

## **“Children of the Revolution”**

Generation Gaps in Socialist  
and Latin American Cuba: An Interview  
with Gregory Randall

*Isabella Cosse*

Gregory Randall heads an image processing group that includes researchers in France, Spain, and the United States, and he also teaches in the electrical engineering undergraduate program at Universidad de la República in Uruguay. He is also active in university government. Only his intonation reveals he is not a native of Montevideo, the city he considers his home, where he chose to live, work, and raise his children.

Born in New York in 1960, Randall has led a transnational life. His mother, Margaret Randall, was a young writer in the bohemian scene when she decided to become a single mother. From her relationship with the poet Joel Oppenheimer she had Randall, and shortly after, at the height of the Cold War, she took her infant son to Mexico in search of new horizons. Randall spent his early childhood in a comfortable and lively home filled with cultural stimulation. During those years the family expanded, first with Sarah and Ximena, the two daughters Margaret had with the poet Sergio Mondragón, and then with Ana, from Margaret's relationship with Robert Cohen, a young American poet. Life changed dramatically for them after the Tlatelolco student massacre (Mexico, 1968), as repression came knocking on the

family's door. Margaret and Robert were persecuted and forced to leave Mexico. They decided to settle in Cuba in 1970, sending the children ahead of them in 1969.

Randall lived in Cuba until the 1980s, when he joined Chile's Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) and moved to France. There he engaged in political actions to further Chilean resistance efforts and continued his studies at the graduate level. He seldom spoke of his political activism or his life in Cuba until his teenage son convinced him that he needed to tell his story. He invited his mother to write a memoir with him, but they later decided to write separate books. Randall tapped into his family's narrative and confronted his own memories. The result was the book *To Have Been There*.<sup>1</sup> The title reflects the Cuban Revolution's role as epicenter of an era defined by the cultural and political upheaval of the "long 1960s." The book was recently released in Cuba by the publishing house Aldabón.

Randall provides a unique perspective on Cuba, shaped in part by his displaced position in that historical process. Unmoored from national frameworks, his subjectivity is anchored in his social sensitivity. He was part of a generation of children of the revolution. This interview explores that experience.

**Isabella Cosse:** *What do you remember of the UNAM [Universidad Nacional de México] student occupation in 1968?*

**Gregory Randall:** I was seven. I know because it was right before Cuba. My memories are fragmented. I remember that everything was in a state of flux. For me, personally, that included what was going on at home. My father [Sergio Mondragón] had moved out. He lived nearby, but he and my mother had separated. That's the image I retain. When the university student movement erupted, around July [1968], many in their circle got involved because they were intellectuals. My friends' parents all took part in some way. If students took over the university, these artists supported them by writing an open letter or speaking at the university. And naturally we, as their kids, would be there too. I don't remember the poetry readings, but I remember us playing hide-and-seek in the UNAM garden.

*Do you have any memories of the repression?*

My mother didn't go to the Plaza de las Tres Culturas protest [in the district of Tlatelolco, which was brutally repressed by the government and resulted in hundreds of students killed]. Their group argued over going, with some considering it too dangerous. They knew something was going to happen, so they decided not to go. A friend of my mother's, who was much younger than her, was there. He ended up under a pile of corpses. He got away after night fell and came to our house, where he hid for three days.

*Did you know what he had gone through?*

We all knew. The day after the repression my mother took us to the plaza and we could see shoes strewn everywhere. We saw them from afar because it was dangerous. My mother was like that, wanting to see for herself. I remember that same guy took me to the Olympics two weeks later. When you look back, it seems crazy, but that's how things were. I never saw that guy again, but going with him to the Olympics was very important to me at the time.

*In your book you write about going on a trip with some Canadian hippies who visited your house. Tell me about that.*

That was much later. Tlatelolco happened on October 2 [1968]. I think the magazine [*El Corno Emplumado*] stopped coming out around that time. We left for Cuba on July 25, 1969. So there were almost ten months between Tlatelolco and Cuba. We were in hiding for a month before we left. Bob and Alice had been at my house about three weeks when I went on that trip with them. They came into my life in May and we started out in June. I returned a week later, when the police arrested us. That's when it began [the persecution that would lead to exile in Cuba]. That's more or less the timeline. Things were moving very quickly; it was only five months, but it felt like a lifetime. My sister had been born in March. And now that I think of it, considering the nine months of my mom's pregnancy, Robert [Cohen] was already in our lives when Tlatelolco happened. But I don't know why I can't place him then.

*What did those months mean to you?*

For me and my family there's a before and after Tlatelolco. To a great extent it marked my entire future, to this day. You can say that about anything. But it was because of Tlatelolco that we left for Cuba; because of it I met my wife [Laura Carlevaro, with whom he is still married]. Everything has to do with that. Sometimes, when I think back to that moment, I see a parallelism—with the obvious differences—between the impact that Tlatelolco had on so many people's lives and how the Spanish Civil War influenced the international labor movement. Although both were failed experiences, they were great generators of energy and ideas. They mobilized people who went on to mark many generations; they traced the way forward.

*How did you end up traveling with Alice and Bob? How were you arrested?*

They were traveling across Latin America. I asked my mom if I could join them part of the way and, as usual, she said yes. I wanted to go as far as Panama. My mother agreed to let me go to the Guatemalan border. I was really excited. I had been on the road with them for five days when the hippie commune where we were staying was surrounded by the police. We were immediately taken away in a bus with the windows covered, so nobody would see us. We were taken to a police station in Mexico

City where I was held for thirty-six hours. I was the only kid there. Bob and Alice spoke no Spanish and I didn't speak English because my mom had stopped talking to me in English when Sergio moved in with us. I tried to explain to the police that they were friends and not my parents, and asked them to let me call my mother. They eventually put us in a car to the airport. On the way there they stopped at my house. A policewoman got out and knocked on the door. She handed me over to my mother and told her to cut my hair.

*How did you feel through all that? What do you think now of your mom giving you permission to go on that trip?*

I can still clearly remember those thirty-six hours. When I got home I ran into my room and burst out crying. The next day, Robert took me to get a haircut. What my mother did then, letting me go alone with those hippies, would be unheard of today. But things were different back then. My mother was a bit more extreme in that sense, more than the average person, but she wasn't unique. I don't remember any other kid going on a trip like that, but I'm sure I wasn't the only one. I think many parents in my mother's generation believed in giving their children freedom and letting them think for themselves. If you're fighting for equality in society, you have to fight for equality in the family. That was the idea. Afterward they processed it more theoretically—"the personal as political"—but back then they really tried to live by that, with all the limitations you can imagine. That attempt at equal treatment—which was never such anyway—was important. Free love, for example. In those days, everyone in my house might each be with their other partner. They saw that as being true to their revolutionary ideas.

*We can come back to that in a moment. First, I want to ask you about leaving Mexico for Cuba.*

It wasn't easy for my mother to leave Mexico without papers. She couldn't leave with us. She finally decided to send us to Cuba, where we would be cared for until they joined us. I was eight and my sisters were all younger than me (Ana was only four months old), so I was in charge. Cuba started out very traumatically, then, although at the time I didn't experience it like that. I experienced it with joy, and fear also. I feared I would not see them again. But at the same time it was an adventure and I had a leading role. . . . The Cubans were great, welcoming us with open arms. They sent us to a summer camp. All of us except Ana, who was a baby and had stomach flu, so the assistant director of the clinic where we had a check-up offered to care for her at home until my mother arrived. We spent the whole summer at the camp and it was spectacular. We were very privileged. We lived with hundreds of refugee kids from other countries. Some had lost their parents; others were missing an arm or a leg. Compared to them, we were much better off. Two and a half months later, our parents arrived. Robert came first and a week later my mother. We were overjoyed.

*What changes were there in the family?*

Everyday life changed enormously. Mondays through Fridays we were all (except Ana) at boarding school—what they called the “scholarship” system—and on Friday nights we went home. The aim of these scholarships was to shape the “New Man,” considered essential for the future of the revolution. Many Cuban kids were on these scholarships, especially kids from the poorest families. I always felt that the Cuban Revolution was especially devoted to children. The slogan “Children are born to be happy” says it all. The scholarships also suited the parents because while the state looked after their children they were free to “make love and Revolution.” The Cubans later examined this practice critically and realized that separating ten-year-olds from their families for such long periods was harsh on the children. So they revised the scholarship system and applied it to secondary schools.

*Coming as they did from bohemian experiences and with a countercultural take on personal relationships, what were your mother and Robert like in terms of your education?*

Some Cuban friends criticized the way my parents raised us. Unlike other parents, my mother never went to see me on Wednesdays at boarding school. Almost all the other parents visited their kids on that day, bringing them cake and things. My mother and Robert gave no importance to such things. At the same time, I felt really close to them and the weekends were very intense and happy times. Ours was a very cultural house and I was given a lot of freedom. I always felt I had a great relationship with my mother and fathers. Since I was away at school, I wasn’t very aware of what everyday life was like at home. There were some pretty strange moments. For example, the time a very tall African American man, who was my mother’s lover, came to live at our house, with Robert still living there. At the time, I didn’t notice it. To me he was just a *compañero* living in our house. I had no idea. But my sister Ana, who lived at home, realized what was happening. Years later, at a family reunion, she said to me, “You didn’t know about that?” It wasn’t easy for her. I also knew that a neighbor who lived in our building was my father’s lover. At that time in their lives, they obviously had that option. But not much later they split up, so maybe it wasn’t really an option. They obviously couldn’t take it. That went on for a few years, though, and I didn’t see it. I didn’t think it was strange that they had other relationships.

*And what happened among boys and girls your age?*

There was a mixture of free love with strong elements of a macho culture. In my sexual awakening—no doubt influenced by Cuban society—I believed that as a young man it was up to me to take the initiative. It was unheard of for a young girl to do it. It had to be me. That was a huge problem for me, because I didn’t know how

to act. On the one hand, at these schools there was a formal level, where the scholarship meant the school had a responsibility to watch over us and make sure girls didn't lose their virginity. If that happened to a girl, her father would raise hell, because his daughter had been in the school's care. But, at the same time, among us kids, when it came to sexuality, it was anything goes. And everyone knew it.

*What do you remember from that experience?*

At different moments during my scholarship days, I encountered various attitudes from my teachers in that sense. I remember there was a very repressive atmosphere at times. They did everything they could to stop us from having sex. I was once punished because I was caught holding my girlfriend's hand in the hallway and then kissing her—and not even on the lips. That was probably at the Lenin School. Later, at another school, Río Seco II, where there were sixty of us in one bedroom, I woke up one night to find two students having sex in the bed next to mine. The principal there was smart enough to realize it was something they couldn't stop, so he gathered all five hundred of us in the amphitheater and brought in a nurse to instruct us on the use of condoms. That was 1976. So you can see that those two attitudes coexisted. One more influenced by Catholic morality, and the more open attitude of free love. But because the scholarship was a major part of life, with us living daily at coed school, it was almost impossible to control.

*Were these always consensual relations? Was this something you talked about?*

During the discussion of the Family Code adopted around that time, it was widely accepted that raping a girl under sixteen (the legal age in Cuba then) could be punishable by the death penalty. I don't remember personally knowing any teachers who were openly involved with students. I do remember many cases of boys with crushes on teachers. Our teachers were young girls not much older than us. When I was fourteen I had a teacher who was sixteen. So crushes were inevitable. I think the teachers restrained themselves out of that almost religious morality [of the revolution], which dictated a self-imposed discipline that called on them to avoid "bourgeois deviations," like Che [Guevara]. Later, at the Lenin School, I heard about a thirty-year-old teacher—the assistant principal, I think—who disappeared from the school one day and it was rumored that he was in jail for having intimate relations with female students. I don't know. They were probably consensual. But everyone agreed that he had been rightly jailed.

*How did you experience that time of discovery?*

The first time I was in bed naked with a woman it was with a very beautiful girl. I fell in love with her and we started going out. I must have been around sixteen. Her father had fought alongside Che and had been killed in Bolivia. We went to my

room—I had my own room, so we had privacy—took off our clothes, and got in bed together. It was obvious she wanted to make love. I had never done it before and I didn't have the nerve. Mostly I was afraid I'd get her pregnant. I don't know, maybe I was also afraid I wouldn't be able to perform. But things didn't go beyond kissing and petting, and she was really angry at me because of that. We were together for two months. It eventually split us up. She expected us to have sex, and I was too afraid. She probably thought I was a coward. Looking back now, it seems significant. Another incident comes to mind, which happened earlier, in '75, when I was fifteen or sixteen. In the first trip of the BIJA [Brigada Internacional Juvenil de la Amistad]—a solidarity group formed by two friends from the Communist Youth—we were on a bus for fifteen hours and I was seated next to a girl. We ended up kissing, making out, like kids that age do. But after a while, when we were right in the middle of it, I realized I wasn't interested in her as a girlfriend. It was just a hookup. I felt really embarrassed. I was afraid she thought that meant we were a couple. So I told her I was sorry, but I didn't want her to expect anything more and that I felt I was taking advantage of her. She felt awful. We're still friends to this day, but at that moment she was clearly upset. That gives you an idea of how I was back then. I think it has to do with a sort of internal questioning of sex as a way of using the other. That didn't feel right to me. I didn't want to be in a relationship in which I was using the other, but at the same time I was using her.

*How did you combine the New Man paradigm with your family's unconventional approach to relationships?*

You have to be careful when you think about that. Views on gender issues have changed dramatically and very rapidly around the world over the past thirty years. My mother is now a lesbian, but back then the prevailing sentiment was naturally homophobic and none of us thought that was all that terrible. My mother was always a bit more tolerant in that sense, but just that, tolerant. When my mother told me she was a lesbian, which was in '85, I was living in France, and to a certain extent it came as a surprise. Right after she told me I thought, "Oh, ok, that makes sense." But it was a surprise. My mother had had many men in her life. And my fathers—Robert, in particular—he was a guy who had many women, a man women found desirable. That whole macho thing was quite naturalized.

*Was that also something that happened in your family, which cultivated "free love"?*

There too. The family could aspire to free love, but that doesn't take away from the fact that she was a woman and he was a man. Also, at the time, the Cuban Revolution was very homophobic. I think there is a misconception in that sense. People tend to think the Cuban Revolution was more homophobic than the rest of the world. I don't think it was. It was just as homophobic. The difference was that in Cuba

there was an authoritarian power—a dictatorship of the proletariat, so to speak—and that left little room for diversity. It's also true that there were major figures in the Cuban Revolution who were homosexuals, such as Alfredo Guevara, a member of the Central Committee and head of the ICAIC [the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry], who was openly gay. Everyone knew he was gay. He went to the theater with his boyfriend. There was an anecdote involving Alfredo Guevara—almost a myth. Apparently he used to argue with Fidel [Castro] when they were students together in the university, and Guevara would win his arguments by shouting, “macho” style. So he was seen as a guy who could go up against the “horse” [as Castro was known] himself, a term that, incidentally, also has a sexual connotation. It's no wonder, then, that it was the ICAIC that defended Silvio Rodríguez and other young musicians when they were persecuted. It has to be said, also, that the Cuban Revolution did allow for certain spaces of freedom. People would say, “Look at Alfredo, he's a homosexual and he doesn't care; that takes some balls.” That said, we need to remember that many people were sent to work camps because they were gay. The bureaucrats in charge would say, “This guy is sick and needs to be reeducated.” And they suffered enormously.

*So your family was not very different?*

Exactly. I think we need to demystify that aspect. My family was not all that different from how other families were. For example, 80 percent of Cuban children were going to boarding schools, so they were living collectively five days a week. That reveals that, in that respect, the role of the nuclear family was less important for everyone. Families experienced a general process of transformation. Like I said, sexual activity in the boarding schools was wild. That was all part of the revolution. And not just in schools. Everyone was screwing around in general. We all knew that among our parents everyone was more or less sleeping with everyone else. We were different mostly because we were foreigners, because we could travel and were in contact with certain people and could access cultural assets. But the fact that my parents practiced free love didn't necessarily make them different. At least I didn't perceive it that way. Maybe in a sense it was, but I didn't feel the difference.

*What was it like being a young foreigner in Cuba?*

We were a bit in the middle. Cubans considered us foreigners—welcomed and esteemed foreigners—but it was always clear that we were foreigners. For example, the [food allocation] booklet foreigners received was a special booklet, and that was a way of saying, “Okay, these people are here in solidarity and we're not going to force them to make the same sacrifices we have to make.” It was somewhat condescending. But my mother refused that special booklet and instead we got the standard one



for Cubans. Unlike many people, we were given a house. We also had the privilege of being allowed to travel. But, at the same time, because we were foreigners, the logic of that time dictated that they couldn't let us into key places. We couldn't be party members or serve in the military (and you have to remember that there was always the possibility of aggression), although we could join any social organization. But we also had the freedom, the privilege, of discussing issues that were off limits in Cuba. For example, I was able to debate about Trotsky in my group in the Revolutionary Left Movement [MIR]. So, being a foreigner had its pros and cons.

*How was your relationship with other Latin American youths?*

There were many of us Latin Americans in Cuba and we loved Latin America. We were from many places, but came from a common magma. There was a certain similarity between the revolution that was happening here and there. To us we were all alike; we were friends and went to parties together. When the MIR had the great idea of telling a group of kids to organize, and we were invited to a meeting, it was like hearing the gods calling us. We were all there, not just Chileans, but Mexicans, Brazilians, Argentines. . . . They told us they were forming an MIR youth group and asked if we wanted to participate. It was what we were waiting for: our place in the Latin American revolution. Most of the groups [of the Latin American Left] did not try to harness that energy.

*Throughout this interview you've referred to "us." Was there a generational "us"?*

Yes, there was a generational "us." That is, there were three generations. The generation of those who had survived, who were around twenty-five. There was our generation, the twelve-year-olds. And then there were the small kids. We were in the middle. The year 1976 was the year of the war in Angola and 1979 was the year of the war in Nicaragua. For my generation, these were "our wars." We all wanted to go to either war and fight like our parents had, like Che had. As a foreigner, I wasn't allowed to receive military training from the Cubans; I couldn't go. I felt a little like I was crippled. It was very frustrating. At that initial moment, people wanted to go. There was a lot of pride. In my book I recall a conversation during my scholarship at Río Seco II [the rural school] that led to an argument about our leaders. There were twenty or thirty of us, and someone was saying "Che and Fidel had balls, they fought like men. Martí was an idiot. He was all talk and the first time he went into battle he got himself killed. We Cubans are machos and we are unbeatable in combat." That discussion evidenced a mixture of *machismo* and racism that was permeating the very ideology of the revolution. For example, they would refer to Africans as "backward, not much better than monkeys, with no sense of nationality, tribesmen." All these people spoke from within the revolution. It's appalling—and

I thought so then—but it happened among working-class people. The kids in that scholarship were students who had been left back. Later, in France, I learned about the human suffering, about the dark side of the war, the relatives who never received the remains of their dead. That was when I was in France. The worst I heard, while I was in Cuba, was about people who had left for two years and came back to find their wife had been with another man. There was something absurdly rigid about that. The leaders said, “If you’re a member of the Party you have to be an example, and if you’re an example you can’t be cuckolded. Because you lose face with your comrades.” As soon as the man stepped off the plane, he was told he had to choose between his wife and the party. It was very dramatic.

*Your memoir is written from a place of commitment toward that revolutionary past, but at the same time you’re very critical. The book was recently published in Cuba. How was it received?*

It was released in 2017 by Aldabón. The editor suggested I cut out a bit from the section on Ochoa, to avoid problems. I thought it over a lot, but in the end I agreed. I wanted my memoir to be read in Cuba. When I went to present the book at the Book Fair, the Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, was there. He’s in favor of opening up Cuban culture, and after my talk (I also spoke about the capitalist restoration) he invited me to speak at an internal “cadre” [leader] school for youths. I discussed the book with seventy Cuban intellectuals, which was very interesting. I also presented the book in the school where I studied engineering [Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría, CUJAE]. There were some thirty people there, half of whom had read the book. A third were in their sixties and another third were young people. There were some very good discussions, including about Ochoa and leadership. Seeing my memoir published in Cuba, and the reception it’s having, is really satisfying for me.

Translated by Laura Pérez Carrara

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**Gregory Randall** has a PhD from Université Paris XI (Orsay) and is an engineering professor at Universidad de la República in Uruguay.

## Notes

The book was first published in Spanish in 2010 by Ediciones Trilce (Montevideo) as *Estar allí entonces: Recuerdos de Cuba 1969–1983*. It was later translated into English by Margaret

Randall under the title *To Have Been There Then: Memoir of Childhood and Youth. Cuba: 1969–1983* (New York: Operating System Press, 2017). For references to Margaret Randall's works, see Elizabeth Hutchinson's interview in this issue.

## **References**

Randall, Gregory. *To Have Been There Then: Memoir of Childhood and Youth. Cuba: 1969–1983*. New York: Operating System Press, 2017.