Letter from the Road... At Oberlin College, Midway Point...

Margaret Randall
For three months last fall, Margaret Randall, American-born writer now resident in Cuba and well known for her bestselling *Women in Cuba*, toured more than 40 U.S. campuses. She began in mid-September at the universities of New Mexico and Arizona, and San Francisco State University, and concluded in late November at M.I.T., Wellesley, and Amherst. Her tour, coordinated by Phyllis Vine, historian at Sarah Lawrence College, testifies to the women's studies community's concern about feminism internationally, and to a broad campus interest in Cuba. At Oberlin, Randall, never a college student herself, taught a one-credit, one-week-long intensive course to 45 undergraduates and a group of faculty auditors. She would read student papers on her return to Cuba. During these tightly-packed weeks, Randall continued to write lengthy journal entries; daily letters to her four children in Cuba, as well as to others; book reviews; and brief articles like the one that follows.

The original invitation came from the Berkshire Women's Conference, the fourth, held this past August at Mount Holyoke. In one of the workshops a group of scholars in the fields of women in Cuba, the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Mozambique attempted to answer the question, "Does Socialism Liberate Women?" It was nice having that context—2,000 women's history people, the vast majority of them women themselves—as the initial one in this reencounter with my country and people, after an absence of 17 years! Writing these notes, I'm now just about at the halfway point on a nationwide lecture and teaching tour. Widespread interest in Cuban women has meant invitations from Women's Studies Programs and Centers; history, Latin American studies, English, Spanish, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, and other departments on university campuses; Chicano community centers; Latin American solidarity committees; talk shows that find their way into maximum security prisons; groups of Native Americans; and a group of Puerto Rican students in East Lansing, Michigan.

Living first in Mexico for eight years and more recently in Cuba for nine has been an extraordinary experience, one I continually feel fortunate to be able to share. There have also been losses, of course: the two greatest, perhaps, being the long-distance nature of my relationship with the women's movement, which has nonetheless been at the cultural center of my consciousness, and the vacuum in language—for someone who continues to write poetry in English, to love and nurture and grow from that sound pattern and its own particular history.

The return has been joyous in people's growth: touching the many and real ways people have moved—and are moving—against a dying system that's still got a hell of a lot of kicking to do. Finding friends all over the country—people central to my generation's '50s and '60s—not become advertising specialists or shoe salespeople as the system would have everyone believe, but solidly working and growing in as many
areas as there is future: defying with their lives the myth that our recent history is as nonexistent as they always had us believe all our real history was. Native Americans, Chicanos, Blacks, lesbians, working women and men of all backgrounds and contexts: still a long way from being a coherent, cohesive, and/or viable national movement, but certainly nowhere near the isolation I'd feared. The lessons are being learned. The energy is there.

On the other hand, I am finding the isolation of middle America perhaps more overwhelming than I was prepared for: a young Black woman after a community college lecture in northern California asking: "Uhh ... Could you tell me ...? Is Cuba still a Communist country ...?" and my laying a complex—ultimately irrelevant—answer on her and then needing three full days to realize that what she was telling me was: "I like the things I just heard about Cuba. But how does that all reconcile with the word 'communist'?" A male student from Pennsylvania (b. 1958!) asking, "Well, what happened in Cuba to make things so different? A revolution or something ...?" Others unclear as to where the island is, or what complex—ultimately irrelevant-answer on her and then needing three full days to realize that what she was telling me was: "I like the things I just heard about Cuba. But how does that all reconcile with the word 'communist'?" A male student from Pennsylvania (b. 1958!) asking, "Well, what happened in Cuba to make things so different? A revolution or something ...?" Others unclear as to where the island is, or what language is spoken there.

On this trip I have been talking mainly about Cuban women. What it was like for them coming out of a Spanish and African culture: their own national past (chaperones, child brides, triple exploitation in a colonial and neocolonial past, the man with the wife and the querida on the side, Havana as one large house of prostitution for U.S. Marines and U.S. business magnates). How it was that only nine percent of all women were involved in the salaried labor force before 1959, and that 70 percent of that figure were employed as maids—in the homes of the Cuban and American bourgeoisie. How it was that in order to be an elevator operator or clerk in a large Havana department store, before the Revolution came to power, you had to be young, white, and beautiful!

To a wide range of audiences—academic, community, minority, mostly women and also many made up of women and men—I've spoken of what the initial revolutionary changes have meant for women: full educational and employment opportunities, equality in salaries, day care, real social and political participation at all levels, major changes in the lives of prostitutes, maids, peasant women, students, workers, and housewives. How, actually only a very few years after the Revolution came to power, you had to be young, white, and beautiful!

I was pleased, but also—I remember—concerned lest our poems not speak to one another after all these years. My tears came when Carol Gregory read her "Black Carlotta," and I thought of my own poem named for that same Cuban slave woman whose leadership in an 1843 rebellion gave Cubans strength and the title for the Cuban operation in Angola; Clare Coss read from her mother/daughter poems, and I read "Motherhood" to this auditorium of maybe a thousand women; Audre Lorde hit painful and joyous chords, and Adrienne Rich used speech—voices from history—in ways my own verse has tried to explore in recent years. Out of different experiences, we are, I felt, very much connected.

**BY MARGARET RANDALL**

**FOUR BOOKS IN 1978**


