As a student of twentieth century history, I have long been fascinated with the epochal shift that took place at midcentury: the end of formal Western colonialism. Hundreds of years of political, economic, and intellectual domination over the majority of the world’s population were transformed seemingly at once, in nearly every region of the world. Thus few periods are more fruitful for studying fundamental questions of political sovereignty, economic development, foreign intervention, and national identity. My research focuses on crafting critical histories emphasizing the agency of actors in both the centers of international power and those at its peripheries. While an abundance of easily accessible source material exists for studying the actions of American foreign policymakers, often the same cannot be said for the other sides of the story. Thankfully the resources of the Fondren Library and its dedicated staff have worked hard to overcome this problem, enabling me to tell a story about decolonization that hasn’t been told before.

Introducing Tricontinental

In an influential study, literary theorist Robert Young evocatively asserted that “the founding moment of postcolonial theory” could be located at the “First Conference of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.”\(^1\) “The Tricontinental” – as the conference was informally known – was held in January 1966 in Havana, Cuba, and was the first forum dedicated to opposing Western imperialism and promoting independent national development combining representatives from the three struggling continents.\(^2\) In his book, Young even advanced the term “tricontinentalism” in opposition to postcolonialism due to the Cuban conference’s gathering of activists and citizens from around the postcolonial world for the

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purposes of tackling common problems.\(^3\) Given the extraordinary significance and influence of postcolonial studies and approaches in academia over the last 30 years, Young’s provocation struck me as a powerful, and specific claim to an alternative intellectual genealogy of the present. However, while contextualized within his book’s narrative, Young’s claim was not backed up by a close reading of any of the extant sources regarding the Tricontinental conference or its eponymous journal. Upon further research, I discovered there is no work that does.\(^4\) This absence is unfortunate because few phenomena are more evocative of their time than Tricontinental during the era of decolonization.

Research Process: Building the Archive

As I set out to investigate Tricontinental – first in Prof. Ussama Makdisi’s fall 2013 class “America in the Middle East,” and later in Prof. Caleb McDaniel’s “Methods in US Cultural History” in spring 2014 – I quickly discovered the most likely reason for the lack of research is the scarcity of available sources. Not even the publisher, whom I visited in Havana as part of the “Rice in Cuba” program, had a complete collection.\(^5\) I approached Fondren’s Humanities Librarian, Anna Shparberg with my interest in tracking down this journal. While she was initially unable to find the publication through any of the library’s regular distributors, I tracked down a handful of issues online, which Anna promptly ordered for me.\(^6\) A number of Inter-Library Loan requests yielded a limited, but useful microfilm set of Tricontinental Bulletin (a sister periodical covering news from around the decolonizing world), but not the larger and more substantial bimonthly Tricontinental. My requests were so obscure that I was twice sent a lender’s purported microfilm reel of Tricontinental, only to realize that the reels were mislabeled and the library did not possess the journal at all! In the meantime Anna continued to search, and found that the Hoover Institution at Stanford University had the years 1967–1985 on microfilm. Anna was able to make copies of this unique set, and now Fondren Library has one of the two most complete collections of this understudied yet important journal of twentieth-century social thought.

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\(^3\) “More radically, *postcolonialism* – which I would prefer to call tricontinentalism – names a theoretical and political position which embodies an active concept of intervention within such oppressive circumstances. It combines the epistemological cultural innovations of the postcolonial moment with a political critique of the conditions of postcoloniality.” Young, *Postcolonialism*, 57.


\(^5\) My spring 2013 trip to Cuba was a component of the course “A Revolution From Within: Trends in Contemporary Cuban Culture” (SPAN 392/HART 304 & 565) jointly taught by professors Luis Duno-Gottberg and Fabiola López-Durán, and coordinated by Erika Payán Zanetti, the Director of Rice Study Abroad.

to the tenacity and commitment of Fondren’s Anna Shparberg, I was able to follow my research agenda while bolstering the Fondren’s collection of rare materials for other patrons to consult.

As we collected the original journals, I was careful to gather as much information as I could about the Tricontinental using Fondren’s panoply of books, journals, microforms, and online resources. The Library Service Center possessed a rare copy of The Political Thought of Ben Barka, a Havana-published book of works by the assassinated Moroccan organizer of the Tricontinental.\(^7\) The LSC also housed the proceedings of a conference organized by the Organization of American States specifically to counter the Tricontinental’s pernicious influence.\(^8\) This helped me fill in crucial context, as the OAS proceedings contained intelligence information on the origins of the conference not available anywhere else. I spent tens of hours at the Kelley Center for Government Information, Data and Geospatial Services, where I found rare microfilms of the Cuban-government newspaper Granma, the American socialist journal Monthly Review, as well as the useful “Special Studies Series: Foreign Nations: Latin America, 1962–1980.” The latter contained many materials regarding the challenges faced by US policymaking circles in response to the Cuban Revolution. The large-format scanners at the Brown Fine Arts Collection were particularly useful for making color scans of Tricontinental’s avant-garde artwork. Finally, I used Zotero and Mendeley help me organize and cite the rapidly growing library of materials I was amassing in electronic formats.

**Results**

The Fondren Library’s resources enabled me to write three research papers on Tricontinental. These projects have found audiences beyond the classroom, as I presented two of the papers at international conferences: the American University of Beirut’s (AUB) January 2014 “Transnational American Studies” conference in Lebanon; and the School of Oriental and African Studies’ November 2014 “Historical Materialism” conference in London. This London presentation benefitted greatly from a constructive session at Fondren’s Center for Written, Oral, and Visual Communication. Furthermore, I was awarded travel grants for both of these presentations, from the Center for American Studies and Research at AUB, and from the Humanities Research Center at Rice. Without the tremendous resources and comprehensive support of the Fondren Library’s staff, these achievements would have been impossible.

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