

“Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition”: Robert F. Williams’s Crusade for Justice on Behalf of Twenty-two Million African Americans as a Cuban Exile

By Ronald J. Stephens

Although Timothy Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* has significantly helped to bring greater attention to Robert F. Williams’s legacy in civil rights history, his coverage detailing Williams’s activism in Havana, Cuba, offers at best a limited analysis on the struggles Williams encountered as a human rights activist and international Black freedom fighter. This essay seeks to expand the discussion of Williams’s role as an exiled Black freedom fighter and internationalist in Cuba. Charles E. Simmons, a long-time comrade and supporter of Robert Williams’s radicalism, comments: “Rob’s courageous leadership and his uncompromising commitment to self-defense and the international solidarity of oppressed peoples from the agonizing years of the McCarthy era to the present have inspired the works of many individuals and organizations in the U.S. and abroad[,] including such groups as the Freedom Riders, Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Republic of New Africa, the Black Panther Party, and the Student National Coordinating Committee. His comrade[s] in arms, Malcolm X, held Rob in the highest regard.” The NAACP, which previously stripped Williams of his Monroe Chapter leadership position because he was “too militant,” had until a few years ago restored his membership.¹ Williams’s efforts to expose the faulted civil rights policies of the United States and to favor active resistance to White violence and racism had been criticized and denounced by the NAACP national office. He had grievances in the 1950s and 1960s with the federal government, the national leadership of the NAACP, as well as racist, White citizens of Monroe, North Carolina, over their refusal to accept his call to use armed self-defense as an ideological tactic to desegregate.

The debate regarding active and passive resistance as a response to widespread White racism and violence in the United States during the civil rights movement represents another major development in the history of the movement, particularly as it relates to Robert F. Williams’s call for armed self-defense (Williams, 1962; Cruse, 1967; Foreman, 1972; Cohen, 1972; Barksdale, 1984; Reitan, 1999; and Tyson, 1999). His uncompromising stance in fighting to end racial discrimination in the United States and his activism as a militant Black civil and human rights pragmatist during the nine years he spent in exile in both Cuba and China allowed him to escalate the urban urge for a Black liberation struggle. For Williams the political landscape in Monroe represented a moral and legal battleground that continued to cloud specific questions and issues regarding the human rights of twenty-two million African Americans.

Williams was forced into a self-imposed exile in Cuba in 1961, where he sought to forge close relations with the Cuban government.² Williams, who had previously been in contact with

¹ See speech by Charles E. Simmons, during the “Robert F. Williams Memorial, A Legacy of Resistance,” in which he presented this information on Friday, November 1, 1996, Wayne State University, in the General Lecture Hall, Detroit, Michigan.

² This came following a period of racial unrest in Monroe in 1961, which led the Williams family to flee Monroe and head to New York. Stopping at several different hideouts in Toronto and Montreal, the family, though separated, eventually arrived within days apart in Cuba. Williams left Canada when he learned the Canadian Royal Mounted Police were working with the federal government. Travelling through California, he made his way over to Mexico and from there to Cuba. In Cuba Williams was granted political asylum by Fidel Castro. For additional information

Fidel Castro, was one of his staunchest allies among African-American civil rights leaders at the time and had gone on record to support Castro openly “in a series of mass rallies organized by the FPCC [Fair Play for Cuba Committee]. He went on to turn Washington into a laughing-stock internationally by sending a telegram to Raul Roa and the United Nations, requesting the immediate landing of Cuban troops in the U.S. South to liberate American Negroes from the Ku Klux Klan” (Moore, 1988, 113). In *The Rise and Decline of an Alliance: Cuba and African American Leaders in the 1960s*, Ruth Reitan goes further by suggesting that there were three major reasons why such an alliance with Cuba was appealing to Williams. First, she notes, “a revolutionary Cuba under Fidel Castro offered solidarity and support to civil rights leaders and urban revolutionaries alike, publicized throughout the world the plight of oppressed African Americans and exemplified a successful eradication of yanqui imperialist control from their nation” (Reitan, 1). Secondly, she argues that Cuba represented a safe haven for militant Black leaders, because “Cubans fought against colonialism in Africa, promised to train U.S. militants in insurrectional tactics and weaponry and provided a haven for exiles.” And finally, Reitan contends, “the Castro regime claimed to have purged racism from Cuban society” (Reitan, 1). It is ironic to note that only after visiting Cuba as a delegate of the FPCC that Williams would envision “significantly more freedom in communist Cuba than he would ever enjoy at home” (Rucker, 1).

This article argues, however, that although Williams was able to establish a political base in Cuba to continue to fight for African-American civil and human rights in the United States, Communist Party USA in Cuba would oppose his call for armed self-defense. This article suggests that from 1961 to 1966, Williams’s use of propaganda to vilify and objectify the actions of the U.S. government were not only constantly being challenged and opposed by his enemies in the United States but also in Cuba. It also suggests that in spite of the opposition, the overarching moral tone of Williams’s stance as a freedom fighter was uncompromising. His weekly broadcasts on “Radio Free Dixie” paralleled many of the articles he published in his monthly newsletter, *The Crusader in Exile*, which claimed on the first page of every edition that it “enjoy[ed] a freedom of the press that the racists of the USA could never bring themselves to tolerate.” The so-called freedom Williams encountered in Cuba, where he also published the first edition of *Negroes with Guns*, culminated in angry denunciations of racism in the United States as “tensions, misunderstandings, and outright conflicts challenged the alliance” (Reitan, 1).

In an effort to bring Williams’s political legacy in communist Cuba to the forefront, this essay has three major objectives. The first is to locate Williams’s stance as an Afro-American freedom fighter. The goal is to discuss the political climate in Monroe, which ultimately led to Williams’s transformation from a radical-integrationist to a self-imposed exiled Black nationalist following the explosive 1961 race riot. Secondly, this piece will discuss Williams’s philosophical position as a leader and his challenges to the U.S. government while living in exile in Cuba from 1961 to 1966. It explores his role as a champion of the civil and human rights of twenty-two million African Americans following the Cuban Revolution. Finally, this essay surveys the political factors that motivated Williams to leave Cuba and to reside in China in the years following the Cultural Revolution. Unlike previous works, this essay argues that Williams’s struggles for racial justice and social equality and the political attacks he encountered as a defender of Black human rights while in Cuba were met by intercultural conflicts. These conflicts were in opposition to Williams’s call for Black rights. Communist Party USA wanted

surrounding the details of the racial unrest in Monroe that led to Williams’s self-imposed exile, see James Foreman’s *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972.

Williams to critique the U.S. government using a class analysis that he did not deem proper for addressing the root cause of the oppression of Black citizenship and human rights.

Williams's Crusade for Justice in Monroe, North Carolina

Robert Franklin Williams was born in Monroe, North Carolina, the county seat of Union County, and a Ku Klux Klan stronghold. Despite the relatively limited attention given to him, he has earned his place in U.S. historiography and world history. Williams served in the United States Marine Corps and was a veteran of the Korean War, and when he returned to his southern hometown after serving eighteen months in the military, he was recruited and joined the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1955. Due to his constant agitation at the time and his belief in the continued struggle for the civil and human rights of African Americans in Monroe, he was elected president of the chapter in 1957.

As head of the Monroe branch, Williams was able to increase the organization's membership, recruiting men from pool halls, barbershops, and street corners. In *Negroes with Guns*, Williams writes, "we ended up with a chapter that was unique in the whole NAACP because of working class composition and leadership that was not middle class. Most important, we had a strong representation of returned veterans, who were very militant and who didn't scare easy" (Williams, 3). Clearly, Williams was not opposed to armed self-defense as a defensive response and reaction to White terrorism. As a matter of fact, after obtaining a charter membership for the branch from the National Rifle Association, Williams and sixty other members from his chapter raised funds to purchase rifles and ammunition.

In confronting a climate dominated by racial and sexual politics in Monroe, Williams had urged his followers to arm themselves to protect their community. In October 1957, when James "Catfish" Cole led a Klan motorcade, which included two police officers and about thirty to forty robed and masked Klansmen who had threatened to silence the vice president, Dr. Albert F. Perry, the Monroe Branch of the NAACP under Williams's leadership repelled the attack with gunfire (Tyson, 1999). As Klansmen arrived near the home of Dr. Perry, forty armed Black men, who had dug trenches and hid in barricades, fired shots at the Klansmen, stopping them in their tracks. "We shot it out with the Klan," Williams later recalled, "and repelled their attack and the Klan didn't have any more stomach for this type of fight. They stopped raiding our community." Not only did the Klan cease their armed motorcades through Monroe's Black neighborhoods, but the city council, which had long ignored the appeals of Black residents, met in an emergency session and created a city ordinance that prohibited the Klan from having demonstrations or motorcades without a special permit from the police chief (Williams, 1962, 55-57). The next day, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, the only Virginia newspaper at the time to report the event, also condemned the actions of the Klan. In reporting the incident, the *Guide* noted that "the city council banned Klan motorcades" to complement an already existing North Carolina law, which outlawed "the wearing of masks by adults in public spaces."

Williams's radical activism was inspired by years of terrorist actions against law-abiding Black citizens by racist Whites and the sanctioning of those acts by the local authorities. Williams used his weekly newsletter, *The Crusader*, which he and his wife Mabel founded, as a persistent call to fight for the rights that the U.S. Constitution guaranteed him and others to mobilize men in the community. These efforts also gained Williams support from the Progressive Labor Party (PLP). As Williams continued to expose racial injustice in the infamous "kissing" case, in which James Hanover Thompson and David "Fuzzy" Simpson, two African-

American boys, aged seven and nine, respectively, were charged with rape after a seven-year-old White girl had kissed Simpson on the cheek. The case gained international support and put Monroe at the center of the controversy.³ Williams also organized peaceful demonstrations and used nonviolent tactics through staged sit-ins at lunch counters, local boycotts at department stores and public libraries, and pickets at the city-owned, Whites-only swimming pool in the early 1960s.

The grassroots activism and community-based leadership of Robert F. Williams also championed other local African-American issues. There were two other incidents during that period that encouraged Williams and other members of the Newton community section of Monroe to take a different attitude regarding their treatment by White racists. The first occurred when a Black mother of five children, who worked in a local hotel as a maid, was kicked by a White guest down a flight of stairs into the lobby of the hotel. The second was when a married Black woman, Mrs. Mary Ruth Reed, who was eight-months pregnant, became the victim of an attempted rape by a White perpetrator, Lewis Medlin, who drove her from her home and then beat her brutally. Medlin, a mechanic, was charged with assault and attempted rape and later freed because “he was just drinking and having fun.”

The case ended in Medlin’s acquittal. That same year, a Black man, who was arrested for a similar crime, was convicted. Consequently, Williams issued a press statement in the summer of 1959 in which he advocated “meeting [racist] violence with [self-defense] violence” (Williams, 1962). For Williams, self-defense was defined “not [as] a love for violence” but rather “a love for justice.” Williams added, “we must defend ourselves. We must fight back. We must not only defend ourselves for defense, we must do so collectively.” When this statement was reprinted in a U.S. newspaper, the message sent shockwaves throughout White and conservative Black circles. Disillusioned by the legalist limitations on the one hand and the pacifist civil rights tactics of the NAACP on the other, Williams’s defiant rhetoric and action led to his eventual suspension from the NAACP for six months. Williams had both admitted to and refused to apologize for the statements he made to news reporters when he stated, “the Negro in the South cannot expect justice in the courts. He must convict his attackers on the spot. He must meet violence with violence, lynching with lynching” (Williams, 1998, 26). The NAACP Board of Directors’ eventual decision to expel Williams, which essentially was encouraged by Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, was influenced by Williams’s advocacy to fight by any means necessary against the terrorism of the police and the Klan. In response to these actions, the first issue of *The Crusader*, which was published on June 26, 1959, became Williams’s vehicle to appeal to his readership everywhere to protest the U.S. government, the U.S. Justice Department, and the fact that “the 14th Amendment did not exist in Monroe and that city officials, the local bureau of the FBI in Charlotte, and the Governor of the State of North Carolina were in a conspiracy to deny Monroe Negroes their constitutional rights.”

Seven months following his suspension, Williams invited “Freedom Riders” to visit Monroe in 1961 to test nonviolence. However, when racist, White mobs surrounded the nonviolent demonstrators and attacked them, a riot broke out and shots were fired. Once again, Monroe was on the brink of a race war. Armed, White mobs and the local police beat, harassed, and jailed scores of nonviolent protesters. In the midst of these violent clashes, a middle-aged

³ The incident apparently occurred after Thompson, the seven-year old, and Simpson, the nine-year old, joined a group of White boys to play cowboys and Indians as three White girls of the same age group watched from the sidelines. When the game ended, one of the White girls proposed playing house with them, during which time Simpson was kissed.

White couple, allegedly members of the Klan, drove into an angry, Black, rural neighborhood and were stopped and threatened by a crowd of close to 300 residents, many of whom heard about activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) being beaten in downtown Monroe. In an act of human decency, Williams allowed the couple to take refuge in his home. Although the couple left unharmed, a warrant was issued for Williams's arrest on a charge of kidnapping. Williams fled the state for New York. Pursued by the FBI, Williams and his family then underwent a self-imposed exile as they headed for New York City. Forced to leave that city, the family lived in Canada briefly before fleeing to Cuba for nearly six years.

Harold Cruse (1967) notes that in the course of these events, Williams and the Monroe rebellion were consumed by numerous political forces. Cruse writes:

There were several factors involved in the Monroe, North Carolina, fiasco. In the first place, all kinds of factions descended on Williams and his self-defense cohorts. There were leftwing Trotskyists, Freedom Riders and representatives of other ally civil rights groups—all pro-integrationist forces. On the other hand, there were also nationalist-oriented individuals from Harlem, not to speak of certain writers with muddled views on integrationism and nationalism. They all saw something in Monroe that did not actually exist—an immediate revolutionary situation (358).

Of particular interest was the agendas of the White Marxist Left—both communists and Trotskyists—which, Cruse correctly asserts, fatally crippled Williams's efforts first through the so-called Monroe defense campaigns of the Progressive Labor group, and secondly through the non-revolutionary interventions of the PLP and the Communist Party USA, which followed Williams during his exiled years in Cuba (Waters, 1969). I argue that it was these and other events that set the stage for Williams's political transformation from a radical integrationist in Monroe to his intellectual development as a militant Black nationalist and internationalist while living in exile in Cuba and China.

The Cuban Experience

The year 1961 was not the first time Robert Williams had traveled to Cuba. During the summer of 1960 and the early part of 1961, he had visited Cuba a total of three times as a delegate of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). Documenting the status of the Caribbean nation, which followed a week-long tour around the island from Pinar del Rio Santiago de Cuba in June of 1960, Williams and other FPCC members concluded that racial equality and social justice had occurred as a result of the Cuban Revolution. Following this week-long visit Williams, one of seven FPCC delegates, which also included Richard Gibson, John Singleton, John Henrik Clarke, Julian Mayfield, Harold Cruse, and Leroi Jones, grew a Castro-style beard as a representative of the first full-scale Fair Play Delegation to Cuba. A few months later, while meeting with Fidel Castro in Harlem in 1960, Williams was convinced that the initial link between militant Black activists and Cuban officials and revolutionaries had been established.

Williams's three visits to Cuba were in opposition to the conservative politics of the NAACP. Against the judgment of other leaders of the organization, the alliance he sought to establish as a FPCC delegate with Cuba would later prove to be beneficial. A year or so later, when Williams needed a neutral country in which he could articulate his grievance with the U.S. government as an exiled civil rights leader, Cuba was the logical choice. Dodging the FBI in

1961, Williams's close contacts with the Cuban communist party and his associations with the Communist Party USA's central committee in New York had assured him the safe entry into Havana that he needed. Although the communists made it clear and "very difficult for anyone who wasn't allied with them" to emigrate to Cuba, the Friends of Williams's Committee of the 26th of July Movement was instrumental in his migration to the Caribbean nation. In the end, however, it was "Fidel's personal intervention that made it possible for him to gain asylum there" (Cohen, 1972, 206). Earlier, Williams had favored the politics of Fidel Castro before and after he first visited the country. Williams also admired Che Guevara, even though he never claimed to be a communist. In return, Castro offered Williams political asylum a few years later. For Williams, seeking political asylum in Cuba represented the most logical and practical decision. He would later write in *The Crusader in Exile* about the decision, stating, "I could think of no other place in the Western Hemisphere than Cuba where a Negro would be treated as a human being; where the race problem would be understood; and where people would not look upon me as a criminal."

While living in Cuba, Williams managed not only to foster a mutual and genuine relationship with Castro, but also with Afro-Cubans and initially some White Cuban communists. However, when Castro assigned Commandante Manuel Piñero Losada, who served as the assistant minister of foreign relations, to assist Williams in his transition, the sentiments began to diminish. Having fought alongside Fidel in the Sierra Maestra Mountains, Piñero first "impressed Williams as [a] sincere and well-meaning" individual, who would go to great lengths to help so long as the only things Williams requested were for personal use (Cohen, 207). However, when Piñero's attitude toward Williams changed, reality soon set in.

Williams eventually encountered a set of ambiguous experiences in Cuba. First, he discovered a big gap between revolutionary rhetoric and the reality of relations between Whites and Afro-Cubans. Secondly, after living in communist Cuba, he learned how to turn the Black protest movement for liberation in the United States into an internationalized struggle. Using Cuba as his base of operations, Williams frequently communicated to a world audience about the particular problems facing African Americans in the United States. However, he refused to support the denunciation of the Cuban Revolution that Carlos Moore sought in vain to get from him, even though he knew it to be valid, based upon some early signs, in which "every time he suggested [support from Piñero to do] something such as establishing a Havana Information Center Against U.S. Racism, Piñero tried to discourage him" (Cohen, 208). Thus, when Charles Simmons, one of three students from Detroit traveling to Cuba during the summer of 1963, interviewed Williams and asked, "What role does religion play in the movement?" Williams sharply responded, "praise the lord and pass the ammunition."⁴ Williams understood the role of racial politics in Cuba and the United States after realizing that Piñero would deny him assistance if he were to continue calling for Black uprisings. Piñero would insist that Williams support a "worker's revolution" as opposed to a "separate Black revolt" (Cohen, 208). And while numerous attempts were made to persuade Williams to adopt the party's class line, which came from Piñero and later Joseph North, a Havana correspondent for *The Worker*, they failed to produce enough evidence for Williams to appreciate the conclusions drawn by Moore. Williams also understood that he needed to reach Castro, who would approve his request, so that both long- and shortwave broadcast facilities would be provided. Before the end of 1961 Williams had received approval to produce a radio program. With the support of Castro, Mabel Williams,

⁴ The author held a telephone interview with Charles Simmons on March 15, 2002, while he was teaching as a member of the faculty at Eastern Michigan University.

Carlos Moore, and a small group of Afro-Cubans, “Radio Free Dixie,” which could be heard throughout the South and in selected northern cities, aired twice weekly on Radio Havana. From 1962 to 1964 “Radio Free Dixie” could be heard as far away as Los Angeles and New York City. Also, while in Cuba Williams continued to publish *The Crusader*, whose name he altered to read *The Crusader—In Exile*. By then the newsletter had attracted the attention of large audiences, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation.⁵

Considering the complexity of the ideological, political, and personal struggles he encountered over the establishment of the program, Williams was clearly distressed over the party’s attempt to define and identify the African-American struggle with the Marxist-Leninist, anti-Chinese left in the international movement. Feeling that the “Russians had no right to play atomic chess with the Cubans as pawns, Williams shared Mao Tse-tung’s denouncement of Khrushchev’s actions in the Cuban Missile Crisis as being first adventurist, then capitulationist” (Cohen, 246). In addition to experiencing problems with the broadcast of his radio shows, Williams experienced problems in Cuba with the publication of *The Crusader*, which had become quite popular throughout the world. Commenting on the circumstances surrounding the printing press on which he relied, Williams explained to Castro, “the more popular it became the more difficulty we experienced in getting it printed in Cuba. There was always some excuse about paper, or we had to go through a lot of red tape, which would make it impossible to publish some issues while others came out extremely late” (Cohen, 5). This was the least of Williams’s problems regarding the newsletter. Conditions deteriorated as forged copies of the paper were distributed as propaganda against the Soviet Union. Williams wrote:

We also had the case where some copies of *The Crusader* were forged and distributed throughout the world. This forged copy was an attack on the Soviet Union and surreptitiously anti-China and was designed to make my exile in Cuba difficult. I reported this to the Party and had hoped that I would get some cooperation to help facilitate my making a public announcement on it or a statement that the October 1965 Special Edition of *The Crusader* was not published by me and that it was a forged copy not published by friendly forces, but I was unable to get any cooperation from the Party as far as making this public announcement (Cohen, 5).

Cohen notes that when “some of the U.S. Communist Party people in Havana suggested that CMCA [discontinue] ‘Radio Free Dixie,’ because only a small percentage of American Blacks were listening, and it was provoking many Whites in the South,” Williams tagged them as “Bourgeois Communists.”⁶

During Williams’s first trip to Beijing, his group attended a banquet held in the Great Hall of the People as well as the National Day Parade. Later, along with other delegates attending a peace conference in Hanoi, they were the featured guests at the presidential palace, where they were seated next to Premier Ho Chi Minh. As the peace conference convened, Rob, then exiled president of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), was asked to make a few remarks before U.S. servicemen. He proceeded to deliver a condemning, Black nationalist speech, stating that it was a tragedy that U.S. troops were fighting on the wrong side at a time

⁵ See “Statement of Robert F. Williams Relative to the Banning of *The Crusader* by U.S. Postal Authorities,” courtesy of the Robert Carl Cohen Collection, Wisconsin Historical Society, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

⁶ This term was shared with the author by Richard Gibson, who was close to Williams at the time of the incidents. Gibson conveyed this information to me in an email communication dated February 13, 2002.

when Afro-Americans were being brutally oppressed in a racist United States. Days after the speech Williams interviewed Everett Alvarey, a U.S. navy pilot who was shot down during the August bombing raid on Hanoi and Haiphang in South Vietnam.

The ultimate alliance Williams established with China, however, followed his second trip to Beijing in 1963, when he was able to convince Chairman Mao to issue a statement in support of the struggles of Afro-Americans against the imperialist United States government.⁷ Williams's favorable comments on China, Cohen explains, "triggered a new rash of attacks in the U.S. press, and [among] the anti-Peking 'Bourgeois Communist' [in Cuba, which] began to refer to him as a Chinese-controlled Black Nationalist" (Cohen, 266). However, for many of the Cubans with whom Williams maintained friendships, the alliance continued to be of interest. These Cubans were sincerely curious about his experiences in China. "While they knew that there was a serious dispute between Moscow and Peking, they weren't certain as to its causes" (Cohen, 266). But as 1963 was coming to an end, Williams encountered a host of problems caused by those whom he defined as the "Bourgeois Communist," which would continue long after he left communist Cuba for China.

The tensions between Williams and the Bourgeois Communists continued to escalate as the Cubans were hosting the 1966 Tri-continental Conference of African, Asian, and Latin American Peoples in Havana, when the Communist Party USA had attempted to bar Williams from attending. Although these attempts were unsuccessful, several African-American journalists, including Richard Gibson, were not permitted to attend the conference. Gibson, a young CBS News correspondent, who was swept up by the Cuban Revolution and ended up as chairman of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, states, "when the Tri-Continental was held, not one Black American was permitted in—no Black newsmen—although the old revisionist hacks from the U.S.A. were there. Even an effort was made to keep Rob out[,] and he would have been kept out if it had not been for Jariretundu Kozonguzi and Dr. Ana Livia Cordero, who threatened to make a scene if he were not admitted. Rob's 'Radio Free Dixie' broadcasts were sabotaged (literally)[,] and paper and ink for *The Crusader* became unobtainable" (Gibson).

The hostility of the pro-Soviet, Communist Party USA towards Williams and those who looked to it for guidance did not end there. Those attending the conference not only tried to prevent Williams from attending, but they also denounced *Negroes with Guns*, while at the same time attempted to devise a different "call for armed struggle against imperialism," which was reported by the editor of *Monthly Review* as "rhetoric to be left on paper" (Ring, 1966, 5). Convinced it was time to depart, Williams would soon undergo several failed attempts to leave Cuba in 1966. Gibson writes, "Black militants who sought to confer with Rob were refused Cuban visas[,] and Rob was subjected to intense pressure to shut up or return to the States, but when he asked for permission to leave for China, the Cuban Government took more than six months to let him go." The negative encounters with the White communist from Moscow and the United States, who were working for the Castro government as well as with certain Cuban government officials, made it extremely difficult for Williams to obtain the exit visa. "It was only [after] a ruse worked out with the DRV Government that Rob got out, ostensibly on a trip to Hanoi which the Cubans found difficult to refuse permission for" (Gibson, 1967, 2). Enrique Finlay, a native Cuban who had lived in the United States for many years and knew Williams from his FPCC years in New York, changed his attitude towards him when they met again in

⁷ See "Speech by Robert F. Williams on the Third Anniversary of Chairman Mao's Statement Supporting the American Negroes in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialists, Peking, China, August 8, 1966," *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Communist China, Daily Report*.

Cuba. Finlay relocated to Stockholm with his daughter, Olga, and her husband, the Cuban ambassador, where he and Gibson agreed that “this set the scene for Rob’s visit and eventual move to China, [his] visit to Tanzania and return to the USA via London.”⁸

Before leaving Cuba for the Peoples Republic of China, where Rob and Mabel Williams would join their two sons and dine and circulate among the upper circles of the Chinese government for three years, the color of the revolution was changing, becoming more apparent that they were “dealing with White Power in Cuba, Socialist or not” (Moore, 261). A long campaign would soon be waged against Williams by his enemies in Moscow, Havana, and Washington, D.C. The smear campaign to follow involved a series of tricks and snares laid for Rob during his last year in Havana, his stay in Beijing, and even en route to the States, ostensibly with the approval of the U. S. Department of Justice. In a letter dated September 7, 1965, nearly a year before his departure from Cuba, Williams exchanged correspondence with Richard Gibson concerning two well-known African-American journalists, Bill Worthy and Charles P. Howard, who were sympathetic to the Cuban Revolution and were experiencing difficulties in obtaining Cuban visas. Carlos Moore, who knew Rob from the States, had begun his notorious denunciations of “Fidel Castro and his white gang.” Williams noted sadly that “Cuban whites seem[ed] to turn to white Americans for advice, and that this is what was motivating him to leave Cuba ‘in the near future.’”⁹ Troubling was Williams’s release of an international appeal from Havana through “Radio Free Dixie,” which condemned the Johnson administration’s pious and hypocritical claims to be defending democracy in far-away Indochina and the Congo while supporting fascist terror and genocide against colored humanity in the United States. The fear of Williams’s Black nationalist stance as revealed in his grievance rhetoric had been troubling for White party members, and this signified the broken pact between the allies. Williams was not alone in his condemnation of the influence of the White faction of Communist Party USA. In their only secret meeting, Che Guevara also voiced to Williams his disapproval of the regime’s approach to the Black movement in the United States.

After leaving Cuba and arriving in Beijing, Williams hand-wrote a twenty-eight-page letter to Castro, which outlined his reasons for leaving the Caribbean nation. When the letter went public, due largely to an article written by Gibson, the negative sentiments against Williams escalated. In response to a September 1966 letter Gibson received from Elizabeth Sutherland, (a.k.a. Betita Martinez), which complained that “Rob’s accusations against the Cuban leadership and the Russian revisionists” were not justified, Gibson noted, “surely, what Rob has to say is of importance to Black Americans? The white leftists can continue to think whatever fantasies they care to about Rob or yours truly. My personal relationship to Rob continues to be, firstly, one of a close friend. He would never have gone to Cuba if it had not been for me, you remember, and I feel in many ways responsible for what happened to him. I think the Cuban leadership behaved irresponsibly, erratically and in a generally cowardly and unprincipled fashion towards Rob. Long before Rob left, I sought in vain to get to Cuba to see if I could patch matters up.”¹⁰

⁸ A copy of the original letter as an attachment was shared by Gibson with the author through an email exchange dated June 28, 2002.

⁹ The author exchanged numerous email correspondences with Richard Gibson, who lived in England. These email exchanges occurred over a six-month period during the academic calendar of 2002-03.

¹⁰ A copy of the original letter as an attachment was shared by Gibson with the author through an email exchange dated June 25, 2002.

Carlos Moore, who offers a critical insider perspective of the broken alliance between Williams and Cuba as well as China's distant relationship with Cuba, characterizes the details surrounding the treatment of Williams and the forgery of *The Crusader in Exile* in this manner:

Throughout Havana's mud-slinging campaign, China observed a strict silence, while giving Williams free reign to expose the treatment he'd experienced during his long Cuban exile. The highest officials of the Castrolite establishment thus came under fire, among them Maj. Manuel Piñero Losada, chief of intelligence at the time; Capt. Osmany Cienfuegos Gorriarán, secretary-general of the Tricontinental and director of the Liberation Committee; Capt. Emilio Aragones, personal aide to Fidel Castro and an important secret service figure; and Maj. Rene Vallejo, the Caudillo's personal physician and confidant. Williams accused them all of being nothing less than a gang of unscrupulous vipers who openly engaged in counter-revolutionary activity, graft, piracy and all manner of subversion (Moore, 265).

Going beyond its claim that Robert Williams had become a CIA agent, Havana countered with ruthless efficiency. In May 1967, tens of thousands of forged copies of Williams's publication, *The Crusader*, were mailed from Havana to the U.S., Africa, and the Caribbean, provoking considerable confusion. Bearing Williams's signature and masthead, these forgeries denounced Mao Tse-tung and his arrogant, power-mad underlings and thugs for having betrayed the Cuban Revolution. Racist chauvinism and ethnocentric fanaticism, charged *The Crusader*, led to the systematic practice of discrimination against Africans and other Black peoples throughout China. Williams issued indignant press releases from Peking to denounce this forgery, which beyond the shadow of a doubt was done under the auspices of Cuban G2....[and by] a high official of the Cuban Commission of the Tricontinental Organization. (Moore, 265-66)

In a May 1967 article published in the *New York Times*, for instance, Williams was quoted as saying that the forgeries of *The Crusader*, which were sent from Havana, represented yet another set of evil and misguided attempts to sabotage his efforts to internationalize the Black freedom struggle and to foster positive diplomatic relations with the Chinese government. To make matters worse, Stokely Carmichael (a.k.a. Kwame Toure), one of the leading Black radical spokesmen in the States, was being courted by several Cuban officials to side with Cuba against Williams. But while on tour in Africa and Europe, Toure expressed serious doubts about the racial democracy "that had been flaunted by Cuban officials," as he observed during his trip to the nation his uneasiness "over the fact that Cuba's top leadership was exclusively white, and that Blacks were nowhere to be seen in positions of real power" (Moore, 260-61). This observation, coupled with rumors that Williams was a CIA agent, was troubling. *The Militant* newspaper published a series of articles about the Tricontinental Conference in Cuba as well as the Black freedom struggle in the nation, affirming Williams's and Toure's observations (Hanson, 1967; Ring, 1967; Waters, 1969).

Williams explained to Gibson a month earlier in a letter dated June 26, 1967, that someone from the Cuban government had attempted to sabotage his contacts with the Chinese government, using a forgery of *The Crusader*. Gibson explained to Martinez, noting, "I don't know who your informants are concerning Rob's difficulties, but I do know that the white left in

America has long had it in for Rob. It is true that Che did attempt to help Rob and Rob paid him tribute for that, and still does.”

Gibson continued, commenting on the Cuban G2’s specialization in forgery:

I don’t know anything about Che or the forgery except that Rob sent me a photocopy of the forgery, which appears to have been printed on the same press in Havana as the genuine *Crusader*. From Chinese sources, Rob learned that the forgery was mailed out from Havana and perhaps the Chinese have told Rob more than that.... Certainly, there was a forgery, the second to come to light. The first one was definitely pinned to Cuba. It is up to the Cubans to explain, not Rob. Of course, they refuse to talk to him or to me, and this refusal goes back to 1964 in my case. I have never been able to get to see Alba Grinan, the Cuban Ambassador here, but have had reported to me numerous derogatory remarks she has made about me, Rob and China. Recently, in Stockholm, while watching the Trots and the revisionists battle inside the Russell Tribunal, I spoke with Enrique Findlay, who was there with Melba Hernandez. Findlay was friendly, but frightened, and had no answers to my questions. I said I was willing even to go to Havana to straighten up matters and would make every effort to heal this breach. Enrique never showed up for a later meeting and nothing more has been heard from any Cuban official source. On the other hand, Carlos Franqui long ago spoke up on behalf of Rob—and by the way soundly denounced Jacques Verges when he slandered me—and led me to believe that the Cuban leadership sacrificed Rob to the revisionist CPUSA. Pablo Armando Fernandez, before he was victimized by the British revisionists, hinted at the same thing, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante, now living quietly in London, told me that Rob had become a definite political liability to the Cuban leadership in their relations with Moscow, which shared the U.S. revisionists’ views that Rob was a troublemaker destined to line up with the Chinese. Can you blame him?

Conclusion

The Williams family lived in exile from 1961 to 1969 in Canada, Mexico, Cuba, and the People’s Republic of China. As Rucker (2001) observes, “Williams not only anticipated the various urban rebellions between 1964 and 1965 as well as the rise of the BPP and other militant organizations, but these phenomena were likely a direct product of his activism abroad. The particular ideological and political issues addressed by the Black Panthers, their insistence on armed self-defense, their views on Cuba and Vietnam, their support for an international struggle against racism, capitalism, and imperialism, and even the escape routes many Panthers used to avoid COINTELPRO persecution were all mirrored by Robert Williams years earlier” (Rucker, 4). The continued activism in which Williams engaged while exiled in Cuba was an example of the common roots of the Black Power movement. Williams’s activism abroad was one of the key mechanisms that gave momentum to the rise of militant Black socialist movements and the call for not only armed self-defense as a means of self-preservation, but more importantly armed struggle as a means to bring about social change. However, Williams’s discreet exit from Cuba as indicated in a letter to Castro noted that the only official in the Cuban government who showed any genuine interest in the struggle he waged was Che Guevara, and even then there were some serious limitations. Williams’s departure in July 1966 marked a snowball effect as other Black leaders, including Kwame Toure, who was at the height of popularity, would

distance themselves from the Caribbean nation. But the alliance that once was had come to end as several Cuban officials worked hard to discredit Williams. As Carlos Moore explained, while Castro was praising the brilliance of Kwame Toure, “Williams was issuing scathing denunciations of the deplorable racial situation reigning in Cuba, which the regime countered with the less credible charge that Williams was a CIA agent” (Moore, 260).

By 1969 Williams ended his self-imposed exile and returned to the United States, where he fought extradition charges against the state of North Carolina. As the Nixon administration was moving toward opening diplomatic relations with China in the late 1960s, however, Williams used his knowledge of the Chinese government for safe passage home and to assist the U.S. government. Williams obtained a Ford Foundation Fellowship grant to work with the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan. Drawing from his extensive stay in China, Williams advised political scientist Alan Whiting, who in turn counseled Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security advisor, shortly before Kissinger’s first trip to China.

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