villas, 127,007 in Camagüey, 116,189 in Havana province, 99,377 in Pinar del Río, and 57,770 in Matanzas. Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), Table 40, p. 143-148.

⁴⁰ Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 18 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

at the invasion of Playa Girón. After finishing the day's lessons, he would sometimes listen to the *milicianos* tell stories about their experiences, "their stories of how combat went, of how they lost friends and loved ones," learning about the Revolution from the recent experiences of men and women fighting for its survival.⁴¹

In participants' accounts, one of the most important elements of Literacy Campaign propaganda was its emphasis on teaching as a vital patriotic endeavor, the best way for young men and women to "prove that they could make a contribution, a grain of sand in the building of the Revolution" and participate in national political life.⁴² The Literacy Campaign also appeared to be an opportunity for young men and women to seek adventure. Young adults responded to these mobilization efforts because they appeared to be part of an ongoing revolutionary project, one they had seen the beginnings of in the 1950s, not necessarily the decades-long struggle that propaganda for the Campaign described.

Personal Independence

For young adults, the Literacy Campaign was often their first experience living away from their families. While patriotism was commonly cited as a motivation for joining the Literacy Campaign, teachers also described their decision to volunteer as a desire for fun and adventure. Upon arriving in the communities where they would teach, many were shocked by the harsh conditions they found, often living without access to electricity, familiar foods, or easy access to medical care. Nevertheless, young men and women described their time as teachers as rewarding, offering them more freedom and responsibility than they were accustomed to, factors

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² María Téllez Márquez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

that combined with patriotic appeals to outweigh the dangers of working in remote and sometimes hostile parts of the country.

Many emphasized their sheltered urban upbringings in accounts of the Literacy Campaign. Men who worked as *brigadistas*, for example, later remarked that “I had never left home; I had never gone farther than my neighborhood,” or that the Literacy Campaign was the first time they had been away from their families.⁴³ Women, who were often more restricted in their activities by social conventions, make similar observations about life before the Literacy Campaign. Adria and Ivon Santana, for example, reminisced that they were “practically children, raised almost without leaving our house; nevertheless, we stepped forward.”⁴⁴ Both sisters reminisced that they did not know much about the illiteracy problem in Cuba before 1961, but they felt compelled to go because it was necessary and “the whole world wanted to participate in these projects.”⁴⁵

Teaching in remote parts of the countryside—where most “Conrado Benitez” *brigadistas* worked—was difficult. One teacher who worked in San Lorenzo in eastern Cuba, for example, recalled that “we had to go down to the town...walking a great distance to arrive there...it was difficult because there was a ditch [for a path] and nothing more, just narrow mountain precipices that we had to go up and down every day.”⁴⁶ Other teachers working in eastern Cuba describe similar experiences where they “traveled at night through all those places that were

⁴³ Gerardo González Carmona, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD); Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 18 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁴ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁵ Ivon Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁶ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

kilometers and kilometers away...it was pitch black, with us staying off sleep to continue forward.”⁴⁷ These experiences were unprecedented for many teachers, most of whom were raised in urban areas.

Teachers also had trouble accessing basic healthcare at many of the communities where they worked because of these transportation problems. Oral histories of the Campaign frequently describe health problems like allergic reactions, appendicitis, or infections that would send teachers back to Havana for treatment.⁴⁸ Silvio Rodríguez, for example, injured his arm while working in the Ciénaga de Zapata, and his arm became infected. A local *curandera* had him moved to a hospital in Cienfuegos, saying that he would die if he did not get more advanced treatment.⁴⁹ He was eventually moved to Havana and recovered over the next several months. Many of these health problems echoed the problems diagnosed by earlier observers, problems like “parasites, rickets, [and] general vitamin deficiencies,” the need to travel for hours to have a doctor set broken bones, and lack of access to basic medical supplies.⁵⁰

Some young adults were so entranced by the project and frustrated by the opportunities available to them at home that they ran away from home entirely. Marina Ochoa, a woman interviewed by Estela Bravo for her documentary on Operation Peter Pan, ran away from home

⁴⁷ Gerardo González Carmona, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁸ For example, María Téllez Márquez returned to Havana after developing an allergic reaction, Diana Balboa Hernández had her teaching career interrupted by appendicitis, and Silvio Rodríguez left Ciénaga de Zapata after an injury to his arm became infected. María Téllez Márquez, interviewed with Gerardo González Carmona, conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD); Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD); Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 18 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁹ Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 18 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁵⁰ Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *Che: The Diaries of Ernesto “Che” Guevara* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2009) 52; Lowry Nelson, *Rural Cuba* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1950) 18.

so that she could remain in Cuba and participate in the Revolution. Ochoa's parents secured passage to the United States for her and her brother, hoping that the Catholic Church in the United States would take care of the children until the family could be reunited there. Ochoa, however, saw "what was going on in Cuba, it was life, it was strength, there was great joy and I did not want to go."⁵¹ Ochoa ran away from home twice, making her way to the home of her godmother in Havana so her parents could not put her on a plane to the United States. Her parents sent her younger brother nonetheless; he was seven years old at the time and less enmeshed in the cultural changes of the Revolution that drew many young adults into organizations like the Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes or the Literacy Campaign.

Some literacy teachers made a similar choice, seeking adventure by running away from home. Jorge Odio Ducase was the third of nine children in a poor family in Palma Soriano, Oriente. He had not attended school before 1959, but in October 1959 he and his brothers enrolled in a new school set up near his hometown. His oldest brother learned to read and write at a second grade reading level and his second-oldest brother—who had attended classes before the Revolution—began reading and writing on a sixth-grade reading level. With his teachers' help, this brother joined the Literacy Campaign. Odio Ducase, however, only and learned to read and write at a second-grade level. Lacking certification, he recalled that he "changed my name several times" and in early April 1961, at the age of fourteen, he ran away from home to join the Asociación de Jóvenes Rebeldes in Bayamo.⁵² In Bayamo he enrolled in the Campaign as a teacher and received a teaching placement in the Sierra Maestra, where he taught five students,

⁵¹ Marina Ochoa, interview in Estela Bravo and Olga Rosa Gómez Cortés, *Operación Peter Pan: cerrando el círculo en Cuba* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 2013) 196.

⁵² Jorge Odio Ducase, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

“appearing to teach them, but all the while they were teaching me,” studying at night to maintain his head start in the textbook.⁵³ By November 1961 all of his students learned to read and write, as had Odio Ducase. He continued his education after the Campaign and re-enrolled as a teacher in further literacy projects in the Sierra Maestra in the late 1960s, a project that took him further from home and the oversight of his parents.

Young adults had to negotiate new social relationships in their teaching placements, adapting to the norms of rural life while challenging illiterate Cubans to join their classes. While organizations like the FMC set out to recruit housing for *brigadistas* from willing families, some regretted their decision to offer housing to the young men and women by the time they arrived. The young teachers were faced with winning over their intended hosts as well as teaching their neighbors. One such teacher later observed that upon arriving in the countryside, “they sent me to my assigned house, which was owned by two *campesinos* named Clara and Antonio...who did not want me in their house. The old man said, ‘We won’t take a *brigadista*, and certainly not a woman!’ I had to argue like a lawyer, but with love, tenderness, and my clearest explanations about patriotism [to be accepted into their house].”⁵⁴ Other female teachers found that for young men of 19 or 20 years of age “it pained them when we girls taught them to read.”⁵⁵ Women, meanwhile, sometimes complained that they did not have time to study or attend class because they had to care for other family members unless the young teachers could persuade them to attend class with the rest of their family, “sitting with men, all at the same table.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless,

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Anonymous testimonio in *El pueblo dice*, Ed. Serra Robledo, et al., 27.

⁵⁵ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

once teachers could coax students into classes, they observed that their pupils were dedicated to learning and they would “repeat the lessons over and over until they learned the material.”⁵⁷

Other teachers describe fears of counterrevolutionary groups operating near their teaching placements. One pair of teachers working outside Las Tunas, for example, were scared one night when they heard “men’s voices and a pounding on the door...and then, ‘Bring out the teachers!’ The father of the family told us, ‘No, under no circumstances will I open the door. Don’t be afraid that I will ever open the door.’”⁵⁸ Threats from counterrevolutionaries carried particular weight because of the death of Conrado Benítez in January 1961, who was apparently targeted for assassination because he was a teacher. A second teacher, Manuel Ascunce, was also assassinated in November 1961, along with the father of his host family, Pedro Lantigua, who tried to protect him. The deaths of teachers like Conrado Benítez or Manuel Ascunce convinced many young adults that “the bandits did not want us to teach anyone,” and illustrated that even the civilian host families could face reprisals for working with the *brigadistas* and the national government.⁵⁹

Beyond overt political motivations, young adults described the Literacy Campaign as a source of adventure and entertainment, a way of exploring the world beyond the control of their parents. The harsh realities of life in the Cuban countryside challenged this expectation, but accounts from former teachers often describe these challenges as enhancing their sense of accomplishment and capacity to contribute meaningfully to the revolutionary project in the years

⁵⁷ Ivon Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁵⁸ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁵⁹ Gerardo González Carmona, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

that followed. Women reflecting on their work often observed, “it was a means of opening me to world, of demonstrating to myself and to others that I was capable of doing something useful for others,” with the implication that after braving the hardships of the Sierra Maestra what challenge could there be in a career as a teacher, doctor, or engineer?⁶⁰ Other women made similar observations, that the pressure of the Literacy Campaign encouraged them to begin working outside the home, return to work outside the home, or continue it. Sometimes this took the form of observations like “there were many moments when I was tempted to give up my work, but I asked myself, if others can [teach adults to read & write], why not me?”⁶¹ Keeping up with one’s peers and seeking adventure required young men and women to work for the Revolution.

A New Professional Class

While the revolutionary government often prioritized messages about the urgency of the Literacy Campaign over their plans to further the careers of young adult teachers, young men and women themselves volunteered as teachers with the explicit expectation that they would benefit from their work as agents of the Revolution. The earliest cohorts of teachers, for example, were recruited with the explicit promise that they would receive the postsecondary training needed to work as teachers after the Literacy Campaign. As the government expanded the call for teachers, this promise became less concrete: the Conrado Benítez *brigadistas* between the ages of 12 and 19 often required several years of secondary education before they could qualify for higher education. *Brigadistas* themselves, however, often joined the Campaign with the expectation that they would receive scholarships or preference in hiring based on their work and demonstrations

⁶⁰ Onelia Castillo Díaz, Santiago de Cuba, *brigadista* quoted in *El pueblo dice*, Ed. Serra Robledo, et al., 30-31.

⁶¹ Rosalia Rouce Leal, *brigadista* from Camagüey, in *El pueblo dice*, Ed. Serra Robledo, et al., 29.

of loyalty to the revolutionary government and its goals. Thus, the Literacy Campaign helped select ambitious, patriotic young adults who sought to improve their country and their position within it.⁶² These young adults would become a likely base of support for the revolutionary government in years to come and examples of the professional and personal values the Revolution hoped to instill.

The young men and women who joined the Literacy Campaign expected that their work would improve their career prospects, and their role as teachers was one part of that. Just 3 percent of the Cuban population—nearly 140,000 citizens in a country of more than 4.5 million—had a post-secondary degree in 1953.⁶³ Teaching was one of the fields that generally required some post-secondary education. Teaching certification programs were cheaper and less time-consuming than other degrees like law or medicine, so in the 1950s some Cubans like the sought training as teachers as a way of entering the middle class even if they did not have the resources for a university degree. The earliest cohorts of teachers, young men and women generally between the ages of 17 and 25, who trained in Minas del Frío received a variation on this postsecondary curriculum that had been adapted to the circumstances of the 1961 Literacy Campaign. Later cohorts of teachers—particularly those who underwent week-long orientation courses before being sent to teaching placements—could not claim to be fully certified teachers, but from its origins in the Sierra Maestra mountains the design and implementation of the

⁶² The young adults who joined the Literacy Campaign embodied many of the characteristics Ernesto “Che” Guevara laid out for the “New Man” under Cuban socialism later in the 1960s, including his emphasis on individuals’ moral commitment to improve Cuba through the Revolution. Some teachers have adopted the label, describing themselves as “New Men” or “New Women” even though Guevara focused on the revolutionary development of men in his 1965 work *El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones R, 1965). In 1985, Theodore MacDonald observed that in the 1961 Literacy Campaign “this commitment to the New Man was to some degree evident. But from 1965 onward it became established policy.” Theodore MacDonald, *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985) 20.

⁶³ Oficina Nacional de los Censos Demográfico y Electoral, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral*, Table 36, p. 119.

Literacy Campaign suggested that its organizers wanted to make lasting improvements in the lives of volunteer teachers, offering them access to higher education as soon as it was possible. For young men and women who aspired to be professionals, therefore, the Literacy Campaign offered a rapid induction into a respectable profession.

Conrado Benítez, the first “martyr” of the Literacy Campaign, was one such young man. He grew up in relative poverty and by early 1960 he lived with his aunt and cousin in the Havana neighborhood of Luyano. He joined the first cohort of teachers, the *maestros voluntarios*, and traveled to Minas del Frío for his teacher training. His colleagues there remembered him as “a very quiet boy, a very serious boy, a very good *compañero*...who missed his mother very much.”⁶⁴ He was the first member of his family to reach post-secondary education, and in interviews his aunt and cousins speak fondly of the hopes they had for their whole family once he was a fully certified teacher. Sadly, their hopes were not fulfilled. Benítez was killed on January 5, 1961 by members of a counterrevolutionary group operating near his teaching placement in the Escambray Mountains. Benítez became a “martyr” for the cause of universal literacy and national self-determination, a distinction that has brought his family attention in the decades that followed his death.

While Benítez was the epitome of the revolutionary teacher in propaganda, in practice the profession was especially appealing for women, who comprised 80 percent of the teaching workforce in the 1953 census. Before 1959, women often sought training as teachers with the expectation that they could work to support themselves until they married and had children. Nancy Castañeda Moncada, one such teacher, came from a middle-class family and was in her

⁶⁴ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

fourth year of a teaching program when she joined the Literacy Campaign. Her parents supported her initial career choice, but—like Lilian Delia Navarro Morán’s family—they had “problems” with her work in the Literacy Campaign since she “would be going alone to an unknown house where she knew no one.”⁶⁵ She returned to school in 1962, completed her thesis on the Literacy Campaign, and went on to a career as a professor. Other young women used the Literacy Campaign in a similar way, to “develop skills for a calling I had since I was young,” using their work in 1961 to rise to professorships in education rather than working as local schoolteachers.⁶⁶ This history normalized teaching as an acceptable form of women’s work, while offering women with a background in teaching professional advancement and greater authority.

Overall, recruitment efforts for the 1961 Literacy Campaign support the idea that the revolutionary government and Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización sought ambitious and intellectually promising young adults to serve as their ambassadors, radicalizing and recruiting young men and women through their schools. Young adults who had left school sometimes had a more difficult time volunteering to teach, as Digna Caridad Pérez Moya discovered. Her older sister had a scholarship to a local secondary school, which made her automatically eligible for the campaign. Pérez Moya had dropped out of school after the seventh grade, but she wanted to teach alongside her sister. Their grandmother urged Pérez Moya to speak to the principal of her sister’s school and “tell her about the great dreams of teaching that you have.”⁶⁷ The principal interviewed Pérez Moya about her knowledge of the Revolution, math, written and spoken

⁶⁵ Nancy Castañeda Moncada, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁶⁶ Ivon Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, May 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁶⁷ Digna Caridad Pérez Moya, interview conducted by Alina Márquez, 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

Spanish, and concluded that she was capable of teaching. The principal authorized Pérez Moya to join the Literacy Campaign with her sister. Other accounts of the period suggest that young adults with no family in school to hear early calls to join the Literacy Campaign and no teachers to advocate for them were far less likely to be recruited.

Accounts of the 1950s guerrilla insurgency and the Literacy Campaign suggest that interest in the Literacy Campaign—and the revolution that created it—spread through social groups and schools, with individual teachers facilitating the radicalization of their students. In the 1950s, for example, Hugh Thomas complained that “the support given by many teachers to the rebellion meant not only that their pupils followed them but that both had access in science laboratories to the materials of explosion—as in the case of Eriberto Marbán, teacher at the Vibora Institute, who confessed on 27 August [1957] to having taught others to make weapons from materials in the laboratories”⁶⁸ By 1961, this connection between schools and the Revolution was even stronger, with many of the literacy teachers recruited directly through their secondary schools, concluding that the best way to further their education and professional development was to participate in revolutionary projects like the Literacy Campaign. Ultimately, accounts of their work also indicate that the Literacy Campaign taught them self-reliance, a sense of wonder, and an appreciation of themselves as members of a diverse Cuban nation with shared values and goals, agents in the shaping their collective future, long-term effects that will be discussed further in Chapter 4.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Thomas, *Cuba*, 628-629.

⁶⁹ This self-actualization is especially prominent in early works about the Literacy Campaign, notably in the work of Ana Núñez Machín. Ana Núñez Machín, *La Epopeya: historia de la campaña de alfabetización* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1983).

Young men and women also had reason to believe that their literacy work could translate into professional advancement in other careers as well. Visiting Cuba in 1960, Jean Paul Sartre observed that “the greatest scandal of the Cuban revolution isn’t that it expropriated the plantations, but that it brought children to power...touring the island, I met my sons, if I dare say so, in all the positions of authority from one end of the scale to the other.”⁷⁰ Young adults who fought with the Rebel Army or otherwise allied themselves with the Revolution were offered positions overseeing virtually every industry. Enrique Oltuski, for example, led the urban insurgency of Las Villas while working for Shell Oil. In 1959 he became Minister of Communications for the revolutionary government. Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, for example, “was two classes short of a degree” and in the Literacy Campaign, “when there was open enrollment, there I was.”⁷¹ Her mother’s poor health and status as a single mother also required her to help care for her siblings, which contributed to her “low cultural attainment.”⁷² Navarro Morán had joined a clandestine revolutionary cell in the late 1950s, though, so by 1961 when she participated in the Literacy Campaign, the Revolution offered her a good chance of professional advancement.

In some cases, young adults embarked upon new professional careers even before the Literacy Campaign officially ended in December 1961. Silvio Rodríguez, for instance, left his second teaching placement in a community of *carboneros* early because of health problems. He returned to Havana and began working as an artist for the magazines *Verde Olivo* and *Mella*.⁷³

⁷⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Cuba* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974), Originally published in New York by Ballantine Books, 1961, 88.

⁷¹ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 18 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

Because he left the Campaign early, he “did not feel that I had a right to participate in the [parade on Dec. 22] because really I had not finished out the Campaign.”⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Rodríguez observed that even his abbreviated teaching career was a milestone and the moment when he became a man and determined his career trajectory within the Revolution: “later I worked on a fishing boat and I spent five months there, but I was already a man. Later I also went to Angola with Cuban troops—as a volunteer no less—they did not call me up, I volunteered to go.”⁷⁵

Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, meanwhile, began working as a teacher in the Ministry of the Interior after the end of the Literacy Campaign, teaching men and women to read and write at a second and third grade level. After a few years, though, she moved on to non-teaching work in the ministry, followed by training as a chemical engineer and an economist, which brought her back to the Ministry of the Interior.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Traveling through Cuba just after the Revolution, Jean Paul Sartre observed that the Revolution was positioned as an inter-generational conflict, in which older generations were blamed for inequality and other problems of the 1950s. In the process, “in fighting privilege, these children were by the same token revolting against grown-ups...it was all the same for these *enfants terribles* to rebel against a dictatorial regime as against the bankruptcy of those who had permitted it or supported it by their passivity. It was all the same to pulverize the mercenary army or bring their elders to abdication”⁷⁷ Literacy teachers also came into conflict with older, traditional authorities within their own families. Many teachers’ accounts feature a common

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁷⁷ Sartre, *Sartre on Cuba*, 90.

theme of parents worried about their sons and daughters traveling far from home and working in harsh, remote environments. These worries were particularly acute for parents of young women, who were traditionally expected to live at home until they married and travel with a chaperone. Some of the young teachers were also in relationships, which led to tension when young women announced they would be leaving their partners to further the work of the Revolution. Throughout the year, though, “there were engagements broken and weddings postponed, but the majority obtained permission [to teach].”⁷⁸ Defying these traditional authorities in the name of the Revolution and universal literacy was far easier than challenging these same authorities under normal circumstances.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the revolutionary government sought to recruit young men and women to teach, promising that they could join an “Army of Teachers” and help build a new revolutionary society. Many teachers found their hopes fulfilled, with “in two or three months [their students] learned everything and read well...there was one who exclaimed, ‘Ay! I thought I was going to die before I learned to read and write!’”⁷⁹ More than that, young adults were part of a larger project in which “education is not just teaching basic literacy, not just to read and write, not just a matter of a pencil, primer, and textbook”—it was a process of indoctrinating marginalized Cubans in the revolutionary project.⁸⁰ Both teachers and their students were expected to receive an education over the course of the Literacy Campaign. For young women, who often experienced the greatest change in their day-to-day agency, this education in

⁷⁸ Cándida Rosa Orizondo Crespo, a *brigadista* from Santa Clara in her *testimonio* in *El pueblo dice*, Ed. Serra Robledo, et al., 21.

⁷⁹ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁸⁰ Diana Balboa Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 8 March 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

revolutionary politics and personal autonomy was often transformative. For both young men and women, though, the accomplishments of the year gave many the confidence to continue their education and pursue their goals in fields they might never have considered before 1961. It also inspired many teachers, who later observed that their work helped them “learn to be a person, to be a human being...it taught children from the city to respect [workers and *campesinos*] because they were knowledgeable about many things we were ignorant of.”⁸¹ In the process, they often concluded that they were part of a diverse Cuban nation with shared goals and priorities.

Reflecting on her work as a literacy teacher in 1961, María Téllez later observed that the Literacy Campaign was “practically the first time I was independent of my family, particularly of my mother...After the Literacy Campaign, here I am, María. I am not who my mother says I am, nor who my father says I am. [I have] my own priorities, my own goals.”⁸² Like María Téllez, many other young women found emancipation from traditional authorities through teaching.

Accounts from these young teachers suggest that in 1961 the Literacy Campaign represented a patriotic liberation from the constraints of traditional young adulthood, a personal analogue to the national autonomy and self-determination promised in government propaganda. The accounts further suggest that propaganda for the Literacy Campaign discussed in Chapter 1 found an uneven reception among young adults, who responded more to recent history than nineteenth century precedents. For its female participants, “liberation” could take on a number of meanings ranging from a way to continue the work of their parents to a way to liberate themselves from the control of parents or other authority figures.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² María Téllez Márquez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

In 1962, for example, María Téllez received a *beca* for her work in the Literacy Campaign, and after finishing secondary school she enrolled at the Instituto Tecnológico José Martí, where she studied industrial and civil construction. One of her classmates was Gerardo González Carmona, from Marianao, Havana. Like many of their classmates, he was also a former teacher who had been sent to Palma Soriano in Oriente, and enrolled in the school on a *beca*. studying industrial and civil construction. They eventually met, began dating, became engaged and married in 1969.⁸³ The couple had two sons, and Téllez worked as a chemist until her retirement. As a result of her work on the 1961 Literacy Campaign, she gained access to higher education, had a successful professional career, and had a family, embodying the many of the goals young adults had when volunteering to teach in 1961.

⁸³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5: *TESTIMONIOS* IN THE ERA OF YO SI PUEDO POLITICAL CULTURE FROM WOMEN'S POINT OF VIEW

Introduction

In 2006, the sisters Adria and Ivon Santana reminisced about one of their students in 1961, a septuagenarian by the name of Juan. He wanted to learn to read and write, but his eyesight had deteriorated with age. The sisters reported his problem to their supervisor, who summoned an ophthalmologist who was working on the Campaign. The ophthalmologist fitted Juan with a pair of glasses, and Juan quickly learned to read and write. Adria recalled that “when he put on his glasses and signed his name, he announced, ‘this is something that I will never forget!’”¹ Though he was not and never became “an intellectual,” he did learn “the essential things” like how to read and to sign his name, Juan’s enthusiasm and delight at his achievement marked it as a historic experience in his own life, and a memorable one for his teachers.²

Nevertheless, the historiography and public commemoration of the 1961 Literacy Campaign has been uneven, with the individual effects of the expansion of public education and literacy largely overlooked in Cuban discussions of the achievements of the revolution throughout the decades that followed. Since the 1990s, though, former literacy teachers like the Santana sisters who have had full careers in Cuba and who are approaching the age at which Juan learned to read and write have brought renewed attention to the long-term effects of the

¹ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

² Ibid.

Literacy Campaign, addressing the lack of a “history of cultural politics and political culture of women” decried by feminist scholars like Catherine Davies and Luisa Campuzano.³

Scholars traveling to Cuba in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were often familiar with the Literacy Campaign and its achievements. Oscar Lewis, for example, was aware of the Literacy Campaign as it took place, and found the energy that it helped impart to public life remarkable. As he wrote in September 1961, “for the first time in my twenty years of research among the poor, I found slum dwellers who showed some hope and faith in the future, who expressed love for their Government leaders, and who were involved in a movement which was bigger than their own local problems and which gave meaning to their lives.”⁴ When he traveled to Cuba in the late 1960s, the Literacy Campaign was one of the topics about which he sought information. Several of his Cuban assistants taught in the Campaign, but when Lewis inquired about the events of 1961 his assistants showed little interest in discussing their personal experiences. In one exchange about Melena del Sur, the first town to be certified free of illiteracy in 1961, Lewis was enthusiastic about the importance of the town. His assistant, a young woman and a former *brigadista*, responded, “Oh yes! It was the first municipality certified free of illiteracy...it has been the pilot for many things.”⁵ Discussions of the Campaign focused more on general narratives of national achievement, rather than individual change.⁶

³ Catherine Davies, quoted in Luisa Campuzano, “Literatura de mujeres y cambio social: narradoras cubanas de hoy,” reprinted in Luisa Campuzano, *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios: escritoras cubanas del siglo XVIII y XXI* (Leiden: Almenara Press, 2016) 139.

⁴ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 55, Folder “Beals, Carleton: 1961.”

⁵ Oscar and Ruth Lewis Papers, University of Illinois Archives, Record Series 15/2/20, Box 143, Folder 94.

⁶ Luisa Campuzano examines this phenomenon in detail, and particularly its articulation in *Maestra voluntaria* by Daura Olema and *Primeros recuerdos* and *Por llanos y montañas* by Araceli Aguililla in her 1996 essay, “Cuba 1961: los textos narrativos de las alfabetizadoras. Conflictos de género, clase y canon,” reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios: escritoras cubanas del siglo XVIII al XXI* (Leiden: Almenara Press, 2016); Daura Olema García, *Maestra voluntaria* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1962); Araceli Aguililla, *Por llanos y montañas* (Havana: Girón, 1975).

Though the Literacy Campaign was a success, it was eclipsed by later projects in the national narrative, becoming one of “many things” that had improved. Nearly a decade later, Jonathan Kozol heard about the Literacy Campaign of 1961 from Paulo Freire in Mexico. Kozol quickly concluded that the Literacy Campaign was “the untold education story of the century.”⁷ This is not to say that Cubans were unaware of the Campaign or its impact. Teachers and students often volunteered more information than Lewis’ assistants did, and the Literacy Campaign was the subject of school activities and public commemorations. Nevertheless, these commemorations did not convey much of the energy of the Campaign itself or the changes it wrought on individual participants. Cubans in the 1990s and 2000s reassessed the achievements of the revolution in light of the economic crisis. The Literacy Campaign of 1961 reemerged as an enduring achievement for Cuba, and a model for how it could engage with other countries.

The renewed interest in the Literacy Campaign has come from two main sources: former teachers and the internationalist interests of the Cuban government, both of which have attempted to grapple with the meaning and purpose of the Cuban Revolution since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and “Special Period” in Cuba. This decade also coincided with a new interest in promoting literature authored by women in Cuba, led by feminist scholars like Luisa Campuzano.⁸ Furthermore, a regional interest in *testimonio* literature in the 1990s served

⁷ Jonathan Kozol, *Children of the Revolution: A Yankee Teacher in the Cuban Schools* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978) 4.

⁸ Cuban literary scholars like Luisa Campuzano rose to prominence in the 1990s, and by the early 2000s they had achieved domestic and international recognition for their work. Campuzano, the founder of the Women’s Studies program at the Casa de las Américas, argued in works like *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de Dios: Escritoras cubanas del siglo XVIII-XXI*—originally published in Cuba in 2004 and reprinted in 2016—that contemporary literature produced by women served to define their role in the Revolution despite ongoing problems that disproportionately affected women, like emigration, domestic violence, and sexual discrimination. Barbara Riess directly compared and contrasted Campuzano and her contemporaries like Nara Araújo in her piece, “Counting Women, Women Who Count: Measures of the Revolution Within the Revolution,” *Cuban Studies* 42 (2012) 115-135; Luisa Campuzano, *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de Dios*. Scholars including Helen Hernández Hormilla and Sarah Moldenhauer have also continued Campuzano’s analysis of Cuban women writers through the 1990s, particularly working on the topics of crisis and postmodernity in that decade. Helen

to bring attention to the narratives of women like Rigoberta Menchú, narratives told for the purpose of raising awareness about important events. Together, these dynamics offered the women who taught in the 1961 Literacy Campaign a reason to speak about their experiences and a forum in which they could be heard.

Commitment to the Revolution and a Right to Speak

As discussed in Chapter 4, women often describe their work in the Literacy Campaign as helping to adjust their expectations about their later career and personal goals, even though the Literacy Campaign did not explicitly promise to change their long-term goals. By emphasizing these individual paradigm shifts, the women who taught in the Literacy Campaign argue that their work was an integral part of the Revolution's project of bringing equal rights and opportunities to men and women of all ethnicities and social classes. In the process, they speak to trends observed by feminist literary scholars in Cuba, who have argued that literature produced by women since the 1990s reflect a gendered perspective on the revolution. Luisa Campuzano, for example, observed that beginning in the 1960s women found meaning in the revolution even as it did not eliminate barriers to full equality between the sexes. By the 1990s, individual female writers were able to attract critical attention to their personal narratives, creating an awareness of the gendered omissions of the revolutionary project and offering women a platform from which they could rectify these problems.⁹ The former teachers of the 1961 Literacy Campaign often describe challenges they faced because of their gender, but they also argue that the Literacy

Hernández Hormilla, *Mujeres en crisis: Aproximaciones a lo femenino en las narradoras cubanas de los noventa* (Havana: Publicaciones Acuario Centro Félix Varela, 2011); Sarah Moldenhauer, "Writing in the End Times of the Great Metadiscourses: Female Identities in Cuba's Special Period/Escribir en tiempos del fin de los grandes metadiscursos: Identidades femeninas en la Cuba del periodo especial," *Romanistik en Geschichte und Gegenwart* 20.1 (2014) 71-83.

⁹ Campuzano particularly discusses this shift in her 2004 essay "Literatura de mujeres y cambio social," reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios*.

Campaign helped set the tone for combating those challenges. A major catalyst for this reassessment was the “Special Period” of the 1990s, an economic crisis that challenged the achievements and stability of Cuban revolutionary development.

Adria Santana, for example, reflected that “in that historic moment when thousands of people went to teach literacy, at first I did not understand that there were many people who did not know how to read or write or the impact of literacy...I never imagined it,” sentiments reminiscent of some memoirs of men who fought in the Sierra Maestra on discovering the poverty endemic in the region.¹⁰ Participating in the Literacy Campaign alerted her to the challenges Cuba faced and the impact she could make. Furthermore, she saw former students from the 1961 Literacy Campaign achieve professional success, as with “a friend who worked in Cubanacán, in the school of art there...she was from Oriente, from the countryside. Today she is an economist, but then she had just learned to read. I did not teach her to read and write, but think—how many people that I taught are now able to leap ahead, to contribute something significant to society.”¹¹ Without the ability to read and write, Santana thought it was unlikely they would “be productive, contributing members of society.”¹² As a young person, this opportunity was especially meaningful to Santana, since “we were very young, above all we were people who needed to give something, to give value...it was the first time that I could contribute as the daughter of a humble family. We had nothing to give, except our love.”¹³ Unlike traditionally masculine accounts of the Cuban Revolution, which focused on “masculine authorship” and a “discourse of epic nationalism,” Santana described a vision of the early 1960s

¹⁰ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

in which attributes like love and art were key indicators of the accomplishments of the Revolution.¹⁴

Former literacy teachers also attracted new attention from individuals who had never heard of the Literacy Campaign before. Catherine Murphy, a North American student and filmmaker working in Cuba, who independently discovered that among her acquaintances there were “a number of really interesting men and women doing cutting-edge work in contemporary Cuba, but it just so happened that a number of these people had been literacy teachers...but several of them referenced their experiences as literacy teachers as the most important thing they had ever done.”¹⁵ Based on her initial research, Murphy considered the Literacy Campaign enough material for “a few interviews and edit a small film,” and began conducting interviews among female teachers from the Campaign with that in mind.¹⁶ Unlike Oscar Lewis or Jonathan Kozol, though, her interviews quickly attracted attention from other women who taught in 1961 and to have their *testimonios* recorded. Despite the explicit focus on the accounts of women and men’s exclusion from Murphy’s 2012 documentary *Maestra*, she found that “numerous men came up to me and they were like ‘you left us out!’,” volunteering to be interviewed even though their perspective was not the original focus of the project.¹⁷ Their eagerness to participate

¹⁴ Campuzano, “Literatura de mujeres y cambio social,” In *Las Muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios*, 138. In comparison, see the writings of Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Raúl Castro on the Cuban Revolution emphasize military actions over social policies. These examples are particularly telling because both men were involved in establishing Rebel Army schools, but neither focuses on this in their descriptions of the period. Castro’s writings on the guerrilla insurgency were serialized in *Revolución* beginning in the spring of 1959. Ernesto “Che” Guevara, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2006); Raúl Castro Ruz, “Diario de la campaña: la columna ‘Frank País en el llano,’” *Revolución* (26 January 1959) 4, 10; Raúl Castro Ruz, “Diario de la campaña: audaz ataque al cuartel de Jamaica,” *Revolución* (27 January 1959) 4; Raúl Castro Ruz, “Diario de la campaña: lucha implacable contra el bandolerismo,” *Revolución* (28 January 1959) 2; Raúl Castro Ruz, “Diario de la campaña: alzamiento en masa en la regional oriental,” *Revolución* (29 January 1959) 2.

¹⁵ Catherine Murphy, interview conducted by Ann Halbert-Brooks, 24 May 2017 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Maestra* includes interviews with 9 women: Griselda Aguilera Cabrera, Diana Balboa Hernández, Norma Guillard Limonta, Eloisa Hernández Caneiro, Blanca Monett Yanes, Gina Rey, Adria and Ivon Santana, and Daysi Veitía

suggests that events since the 1980s have increased former teachers' interest in discussing their experiences, particularly in discussing their experiences in front of a new audience that would recognize their standing to speak about the Cuban Revolution but that was not familiar with the details of their work.

Former literacy teachers could claim a status as authority figures in part because of their achievements after the Campaign, work that was facilitated by their experience. One such teacher was Daysi Veitía, who taught in the Campaign at the age of 17. She taught in Baracoa from May to December 1961, and when the Campaign ended, “never again did I return to live in my parents’ house. I began to live off of scholarships, one after the other, and I married later.”¹⁸ She had achieved a degree of personal independence that would have been unusual in previous decades, when young women traveled with chaperones. Veitía herself acknowledged that this level of independence was surprising, remarking in one 2003 interview that “I never thought that I had the courage or the strength to be able to do those things...[the Literacy Campaign] helped me very much” in establishing herself.¹⁹ Nevertheless, her parents remained an influence on her life, one that could restrict her opportunities. Based on her academic performance, Veitía was offered a place in a Polish film school, but her parents disapproved of her leaving for Europe, so she studied architecture instead, specializing in hospital design.

Her travels were postponed, not precluded by her course of study, and her 29-year career included work in Cambodia, Bolivia, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Angola. Her view of the

Santonvenia. Catherine Murphy, *Maestra* (New York: Women Make Movies, 2012), DVD, 33 min; Catherine Murphy, interview conducted by Ann Halbert-Brooks, 24 May 2017 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹⁸ Daysi Veitía Santovenia, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 14 June 2004 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

¹⁹ Ibid.

Revolution was positive but not uncomplicated, because she was “very grateful to the Revolution for giving us these opportunities...[but] there were bad times, there were problems that arose, and we had to take care of them”²⁰ Veitía had a long and accomplished career, a family, and she had traveled the world, experiences that allowed her to contribute to both Cuban educational and medical advances and gave weight to her opinion that the Literacy Campaign made the rest of her career possible. It also lent weight to her evaluation that the challenges Cubans faced since 1961 did not outweigh the importance of the larger project.

The challenge that most affected these *testimonios* and public opinions of the value of the revolutionary project was the “Special Period” of the 1990s, when the achievements of the Cuban Revolution were challenged and feminist scholars began to claim a larger place in public discourse. From the early 1960s through the late 1980s, the Cuban economy was intertwined with that of the Soviet Union, its client states, and its allies: young adults went to school in Soviet bloc countries, technical advisors from the Soviet Union oversaw industrial development in Cuba, and leaders in the Soviet Union offered Cuba favorable trade deals and economic aid. All of this came to an end in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Soviet Union dissolved and its trade deals with Cuba were cancelled. The Cuban economy suffered in the years that followed, with a 90 percent decrease in its oil imports, decreases of up to 80 percent in the production of many agricultural products, the suspension of production in perhaps half of all factories, and an overall reduction to the economy of more than 40 percent.²¹ Rationing, a feature of the early 1960s, was reintroduced. Daily life “evoked signs of an apocalyptic

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Domestic milk production fell by 50 percent, beef production fell by more than 60 percent, and poultry production fell by nearly 80 percent, for example. Louis A. Pérez, Jr. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 4th Ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 292-293.

premonition...[with] an eery silence descend[ing] upon urban neighborhoods in the evenings as the sights and sounds of the city so much associated with gasoline and electricity ceased.”²² By the late 1990s, conditions in Cuba began to improve, with increases in food, electricity, and industrial production, and by the 2000s the Cuban government established new trade partnerships with countries like Venezuela, increasing access to gasoline.

Feminist scholars like Luisa Campuzano responded to this crisis by drawing attention to women as some of the citizens most affected by cuts to social services and scarcity. Cuban women often responded to the crisis by considering leaving the workforce to manage time-consuming problems like finding food or caring for children. Many others left the country as *balseros*, though “the stereotype [of the *balsero*] was of a man who defied adversity in search of better opportunities, while women stayed at home to care for their home and children.”²³ In Cuban public discourse, there was a need to discuss women as a group in need of special concern. However, feminist scholars went beyond calling for relief for the physical hardships of women. Campuzano, for example, argued for “the political necessity of promoting women’s studies as an indispensable strategy for saving these advances and solving the serious crisis that exists in all aspects of Cuban life.”²⁴ By promoting women’s literary production and economic production, women could sustain both the physical Cuban state and its intellectual life, much as the Literacy Campaign of 1961 had functioned to unify the Cuban nation around intellectual and political goals.

²² Pérez, *Cuba*, 295.

²³ Hernández Hormilla, *Mujeres en crisis*, 113

²⁴ Campuzano, “Literatura de mujeres y cambio social,” reprinted in *Las Muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios*, 140

Media coverage of the legacy of the Literacy Campaign and of one former *brigadista* Patria Silva began to echo these concerns in the 1990s. Silva was 19 years old at the time, and studying for her teaching certification when the Campaign was announced. She joined the Campaign with the blessing of her parents “because we were revolutionaries” and worked in a village near Playa Girón in April 1961.²⁵ She was one of the few teachers captured by counterrevolutionaries in the invasion, along with many of the children in the village where she lived. The men who captured Silva announced that they had arrived to free the populace from the “yoke of communism,” and Silva recalled that she spoke out, arguing that “this Revolution was from the humble people, that this was my biggest reason for supporting it, and a more just cause than anything they had.”²⁶ She was rescued after three days of captivity, during which time she was subjected to death threats and food was withheld from her. On her rescue, she was evacuated to a hospital. Silva left her teaching placement early because of the trauma of her capture, but she insisted that it only strengthened her commitment to teaching and the Revolution in her later life: it was “a baptism by fire in which I earned my *magisterio*.”²⁷ Silva was featured again later in the decade, and in coverage of the fortieth anniversary of the Campaign in an interview that presented her as a “strong woman, valiant...loved and respected”—an example of how Cuban women could work for the Revolution, defend it, and remain faithful to it despite the challenges she had faced.²⁸

²⁵ Patria Silva Trujillo, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 12 February 2009 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

²⁶ Patria Silva, in Vladia Rubio, “El bautizo de fuego de un magisterio: las vivencias de una alfabetizadora que permaneció en Girón durante la invasión mercenaria,” *Granma* (28 March 1996).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Iraida Calzadilla Rodríguez, “‘Solo tenía como arma mis ideas’: brigadista piloto en la Ciénaga de Zapata estuvo presa de los invasores durante la agresión mercenaria por Playa Girón, pero no pudieron hacerla desistir de su noble y revolucionaria misión,” *Granma* (19 September 2001).

Because Silva in particular spoke as a woman and a revolutionary tested during the invasion of Playa Girón, her *testimonio* also acquired an added weight when viewed from a historical perspective. Unlike many other teachers, she openly challenged counterrevolutionaries during the invasion of Playa Girón in April 1961. As a result, her *testimonio* echoed both those of other female teachers who challenged gender roles to teach, and historic narratives of feminine sacrifice and militancy in times of crisis. As discussed in Chapter 2, the latter narrative also demonstrated the gender-specific roles the revolutionary government wanted women to fulfill.²⁹

Men were less prominent in these discussions of the legacy of the 1961 Literacy Campaign, but when prompted men like the *trovador* Silvio Rodríguez concurred that his experiences in 1961 helped him mature into an adult and a revolutionary: “who does not have a year to give, or even two or three? The idea [of the Campaign] was attractive and young adults seized on it...[it was] an altruistic quest...the Revolution gave us this, the opportunity to begin to become people, to begin to become men and women.”³⁰ He was hardly alone in his assessment. Other former *brigadistas* including the Olympic medallist Juan Morales Echevarría, artist José Fuster, and the founder of TV Serrana Daniel Diez all expressed similar sentiments.³¹ Women, however, were more prominent in these discussions and placed a greater focus on the experience

²⁹ This relationship between women’s participation in combat and times of crisis is particularly noted in K. Lynn Stoner, *From the House to the Streets: The Cuban Women’s Movement for Legal Reform, 1898-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

³⁰ Silvio Rodríguez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 10 February 2010 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

³¹ Juan Morales Echevarría, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2 February 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD); José Fuster, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD); Daniel Diez Castillo, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 14 February 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

of teaching and learning to be independent in their commitment to the Cuban revolutionary project.

Generational Change and Revolutionary Commitment

By the early twenty-first century, former teachers had begun to discuss their experiences more frequently and in front of a new audience: their children and other members of younger generations that were born after 1959. These *testimonios* they shared were shaped by the circumstances in which they were shared, acquiring new meaning as the individual experiences of women were retold to a wider audience. This represented a shift in the public meaning of the Literacy Campaign, marking it as a historic event with particular relevance for contemporary events. As Campuzano has argued, literature by and about women in the Literacy Campaign in the early years of the Cuban Revolution frequently portrayed young women's individual experiences as a unique and temporary experience that did not obstruct their return to their families; in other words, that there was no larger historical message to be drawn from the experiences of young women.³² Women retelling their experiences in the Literacy Campaign contradicted this paradigm, asserting that their experiences did relate to the rest of their lives from which they could form a collective framework for inter-generational solidarity.

In 1985, Theodore MacDonald observed that there was a general concern about the diminution in the resonance of revolutionary touchstones: "by the late 60's and early 70's the heroism and sacrifice of the revolution—the days of the Sierra Maestra, the Great Literacy Campaign, the repulse of the Bay of Pigs invasion—had become only second-hand to most of the

³² In her analysis of *testimonio* literature of the Campaign including the work of Daura Olema, Araceli de Aguililla, Dora Alonso, and others, Campuzano describes this return from literacy work as a "re-insertion into the domestic space," a "concession" to young women's desire to participate in the Revolution rather than a conquest or emancipation. Luisa Campuzano, "Cuba 1961," reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios*, 134, 135.

children in the school system. Their parents had been directly involved, but not they themselves.”³³ Teaching the history of the Revolution appeared to be in crisis to his interlocutors. Education in Cuba helped to reinforce this distance from the major events of the Cuban Revolution. One school assignment on the Literacy Campaign from 1991, for example, encouraged students to “honor the memory of the martyrs of the Literacy Campaign with cultural and patriotic activities” by visiting the museum dedicated to commemorating the Literacy Campaign, and to sing the anthem of the Literacy Campaign.³⁴ Joining similar projects that could help reenact the values of the Campaign or engaging in other “acts of transfer” to re-inscribe its importance did not appear on the list.³⁵ Where their parents, aunts, and uncles who taught in the Literacy Campaign were encouraged to leave home for the first time to work in remote parts of the countryside, young people of the 1980s and 1990s were encouraged to consult official narratives of the Campaign and reflect on the lives of those who could no longer tell their experiences. Artifacts at the museum were compelling, including possessions of martyred teachers like Conrado Benítez and a chalkboard damaged by gunfire during the invasion of Playa Girón, but the manner in which they were exhibited and described in the school curriculum did not recreate performative aspects of the Campaign, let alone the excitement seen in accounts from the 1960s.³⁶

³³ Theodore MacDonald, *Making a New People: Education in Revolutionary Cuba* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1985) 22.

³⁴ Carmen J. Ferrer Cepero, “XXX Aniversario de la alfabetización y el asesino de Manuel Ascunce Domenech,” (Departamento de Historia, 1991), Archivo del Centro de Estudios Sobre la Juventud, Folder CIS 439: Campaña de Alfabetización.

³⁵ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 39.

³⁶ Octavio Cortázar conducted interviews with nearly 70 *brigadistas* as part of his research for his 1977 film. As he discussed in his February 15, 2007 interview with Catherine Murphy, his original interviews have not survived. Octavio Cortázar, *El Brigadista* (Havana: ICAIC, 1977) Film, 113 min.; Octavio Cortázar, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 15 February 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

One prominent feature of the *testimonios* given in the early twenty-first century was the degree to which women argued that their identity was forged in the Campaign, and therefore they had not occupied an “ephemeral public space” that had been open to women in 1961, but vanished in subsequent years.³⁷ While they acknowledged that the impact of the Literacy Campaign was not directly visible at all times, women like Adria Santana—who taught alongside her sister Ivon in 1961—asserted that their identity was fixed in 1961 and her later development merely fulfilled her mission as a revolutionary. Santana, for example, concluded one telling of her *testimonio* by offering to take her son to the part of Las Tunas where she worked, telling him that “it would be an opportunity to see where his mother was born.”³⁸ By visiting Las Tunas, Santana and her son could reenact part of the Campaign, illustrating for the son the continuing importance of his mother’s early work.

Older women expressed similar sentiments as well. One such woman, María del Carmen Almeida Hernández, completed her *bachillerato* in the 1950s. By 1960, she was married to an officer in the Güines militia, with two young children. She joined the Literacy Campaign as a teacher, supervising 63 younger adults around the town of Soroa and leaving her children at home with her husband. In 2006, though, she observed that the Literacy Campaign taught her to be a better revolutionary and “taught me to live, to eat what bread there was, to eat what meat we had...I learned to adapt” to accomplish larger goals.³⁹ As the supervisor for dozens of young teachers, she was also responsible for helping them acclimate to rural culture and ensuring that they were safe. She observed that “culture today is in debt to the Campaign” and despite the

³⁷ Campuzano, Cuba 1961,” in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios*, 135

³⁸ Adria Santana, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

³⁹ María del Carmen Almeida Hernández, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

flaws in the Campaign, pedagogical methods in Cuba had improved.⁴⁰ Discussing contemporary events, however, Almeida Hernández emphasized the toll that time had taken on her, saying: “I am very happy, but it is not like it was during the Campaign.”⁴¹ She observed that she did not have as much energy as she once had, and she had lost her eyesight to neuropathy.⁴² While the Literacy Campaign had fostered a sense of purpose for her and encouraged women to seek out fulfilling professional careers, the revolutionary projects that followed did not lead to a comfortable retirement for every participant.

Isabel González, who turned 12 years old in 1961, also observed that the Literacy Campaign was a crucial formative period for her, “the greatest thing I have done in my life, and my part in it was so small, I was amazed at the results.”⁴³ González taught in a community in the Escambray Mountains and helped to establish a small community library there. She also credited the Campaign with teaching her and her female colleagues independence. The Campaign set her on a path for further mobilizations, but by 2009 those mobilizations appeared less important and she “wished that I could have done more great things like [teaching in the Literacy Campaign]...when we mobilized for the October Crisis, we were ready to die under the atomic bombs, and after that, it was nothing, it was natural to be mobilized, to go to the countryside, to work there, to mobilize after Hurricane Flora, or against any other threat.”⁴⁴ The best and most

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² While Almeida Hernández does not specify when she lost her sight, cases of optical neuropathy reached epidemic proportions in Cuba in the early 1990s, and correlated with communities hardest-hit by food insecurity in the economic crisis. The correlation was identified as early as 1995, and in subsequent years improved nutrition controlled the incidence of new cases, as in the article by Caryn Bern, Rossanne M. Philen, David Freeman, Barbara A. Bowman, et al. “Epidemic Optic Neuropathy in Cuba: Clinical Characterization and Risk Factors,” *The New England Journal of Medicine* 333, No. 18 (November 2, 1995) 1176-1182.

⁴³ Isabel González, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 12 February 2009 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

important parts of the Cuban Revolution were in the past, it seemed. González closed out her interview by saying to Catherine Murphy, “thanks to you, we won’t lose these *testimonios* and all of this history,” stories and examples that could provide lessons for the future, but that—in her analysis—were not sufficiently commemorated and in danger of being lost.⁴⁵ Non-Cubans like Murphy might step in to help transmit lessons to future generations.

Likewise, the former *brigadista* María Elena Llera remarked that the Campaign emancipated her, but times had changed. Her mother fought in the Escambray Mountains in the 1950s, and by 1960 Llera “was a young woman and involved in all of these things related to the process of the Revolution.”⁴⁶ She was “eager to see Oriente” and received a teaching placement near Moa.⁴⁷ Reflecting on the experience in 2006, she described its importance to her as “a very important thing, it was a great feat...I think that after that I was a mature woman. I turned 13 years old there and yes, many years have passed, but I think [the Literacy Campaign] set the course for my life.”⁴⁸ As with many other female teachers, she credited it the experience with fostering her sense of independence as well.

At the end of her *testimonio*, Llera observed that “I think that if, at this moment they put out a call for a literacy campaign like the one they did then [in 1961], people would not go like they did then.”⁴⁹ Not only would the response be less, she specified, “there would be no one, because today you know we have a ‘certain situation’ but then, in that moment there was...a

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ María Elena Llera, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

different way of thinking.”⁵⁰ Like many other observers, Llera appeared to point to a loss of idealism and ideological commitment to the revolutionary project, but she also hinted that the Literacy Campaign was possible because of the naiveté of young Cuban women, who were “children,” not adults. For her, it seemed that “today, a 12-year-old girl has a boyfriend and in those days we never thought about that. At 12 years old it was appropriate to play with dolls...we were real children, children without the mindset of adults.”⁵¹ The Cuban Revolution, the Special Period, and its aftermath encouraged young women to grow up too quickly, it seemed, leaving them little room for altruistic projects that could broaden their professional and horizons and imbue them with a sense of purpose.

These concerns about young women, their sexual agency, and their priorities were not new, and echo the concerns that encouraged some parents to send their daughters abroad in the early 1960s as part of Operation Peter Pan. Nevertheless, the experiences of women like María del Carmen Almeida Hernández—or Diana Balboa Hernández, whose fiancée gave her a pistol as an engagement present before she left to teach, as discussed in Chapter 4—indicate that in 1961, young women and men were capable of balancing the needs of romantic partners and revolutionary projects. However, by taking over childcare duties Almeida Hernández’s husband challenged gender norms in the service of the Revolution. The prevalence of these anxieties around relationships and women’s achievement suggest that while Cuban women might be liberated, they still required social support. If that was not forthcoming, either from romantic partners or the state, young women had little reason to commit to ambitious projects like the Literacy Campaign.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Some former teachers saw reason for hope when discussing the Literacy Campaign and younger generations. Like them, young people of the twenty-first century sought meaning in the Revolution and its touchstones. Gerardo González Carmona, a former teacher and the husband of the former teacher María Téllez Márquez, for example, asked in 2007, “How did those songs go? ‘Fidel, Fidel, tell us what other things we should do.’ These were the songs we sang...and now younger generations also ask this question, but we were the first to ask this.”⁵² Young adults sought meaning in the Revolution, but they required a call to action.

Yo Sí Puedo and Cuban Internationalism

As scholars including Piero Gleijeses and Jorge Domínguez have documented, from the 1960s through the 1980s, Cuban internationalism often focused on military aid to Third World countries in Latin America and Africa, with Cuban doctors and teachers following along as what some scholars saw as a secondary priority.⁵³ Overall, this internationalism established a pragmatic program of support for fellow leftist governments, efforts that Domínguez categorized as “more often the result of calculation than impulse,” with the goal of fostering diplomatic and trade relationships if revolutionaries succeeded.⁵⁴ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government continued its international programs, but deemphasized military aid in favor

⁵² Gerardo González Carmona, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁵³ Gleijeses observes that “the most significant aid was military training in Cuba” for leftists. Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 23.

⁵⁴ Domínguez uses mainly official Cuban government documents and statements to make this argument, and further insists that while Cuba was economically dependent on the Soviet Union this did not preclude an independent foreign policy that served Cuban interests at least as much as Soviet ones. Domínguez’s assessment of Cuban foreign policy has been somewhat bolstered by recent scholarship on the history Cuban interventions in Africa and of negotiations between the United States and Cuba. Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba’s Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 5; Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*; William M. LeoGrande and Kornbluh, Peter, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

of medical and educational missions. Establishing a historical precedent for non-military internationalist programs thus became a priority, with Cuban doctors and teachers becoming a means of earning goodwill and good economic relations for the Cuban government. While these humanitarian missions undoubtedly had pragmatic components, their connections to the early history of the Cuban Revolution are also real, with Cuban humanitarian missions beginning in 1960. Furthermore, the Yo Sí Puedo literacy program that has been exported from Cuba since the late 1990s goes beyond the curriculum used in 1961, but it was designed and overseen by of the 1961 Literacy Campaign veteran Leonela Relys. As a result, the Literacy Campaign of 1961 has taken on a new importance to the Cuban government, establishing a precedent for more recent literacy efforts and arguably disentangling it from the military aid that accompanied earlier literacy efforts.

Military advisors and humanitarian assistance were exported together in the first decades of the Revolution, responding to a view that “the objective conditions that gave rise to revolution—misery, ignorance, and exploitation”—were common in Latin America and the rest of the Third World, and should be tackled together.⁵⁵ Jorge Domínguez observed that as the Cuban school system expanded and programs like the *Seguimiento* raised literacy rates, the percentage of the population with at least a sixth-grade education increased from 11 percent in 1953, to 15.5 percent in 1970, and 41 percent in 1981, creating a skilled labor force to send abroad.⁵⁶ The student-teacher ratio was also cut nearly in half between the mid-1960s and 1985, creating what he considered a “surplus of primary school teachers, who have since been retrained or employed in teaching foreigners in Cuba or abroad.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 22.

⁵⁶ Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 149-150.

⁵⁷ Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 150.

More recent scholarship has often emphasized the role of Cuban doctors working abroad over the work of teachers.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, as early as the 1980s observers noted that even in countries like Angola, where Cubans faced a language barrier, medical and military missions were accompanied by more than 4,000 teachers.⁵⁹ These numbers were small in comparison to the workforce mobilized for the 1961 Literacy Campaign, but by the late 1970s Angola had just 25,000 primary school teachers, 1,750 of whom had specialized training.⁶⁰ Cuban teachers therefore represented a substantial influx of teachers, and a significant number in comparison with the Cuban 30,000 troops committed to Angola at the height of Operation Carlota in 1975 and 1976, or the 700 Cuban medical personnel in Angola by 1981.⁶¹

Cuban medical internationalism continued throughout the 1980s, reaching countries like Kuwait, Zimbabwe, and Sri Lanka before the start of the “Special Period.”⁶² Cuban aid missions became more difficult in the 1990s with the start of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, by 1998, when Hurricane Mitch struck Central America and 1999 when Hurricane Georges struck Haiti, the Cuban economy had recovered enough to send substantial aid to both regions. Doctors led the way on this next phase of Cuban internationalism, but teachers followed soon after. Unlike

⁵⁸ Gleijeses, for example, features extensive discussions of the role of Cuban doctors in Africa but little discussion of the teachers that Domínguez discussed. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*.

⁵⁹ Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 154.

⁶⁰ Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 155.

⁶¹ Gleijeses gives the number of Cuban troops in Angola between November 1975 and March 1976 as 30,000. Domínguez says that by 1981 there were 335 doctors, 12 dentists, 174 nurses, and 157 medical technicians in Angola. Feinsilver gives a slightly higher total count of 91 general practitioners, 294 specialists, 15 dentists, 167 nurses, and 155 technicians in 1982. Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 380; Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 155; Julie Margot Feinsilver, *Healing the Masses: Cuban Health Politics at Home and Abroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 186.

⁶² John M. Kirk, *Healthcare Without Borders: Understanding Cuban Medical Internationalism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015) 26.

the internationalist missions of earlier decades, this latest phase of Cuban internationalism was officially portrayed as a peaceful mission, one that did not further overt security aims.

The Latin American School of Medicine, founded in 1999, was a first step in this new phase for Cuban doctors. At the opening of the school, Fidel Castro denied any political agenda beyond the common “history of our hemisphere, in particular that of Latin America and the Caribbean,” and described a cohort of doctors who “teach the scientific knowledge and the experiences they have acquired over 40 years, both in Cuba and in heroic, unselfish service provided to other Third World countries on every continent...these are the sorts of doctors we will train in the school.”⁶³ Scholars and political figures who examine Cuban foreign policy have tended to concur, arguing that Cuban internationalism is altruistic.⁶⁴ U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, cited Cuban assistance in the 2014 Ebola crisis as an example of the benefits to reopening relations with Cuba in his speech on December 17, 2014.⁶⁵

The timeline of the development of the Yo Sí Puedo literacy program parallels that of the development of ELAM and subsequent medical missions. Yo Sí Puedo began with efforts to expand basic literacy in Haitian Creole in Haiti. Preliminary studies for the project began in 1997, before Hurricane Georges and the Cuban medical mission there, and the full project began in 1999. Where the Cuban campaign employed young adult teachers, the Haitian campaign included tutors, adults who could lead discussions from the *Anseye* manual while their students

⁶³ Fidel Castro Ruz, “Discurso del presidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba, en la inauguración de la Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas,” Havana, 15 November 1999. Transcript available online at <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1999/esp/i151199e.html>.

⁶⁴ Kirk is one notable example of this shift in judgment on medical internationalism. Unlike Jorge Domínguez in *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, Kirk maintains that the Cuban export of doctors—both Cuban doctors working abroad and foreign doctors trained in Cuba and working in their home countries—does not serve an explicit security goal. John M. Kirk, *Healthcare Without Borders*.

⁶⁵ Barack H. Obama, “Statement by the President on Cuba Policy Changes,” Washington, D.C., 17 December 2014. Transcript available online at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/17/statement-president-cuba-policy-changes>.

followed along in the *Aprann* textbook. Expert teachers broadcast lessons over the radio; tutors and students followed along.⁶⁶ The next site for Yo Sí Puedo lessons was Venezuela, where Cuban educators recorded videotaped lectures for distribution with print materials. Bolivia, another key ally for Cuba, also became a site for a later Yo Sí Puedo mission, though the project has also reached less closely allied nations like Ghana and East Timor.

In the introduction to her 2005 book on the curriculum, Relys credited the Literacy Campaign of 1961 with “beginning to germinate the seed of teaching” for the nation, and in her own life “with only the title of elementary school teacher...it was impressed upon me the need to train future teachers.”⁶⁷ In one 2007 interview, she recalled that for her “it was like learning to fly,” becoming independent of the restrictions with which she had grown up.⁶⁸ She described the decision to leave for Varadero as a key part of that, as her family did not want her to go. Instead “I went with what I had ready, but I had already made a decision. I made a plan for myself and I went to Varadero.”⁶⁹ That decision “totally liberated me,” preparing her to make other decisions for herself, “what to study, what to do,” how to live her life as an autonomous individual.⁷⁰ Success and liberation were a process, however, one contingent on dealing with issues of gender. Relys recalled that when she first arrived at her teaching placement, the elderly husband in her assigned host family announced that she was simply unacceptable: “I told them that I wanted a male teacher, and I do not want a woman here.”⁷¹ Following negotiations with Relys’ supervisor

⁶⁶ Leonela Inés Relys Díaz, *Yo sí puedo: un programa para poner fin al analfabetismo* (Havana: Ediciones Abril, 2005) 10-11.

⁶⁷ Relys Díaz, *Yo sí puedo*, 9.

⁶⁸ Leonela Relys Díaz, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 15 February 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

and the wife, it became clear that the wife was a midwife who was often called out to work in the middle of the night. Her husband was concerned that having an unmarried young woman sleeping in the house when his wife was away—even for a few hours—might be improper. Despite the possible appearance of impropriety, Relys remained with the family and successfully taught both husband and wife.

Relys argued that her experience was hardly unusual; “for all of the young adults who were mobilized or who were invited to participate in it, the Campaign was above all a liberating event.”⁷² Like her, other young adults returned home with the desire and preparation to continue working for the Revolution. Their students too had the basic tools necessary to continue their education: they could “they could take a paper, they could take a pencil, and they could write their feelings, their emotions, and they could translate their ideas into written form..”⁷³ Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, another veteran of the 1961 Campaign, also contributed to the content of *Yo Sí Puedo* materials, and published extensively on both subjects.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Relys was promoted as the architect of the project and her role in Cuban foreign policy is highlighted in official statements, suggesting that—at least in this case—the Cuban government found it advantageous to highlight the intellectual production and work of women even when Relys did not describe herself as particularly special, focusing on herself as just one individual in a nation that learned from the Campaign.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ See for example Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, *Desde la alfabetización presencial al yo, sí puedo* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2005); Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, Águeda Mayra Pérez García, Leonela Relys Díaz, and José del Real Hernández, *La Alfabetización: historia y autenticidad en Cuba* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2006); Jaime Canfux Gutiérrez, *Hacia una escuela cubana de alfabetización* (Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2007).

Other former teachers eagerly adopted the Yo Sí Puedo project as well. Gerardo González, for example, reflected that “today, people talk about the [internationalist mission] in Nicaragua, the mission in Venezuela, the mission in Pakistan. They are part of a campaign that touched lives, and in the [1961] campaign that touched our lives is something we are still very proud of. We stepped forward...I believe that I have already completed my mission.”⁷⁵ María Téllez concurred, and emphasized that Cuba had been a pioneer in the effort to bring universal literacy: “the countries of America are learning to read. They are achieving what we did [in 1961], when we became the first country in America free of illiteracy.”⁷⁶ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán made a similar observation, describing Yo Sí Puedo as part of the same internationalist stance that motivated Cuban medical missions: “it is a social problem like the ones that necessitated the campaigns with doctors...this is a social revolution, a social revolution that will sweep to the outer edges of Venezuela, of Bolivia, of Brazil.”⁷⁷ The scale of the internationalist literacy missions pales next to medical missions Cuba also sends abroad, but like them Yo Sí Puedo serves as an exercise in Cuban diplomacy.

Conclusion

Other former teachers from the 1961 have joined Yo Sí Puedo campaigns as supervisors as well. Nevertheless, most Yo Sí Puedo instructors are younger than the original cohort of *brigadistas*, suggesting that some younger Cubans accept the goals of the Cuban Revolution, whether because they find inspiration in the *testimonios* of the 1961 Campaign, out of an interest

⁷⁵ Gerardo González Carmona, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁷⁶ María Téllez Márquez, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

⁷⁷ Lilian Delia Navarro Morán, interview conducted by Ivonne Chapman, 2006 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

in promoting Cuban interests abroad, or out of an interest in advancing their careers. New works on the Literacy Campaign like the documentary *Maestra* and official media attention to women like Patria Silva also suggest that there is an increased interest in discussing the role of women in the 1960s, and that this discussion serves both the interests of the women being discussed and the government that cites their work as an inspiration for its current internationalist work. In the process, the Literacy Campaign of 1961 reemerged for both individuals and the Cuban state as an enduring achievement for Cuba, and a model for how it could engage with other countries.

CONCLUSION

Josefina Riverón del Pino was born in Camagüey, and lived there with her parents and older sister until 1957, when her father moved to Havana for work. The rest of the family followed in 1958. They were a “humble” family, not wealthy, but able to afford an education for both daughters even after Riverón del Pino’s mother became sick with cancer.¹ After the Revolution, her father joined the local militia, which helped to support the family and cover the cost of his wife’s cancer treatment. Josefina had just turned 17 years old in 1961, when the invasion of Playa Girón occurred. Her mother, a housewife and a “very revolutionary” woman, called together Josefina and her sister, and asked them, “Which of you wants to go teach? One of you may go, and one will stay here with me” to work and help care for the rest of the family.² Josefina immediately volunteered, and her sister agreed to stay behind. Her mother sent Riverón del Pino to Ciudad Libertad to begin her training, saying, “when you return, you know that you will need to continue studying. I already have the forms for you.”³ Despite her own ill health, she was making plans for her daughter to have a successful professional career working for the Revolution.

On the Campaign, Riverón del Pino was entrusted with looking after two younger cousins whose Cuban-American parents were letting them teach as well. They were sent to a small sugar *batey* located along the border between Villa Clara and Matanzas where residents worked in the

¹ Josefina “Fina” Riverón del Pino, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 30 January 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

sugar industry or grew guavas, tomatoes, and strawberries. Josefina's mother joined them for two weeks of the Campaign, traveling to the village to help harvest guavas. Riverón del Pino and her cousins finished their work in December 1961, and returned to Havana one day early, on December 21, because her mother's health had deteriorated and she was in the hospital.

Her mother died on December 27, giving them “just a few days” together between their revolutionary duties.⁴ By mid-January Riverón del Pino returned to school as her mother intended and continued her studies for five more years, supported by the scholarship she earned for her work in the Campaign. Her cousins left Cuba for the United States not long after, and Josefina lost contact with them. She returned to the community where she taught, though, visiting the men and women there. She also had a long career as an electrical engineer an official in the National Assembly, and then a graphic designer after her official retirement. Reflecting on the Campaign in 2007, Riverón del Pino reflected that she was proud that the rest of her family had remained in Cuba: “all of us are here...I educated them according to our principles, because we have our problems, we have our needs, we have our shortages, but this is our *patria*” and their work was necessary to help it improve.⁵ The education that she received through the Literacy Campaign—the lessons she learned from her host community, from her formal education, and from her mother—shaped her life and the lives of her descendants.

Josefina Riverón del Pino and her family exemplify many of the themes evident in the Literacy Campaign, themes that affected gender norms, political culture, and international relations after its official conclusion in December 1961. For both Riverón del Pino and the nation as a whole, women were essential to the project. Women like Riverón del Pino comprised a

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

majority of all of the 250,000 teachers working on the Literacy Campaign, and women like her mother—or Ana Margarita Vielsa González in Chapter 4, who was likewise spurred to send her son Sixto José Jiménez Vielsa to teach after the invasion of Playa Girón—were key to their participation.

As discussed in Chapter 4, parents and young adult teachers accepted rhetoric from the revolutionary government that portrayed the Literacy Campaign as part of a larger struggle against imperialism. As Frank Laubach had predicted in his handbook for literacy campaigns, this appeal that “illiteracy is enemy number one of the progress of the country and that there is no more patriotic service than to do one's bit toward wiping it out,” successfully mobilized young people into an army dedicated to fighting imperialism one letter and one *batey* at a time.⁶ Even when there was work at home, families and colleagues were expected to assist in the Campaign so that teachers of all ages could work.

In addition to their patriotic reasons for wanting to join the Literacy Campaign young adults often saw it as an adventure that could improve their access to professional training. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, this expectation that professional development would follow service in the 1961 Literacy Campaign was often true, with women moving into new fields that were traditionally closed to them and pursuing careers outside their family homes.⁷ In the process, women changed perceptions of those fields—most notably in areas like domestic security, where their presence in Comités de Defensa de la Revolución (CDRs) upset some observers. Contemporary scholars like Richard Fagen hinted at this shift, but its full extent was

⁶ Frank C. Laubach, *Teaching the World to Read: A Handbook for Literacy Campaigns* (New York: Friendship Press, 1947) 118.

⁷ In the 1953 census, for example, there were just 295 female engineers and industrial technicians, *Censos de población, viviendas y electoral* (Havana: Tribunal Superior Electoral, 1953), Table 54, p. 204.

not yet clear because many of the young teachers were still in school themselves or just beginning their careers. By the 1990s and 2000s, the full impact of the Literacy Campaign on former teachers' lives was clearer: many remained in Cuba, committed to the revolutionary project, despite the sacrifices many had made. Women, the primary teaching workforce in the Campaign, became the most influential narrators in this wave of *testimonios*, arguing that their lives would have been less rewarding and their work less influential if they had not begun to break out of stereotypical gender roles in 1961.

Oral history archives particularly illustrate this shift. In the early 1960s, scholars like Oscar Lewis found men and women hopeful about the future in revolutionary Cuba, and like many Cuban observers he considered it a positive sign. By 1968, though, when Lewis began the research for *Living the Revolution: Four Men, Four Women, Neighbors*, and the Buena Ventura project, the limits of revolutionary integration were more evident. Young adults who participated in the Literacy Campaign and joined Lewis as research assistants lived in an environment transformed by the Cuban Revolution, where traditional gender roles were all but incomprehensible. For their interlocutors in Buena Ventura, however, social and economic mobility was limited by stigma from outsiders, inadequate access to services like childcare, and the persistence of older gender norms that discouraged women from working outside the home except in cases of extreme financial need. Lewis himself became disappointed by what he saw as a lack of social development in Cuba, and his extensive surveys of Buena Ventura residents were not edited for publication.

Nearly 30 years later, Catherine Murphy found men and women eager to describe themselves as protagonists of Cuban history, agents of change who derived meaning from their teaching even when it was not a focus of public attention. The Literacy Campaign was not a

focus for her research in Cuba, but acquaintances and colleagues insisted that it was an important event in their lives even though the rest of the country did not adequately commemorate it. Criticisms of the absence of women's voices continued through the late 1990s, even as the Cuban government resumed official commemorations of the 1961 Literacy Campaign, awarding teachers military medals for their work in 1961 and promoting interviews with former *brigadistas* like Patria Silva, who was captured in the invasion of Playa Girón and criticized her captors who claimed that the Cuban Revolution sought to force the populace under the "yoke of communism."⁸

In her 2009 interview with Murphy, Silva recalled that she explained to her host community that they should rally together and oppose the invasion because "You are with Fidel? You want literacy teachers to come here? You want opportunities to work and study? Well, they [the counterrevolutionaries] do not want this. They want none of it."⁹ Silva explicitly addressed conditions as they had been in 1961, but her call to arms took on a new meaning in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, when the "Special Period" threatened the survival of the Cuban state and its systems of education and security. These challenges resonated with other former teachers as well, drawing the attention of scholars like Murphy and driving her eventual oral history project.

Even though women had moved into traditionally male-dominated spheres of work and political life, these *testimonios* did not fit into longstanding narratives of national struggle, sacrifice, and achievement. These established narratives focused on "the difficult years," the

⁸ *Granma*, for example, reported on the commemorative medals awarded by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias beginning in May 1997. "Será otorgada medalla conmemorativa 40 Aniversario de las FAR a los alfabetizadores" *Granma* (28 May 1997); Patria Silva, in Vladia Rubio, "El bautizo de fuego de un magisterio: las vivencias de una alfabetizadora que permaneció en Girón durante la invasión mercenaria," *Granma* (28 March 1996).

⁹ Patria Silva Trujillo, interviewed by Catherine Murphy, 12 February 2009 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

war. Thus, the enormous transformations brought about by women's incorporation into society were not 'interesting,' except insofar as they could be considered, paternalistically, a concession to women."¹⁰ As Luisa Campuzano predicted in the 1990s, reassessing the early years of the Cuban Revolution required a reassessment of the work of women. These women, teachers in the 1961 Literacy Campaign, received an important, early taste of freedom and autonomy in the Literacy Campaign, and who found it memorable enough to retell their stories decades later. Because their accounts were relatively neglected, they may have taken on an additional power in public discourse.

On an institutional level, the significance of the Literacy Campaign has shifted. In 1961, it served as a key demonstration that the new government could organize large-scale changes and mobilize the workforces necessary to accomplish them. In the years that followed, it served as proof of the intentions of the revolutionary government and an illustration of how broadly the Cuban state sought to transform society. By the twenty-first century, though, the Literacy Campaign reemerged as an ideological precedent that demonstrated the Cuban Revolution's ideological commitment to improving life for marginalized communities even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result, the Cuban government has also looked favorably on the teachers from 1961 who draw parallels between twenty-first century Cuban internationalist missions and their early work.

Initially, the Literacy Campaign offered a forum in which the revolutionary government that took power in 1959 could argue that the Cuban populace should see it as a legitimate authority, validated by its work in the Sierra Maestra and its intellectual ties to nineteenth-

¹⁰ Luisa Campuzano, "Literatura de mujeres y cambio social: narradoras cubanas de hoy." Reprinted in *Las muchachas de La Habana no tienen temor de dios: escritoras cubanas del siglo XVIII al XXI* (Leiden: Almenara Press, 2016) 137.

century nationalists, capable of mobilizing substantial human resources to address pressing issues, as discussed in Chapter 1. After its early success recruiting women for the 1961 Literacy Campaign, it continued to mobilize women through formal education—overseen by the Ministry of Education—and mass organizations like the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas and the CDRs, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. The Literacy Campaign itself, though, became receded in importance over the decades.

This changed as the Cuban economy contracted in the 1990s and individual literacy teachers discussed their work in the context of the “Special Period.” Without favorable trade agreements with Soviet bloc countries, Cuba’s educated workforce became an important tool for earning the goodwill of other countries. Sending doctors and teachers had been a component of Cuban foreign policy in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but in the twenty-first century they were unaccompanied by Cuban military advisors. Under these conditions, the Literacy Campaign became a useful precedent for twenty-first century Cuban foreign policy. The Literacy Campaign returned to official discourse with the introduction of Leonela Relys’ *Yo Sí Puedo* internationalist literacy curriculum, as discussed in Chapter 5. This curriculum served a new imperative to develop ties to other developing nations as a means to safeguard the Cuban economy and political structure. In 2007, Relys herself described the Literacy Campaign of 1961 as “a campaign that was authentically, genuinely Cuban. This is indisputable. A campaign that was carried out as an example for the world, an example in its principles, in its propositions, and its intentions, despite taking place 45 years ago.”¹¹ Just as the Literacy Campaign had been announced in 1960 with idealistic goal of eliminating illiteracy in Cuba, it returned to the public

¹¹ Leonela Relys Díaz, interview conducted by Catherine Murphy, 15 February 2007 (Catherine Murphy Cuban Literacy Archive, Mt. Rainier, MD).

stage in the twenty-first century as an example of how idealism could bring concrete improvements to other countries as well.

Though Yo Sí Puedo campaigns have been far less ambitious in their scope and labor requirements, Relys' discussion of the 1961 Campaign as a statement of the Cuban Revolution's "propositions, and its intentions" also suggests that for some Cubans literacy education is still associated with systemic change. On its own, basic literacy does not fundamentally restructure society or international relations. However, if it is framed in the same way that the curriculum of the 1961 Campaign was, "literacy" can also imply a "fundamental reorganization" of society, a "massive redistribution of goods, services, and opportunities."¹² While the long-term effects of the Yo Sí Puedo program are yet to be evaluated, it has not yet achieved this transformative potential abroad.

At home, meanwhile, Yo Sí Puedo and the legacy of the 1961 Literacy Campaign suggest that at least some Cubans can find new meaning in the Cuban revolutionary project, drawing on events from the early years of the revolution to explain the present and indicate the direction that the country should go in the future. Oral histories like those collected by Oscar and Ruth Lewis and *testimonios* like those of Josefina Riverón del Pino collected by Catherine Murphy show this process in action.

¹² Richard R. Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969) vi.

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