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Review/Reseña

Margaret Randall, *To Change the World: My Years in Cuba*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2009.

Another Future is Possible

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This was a very difficult review for me to write. I loved reading the book, I look forward to teaching the book, and I highly encourage readers of this review to do the same. So the difficulty does not lie in my frustrations with the book, as is sometimes the case in writing a review, but in how to summarize the book without sharing too much with the reader. How do I do justice to a quarter of a century of one's life, told from the perspective of

an additional quarter of a century's wisdom? How do I summarize the monumental accomplishments of the Cuban Revolution and its substantial shortcomings as explained by someone who experienced them? It is also an onerous task to review the memoir of a poet and artist and do justice to her eloquent prose.

To Change the World is not so much a memoir about Margaret Randall's life in Cuba as it is life in Cuba as lived and observed by Margaret Randall in the 1970's through mid 1980's. She walks the reader through the second decade of the Cuban Revolution (1969-1980) while introducing us to the Nicaraguan revolution as well. Within this social history of Cuba we learn about her personal life, her children, and her relationships, but they only come up when they are important for telling Cuba's story. *To Change the World* might be best described as a memoir of Randall's cultural, political, and emotional development as related to the Cuban Revolution, and a fascinating and beautifully written one at that.

Randall grew up in New York and New Mexico with New York City her last stop before departing for Mexico in 1961. She moved to Mexico with her son Gregory because it seemed to be a politically and culturally inviting place. While in Mexico she married a Mexican poet, had two daughters, connected with artists from around the region, and started a bilingual literary journal with her husband. In January 1967, while living in Mexico, she visited Cuba for the first time. In January 1968 she went to Cuba again as part of a Cultural Congress. Her two visits to Cuba made her want to live there for a year or two; a year or two that ultimately ended up being more than a decade.

She divorced her Mexican husband and was living with an American poet and, in March of 1969, they had a baby girl together; she now had three girls and one boy. While in Mexico she was active in the 1968 Mexican student movement. As a result, in late summer of 1969 she started to experience severe repression that forced her underground. Initially circumstances prevented her from safely leaving Mexico. Margaret had made contacts with Cuban officials on her previous visits so they made arrangements to get the children to Cuba until she could meet up with them. She weaned her three-and-a-half month old baby and on July 25,

1969 her partner took the children to the airport where Cuban officials received them on a plane bound for Havana. Her daughters were three-and-a-half months, five, and six years old, and her son eight years old at the time. Her son became the emotional caretaker of his younger sisters, with the Cuban educational system providing the housing, food, health care, and education to physically sustain the children in the absence of their mother.

Randall finally found a way out of Mexico City and ultimately the country. She was smuggled out in the back of a refrigerated meat truck, flew to Chicago, took a bus to Canada with her U.S. birth certificate, then flew from Toronto to Czechoslovakia. She had to wait in Prague—her last stop before getting to Cuba—for nineteen days, and two-and-a-half months after saying good-bye to her children, they were all finally reunited. She and her family lived in Cuba from 1969 until 1980 and two of her children stayed past 1980. Most of the time she lived in Cuba Margaret worked in various capacities in writing and publishing, connected in one way or another to different arms of the Cuban government. Her children did most of their schooling in Cuba: Her son through his degree in electrical engineering, one daughter until she completed her degree in chemical engineering, another through high school, and her youngest until fifth grade.

During her last four years on the island, Cubans began to distrust her presumably for what they interpreted as public critiques of the Revolution. She was fired without cause, though she still received a salary, and she learned of more and more Cubans who had been warned of interacting with her. Towards the very end of her stay she received a *faux* apology from the Cubans. Once she felt that her name was finally cleared she decided to move on, so she went to Nicaragua where she had already spent a few months. (In August of 1979 Sandinista priest, poet, and Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal invited Margaret to Nicaragua to write a book about Nicaraguan women similar to one she had written about Cuban women several years prior.) She left Cuba for Nicaragua at the end of 1980. Ana, the youngest, was eleven and she had no choice but to leave with Margaret. Her other children were old enough to decide for themselves whether or not to leave Cuba for Nicaragua. Her son and oldest

daughter opted to stay in Cuba, and her other daughter joined Margaret and her youngest sister after graduating from high school the next year.

By the end of 1983 she longed to be home due to overwhelming stress in Nicaragua, missing her family, her native tongue, and the New Mexican landscape. So in January 1984 she returned to the U.S. on a visa because she had taken Mexican citizenship while married to a Mexican and living there. In October 1985 the U.S. government ordered she be deported because she was accused of “being against the good order and happiness of the United States” (242). After nearly a five-year struggle she won her case and was re-granted her U.S. citizenship. The book chronicles most of this timeline as it intersects with the early period of the Cuban Revolution.

Leading the reader through this timeline Margaret sheds light onto her growing political consciousness. But it is not until about forty pages from the end of the book that she clues the reader in to the personal and intimate part of the process. It is not until close to the end of the book that she comes out as a lesbian to the reader by referring to her current partner, a woman, with whom she has recently celebrated their twenty-first anniversary. (Certainly the longest romantic relationship of all of the others we have learned about.) Additionally, Margaret tells us that “childhood indignation at injustice may have had its origin in the fact that I was sexually abused by my maternal grandfather when I was very young; I learned injustice in my cells” (194). But, she continues, maybe it was her father’s influence, as he was “devoted to fairness.” She traces her desire or need to fight for social justice to participating in protest activities in New York against the Vietnam War, the Bomb, and the Civil Rights Movement. She also visited Viet Nam at the end of 1974, which moved her “profoundly” but she believes her “political education consolidated itself in Cuba” (194).

Needless to say, Margaret experienced far more in Cuba than I will even attempt to mention here. Rather, I will highlight several key experiences that I found particularly unique to this sort of book. Interestingly, and perhaps this is one point of a political memoir, much of her political education seems to have occurred long after the fact as she reflected and continues to reflect on the various experiences and tensions they produced. We learn so much about Cuba from this book because

Margaret never stopped asking questions of Cubans, and never passed up an opportunity to learn more about the Cuban Revolution. (And fortunately for the reader, she kept a journal that she occasionally cites verbatim.)

Margaret's earliest trips to and years in Cuba struck her as a period of what she calls "authentic and growing democracy" (28). Not so much in a formal electoral sense, though that later came as well, but in the way that average Cubans were participating in reconstructing their society from the ground up. Certainly as her years passed there she crashed into many undemocratic practices as well—no freedom of press or religion, for example, but the memoir presents anything but an "either-or" judgment of Cuba but rather teaches the reader about what she experienced there. Margaret learned about day-to-day life in Cuba and the construction of the new society because she submerged herself in volunteer and paid work, including the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs). She also participated in the food ration program like all Cubans rather than gain the special privileges available to foreigners. She understood the "drudgery" (64) of shopping and stretching very limited (and often bland) foodstuffs into enough to feed a family of six.

Her children's experiences in the Cuban education system, her youngest starting in Ministry of Labor run daycare centers through her oldest as college graduates, also taught her a lot about the Cuban Revolution's priorities and functioning. As she said, she "loved how clearly the revolution prioritized and treated children" (57). Another pivotal moment for Randall was Cuba's failed attempt at harvesting ten million tons of sugarcane in eighteen months; a goal experts accurately forecasted would not be met. The whole country embraced the challenge, everyone contributing to the harvest. Margaret herself wanted to chop down the cane even though she had just had one of her kidney's removed three weeks prior. She was given the opportunity to cook for the workers given her medical condition, but snuck her way into the fields anyway and eventually passed out and was hospitalized again. Both experiences gave her great familiarity with the Cuban medical system, something else that touched her politically and personally.

Another fascinating story was Margaret's role as the only woman judge in Cuba's Carnival Queen contest. She describes her participation as "one of the most awkward of my life" (86). Haydeé Santamaría, famous Cuban revolutionary, in her capacity as Minister of Culture, asked Margaret to serve as a judge for the contest. Margaret was baffled as to why Santamaría asked her to play this role given Margaret's well-known feminist convictions and the inherently sexist nature of a contest which women are judged predominantly on their physical appearance. Rather than say no, since she felt she could not, Margaret wrote the equivalent of a letter to the editor explaining that "we will be better served when more young women aspire to social change than to contests in which they are judged primarily on their looks" (88). After the contest, she handed her piece to a reporter from the *Granma*, the Communist Party's daily paper, and the next morning it appeared on the front page. Several years later she finally had the opportunity to ask Haydeé Santamaría why she put her in that position. Santamaría explained to Margaret: "I chose you precisely because I knew you would hate it, that you'd find a way to move us a bit closer to stopping those terrible contests. You did that, very well as I remember, with your press release" (89). Sooner than either woman could have predicted, perhaps in response to Margaret's letter, perhaps not, the contest was no more.

Margaret shares many stories and experiences that speak to the Revolution's hypocrisy around women's rights. I particularly enjoyed the discussions not simply because they spoke to my own intellectual and personal interests but because she dissected her own feminist consciousness using the Cuban Revolution as a way to move through that process. She also explains in the memoir how her book *Cuban Women Now*—the first book I ever read by Margaret Randall as an undergraduate Women Studies major—came to be. I have read enough of Randall's works to be familiar with her evolving criticism of the Left's sexism but reading about it in such a way to see what led to the criticism added a whole new layer to the analyses.

Randall also provides the reader with a very unique and fascinating look at the Cuban civil court system—or the People's Court. Margaret was

privileged to sit in on a host of trials and watch defense, prosecution, and deliberations. Though I cannot say for sure, I suspect we could not learn about the People's Court with any detail other than from a memoir like this one. Margaret took the opportunity to sit in on the trials so she could learn and understand as much as possible. Because she set out to learn these details—or, as she says, she was always the journalist—she was very well positioned to explain them to the reader.

A theme throughout the book (and her life outside of the book) is Margaret's need to live her convictions and speak her mind while respecting the Revolution, especially as an outsider. Issues about gender, sexism, and repression against artists seemed to bring out this tension the most. It seems as though the more she reflects on everything the more pronounced the tensions become. On many occasions she makes clear that at this point she is not only frustrated with the Revolutionary leadership but with herself for more often than not deferring to them. I suspect if and when high-ups in the Cuban Communist Party read this book they will feel betrayed by her criticisms; they will feel they were justified in not trusting her way back in the 1980s. Similarly, if members of the right-wing Cuban exile community or pro-embargo politicians read it they will see it as nothing but praise for the Cuban Revolution. In my mind, neither of those reads is anything close to correct. The book seems painfully fair and honest and though I cannot say for sure, I suspect much of it was very difficult for her to write. She does a wonderful job conveying the complexity of the Cuban Revolution. Every criticism she shares is offered as a way to suggest how revolutionaries may avoid the mistakes in the future. And every bit of well-deserved praise she shares is to remind social activists what is possible. Even in her early seventies her commitment to social justice still burns and the memoir is another step in attempting to advance the process.

In sum, and as I am sure is clear by now, I highly recommend *To Change the World*. Randall's prose is beautiful and she walks the reader through the beginning of the Cuban Revolution in a way no other sort of text or author could do. Towards the end of the book she lists several things that, as she says, Cuba gave her. I think what she was looking for most of

all, and apparently found, is that “Cuba taught me that another future is possible” (246).