

ESPACIO CREACIÓN/CREATION SPACE

“Contact is Community”: A Conversation with Margaret Randall

Taylor Marie Doherty
University of Arizona
tmdoherty@arizona.edu

Interview with US writer and Latin Americanist Margaret Randall, accompanied by a selection of her poetry and photographs. She shares her thoughts on the interconnection of memory and place; personal contact for building community, connection, and mutuality; translation; risk-taking; art and social change. She also shares previously unpublished photos from her time in Cuba and Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Keywords: Margaret Randall, *The Plumed Horn*, poetry, women writers, transnational feminism, translation

Entrevista con la escritora latinoamericanista estadounidense Margaret Randall acompañada de una selección de sus poesías y fotografías. Comparte sus ideas sobre la interconexión de memoria y lugar, el contacto personal para promover comunidad, conexión y mutualidad, la traducción, el riesgo y el arte y el cambio social. También comparte fotografías inéditas de sus estancias en Cuba y Nicaragua en los años ochenta.

Palabras clave: Margaret Randall, *El Corno Emplumado*, poesía, mujeres escritoras, feminismo transnacional, traducción



Margaret Randall

Photo by Magdalena Lily McCarson

Margaret Randall is a feminist poet, essayist, photographer, oral historian, translator, and activist. Her prolific body of work, which includes over 200 books, spans decades and locations, drawing inspiration from Beat poets, 1950s New York abstract expressionist painters, 1960s Mexican social struggles, 1970s revolutionary Cuba, Vietnamese antiwar and anti-imperialist struggles against the US, the 1980s Sandinista movement in Nicaragua, the stunning desert landscapes of the US Southwest, ancient ruins, and more. Her writing is also shaped by her commitment to socialist ideals, humanistic values, and the power of art in social change (Randall 2019). Some broad themes explored in Randall's work include: place, memory, space, community, connection, capitalist greed, ecological devastation, social revolution, and, of course, feminism.

Margaret Randall's is known for bringing revolutionary perspectives to Anglophone audiences, especially through her books on Cuba and Nicaragua: *Cuban Women Now: Interviews with Cuban Women* (1974); *Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution* (with Doris Tijerino, 1978); *No se puede hacer la revolución sin nosotras* (1978); *Todas estamos despiertas: Testimonios de la mujer nicaragüense de hoy* (1980); *Women in Cuba: Twenty Years Later* (with photographs by Judy Janda 1981); *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (1981); *Risking a Somersault in the Air: Conversations with Nicaraguan Writers* (1995; rev. ed., 2022); *Women Brave in the Face of Danger: Photographs of and Writings by Latin and North American Women*

(1985); *Gathering Rage: The Failure of 20th-century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (1992); *Sandino's Daughters Revisited: Feminism in Nicaragua* (1994); *Our Voices, our Lives: Stories of Women from Central America and the Caribbean* (1995); *To Change the World: My Years in Cuba* (2009); *Che on My Mind* (2013); *Haydée Santamaría, Cuban Revolutionary* (2015); and *Exporting Revolution: Cuba's Global Solidarity* (2017). On Latin American poetry, she published: *Estos cantos habitados* (1978); *Carlota: prose & poems from Havana* (1978); *Breaking the Silences: An Anthology of 20th-century Poetry by Cuban Women* (1982); *A Poetry of Resistance: Selected Poems and Prose from Central America* (1984).

In 2019, Randall was awarded an honorary doctorate in letters from The University of New Mexico, the “Poet of Two Hemispheres” Prize from Poesía en Paralelo Cero in Quito, Ecuador, and a Haydée Santamaría Medal from Casa de Las Américas in Cuba.

In 1962, Margaret Randall and Sergio Mondragón launched *El Corno Emplumado* / *The Plumed Horn*. The title combined key images from each hemisphere—the US jazz horn and Quetzalcoatl's feathers. The bilingual magazine ran thirty-one issues between 1962 and 1969. *El Corno* created a bridge between the hemispheres by translating Latin American writers such as Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, and Gabriel García Márquez into English and North American poets such as Walt Whitman, Williams Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound into Spanish. The magazine highlighted pieces by well-known and new writers alike. The first editorial note describes its goals and purpose best:

EL CORNO EMPLUMADO — THE PLUMED HORN is a magazine of poetry, prose, letters, art from two Hemispheres, printed in Spanish and English... published in Mexico City out of the need for a NEW MAGAZINE, a magazine whose pages conform to the word instead of whose words conform to pages. Now, when relations between the Americas have never been worse, we hope EL CORNO EMPLUMADO will be a showcase (*outside politics*) for the fact that WE ARE ALL BROTHERS. Manuscripts (with the usual self-addressed paraphernalia), money (any kind) both welcome. To begin with: quarterly publication; later monthly. We hope that this nucleus will eventually grow into a publishing house... eventually grow into MUCH MORE THAN THAT. (Mondragón, Randall, and Wolin 1962, 5)

Production stopped due to repression by the Mexican government because of the magazine's strong support of the 1968 Mexican student movement and denunciation of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre. Margaret Randall left Mexico and fled to Cuba shortly after publication of the journal ended. In 2005, filmmakers Anne Mette Nielsen and Nicolénka Beltrán produced a documentary about the magazine, *El Corno Emplumado: una historia de los sesenta* (*The Plumed Horn: A History of the Sixties*). A complete digital

archive of *El Corno Emplumado*, including searchable scanned PDFs of all thirty-one issues, is available through Northwestern University's Open Door Archive: <https://opendoor.northwestern.edu/archive/collections/show/5>.

The documentary, *The Unapologetic Life of Margaret Randall*. (Colby and Lippold 2002) focuses on her political activism, 1980s immigration trial, affairs and marriages, and relationship with her children. Randall's memoir, *I Never Left Home: Poet, Feminist, Revolutionary*, was published by Duke University Press in 2020. A more detailed biography is available at her website: <https://margaretrandall.org/Biography-21>.

Interview with Margaret Randall

The interview transcribed below was conducted on Zoom in January 2024.

Communities Overlap

Taylor Marie Doherty: In your memoir you have this absolutely gorgeous line: "None of us are separate." I was hoping you could speak more on how concepts of interconnectedness and dependency, maybe a better word is mutuality, have informed your writing.

Margaret Randall: First of all, Taylor, thank you for this interview. I've read some of the others and am honored to be included. To this question, I can say that from my earliest memory, I have understood that we are part of a community or, maybe more accurately, overlapping communities. I think most humans gravitate toward community. I can remember that in high school in the 1950s, which was a particularly stifling time for women and girls, I was prey to the distorted values of the era. I remember yearning to be part of the clique of popular girls at my school; I wanted to be a cheerleader or maybe even homecoming queen. Of course, those were unrealistic dreams, and I failed to achieve them. And they really had very little to do with who I would become in any case.

When I realized that a more logical and satisfying place for me was among those students who we'd call nerds today, the incipient writers and artists who worked on my school paper, I was able to see the direction of my life more clearly. And then of course after that, New York City's abstract expressionist artists and Beat poets were groups that informed my writing and, in general, the person I would become. So they were important communities to me. And much later, the community that Sergio Mondragón and I created with *El Corno Emplumado*, and the heroic effort to build a more just society that was the Cuban revolution and Nicaragua's Sandinista experiment were all extraordinary communities in which I learned, contributed, and grew. I guess I believe we each have

individual identities that must be respected and honored. But I like your use of the word “mutuality,” and I think that’s what enables us to be part of our world.

Deep Connection with the US Southwest, Landscape, and Ruins

TMD: Thank you for sharing that, Margaret. There is another line from one of your books, *My Life in 100 Objects* (2020), that I wanted to ask you about. You write about “how the objects and places that move us breathe their life into ours.” This theme that nature and objects are relational living things is found throughout your writing and your poetry. Could you speak to how human, nonhuman, and more-than-human beings have influenced you?

MR: I’m not sure about more-than-human beings. I don’t believe in a God of any sort. But I have always felt a connection with landscape, particularly the desert and canyons of the US American Southwest. And the idea of an inanimate object is kind of foreign to me; the tiny turquoise bead that looked up at me from the sand at a trail at Chaco Canyon, even the table on which we eat—hewn from native pine by human hands in Honduras—or my favorite coffee cup which is a replica of the dinnerware Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter fashioned for the dining car on the Santa Fe Railway... all those and other things like them are living objects to me because they speak of history, desire, vision. Conversely, it’s clear that we imbue the objects we touch with something of ourselves. It’s difficult for me to explain how this has influenced me, except to say that I feel a continuity between these things and the people who are important in my life.

TMD: That was really beautiful. I think this leads into my next question, which is about a passage in your memoir, *I Never Left Home* (2020), describing your move in the 1950s to New Mexico. You write: “When I finally saw that land, I felt I had come home. In some deep way I could not have expressed back then, that landscape introduced me to desire. It put me in touch with my own body, its rhythms and needs, the feelings it would invite me to experience when I knew enough to meet it on its terms” (47). Place is so intimately connected to our bodies and to desire. I would love to hear more about how the landscape of the Southwest has shaped you and what the concept of home means to you.

MR: Well, Taylor, my family and I actually moved from the suburbs of New York City to Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1947. I was ten years old, soon to be eleven. That’s an age when I think one is particularly susceptible to one’s surroundings and to change. The landscape of the US American Southwest was new to me: unexpected, open, rugged, magical. Even the people, I guess, in Scarsdale... I had never seen so many Black and brown people. So even racially, it was kind of a discovery for me.

And I'll tell you a story that illustrates what landscape meant to me back then. As a teenager, I collected US Geological Survey maps. And I would take my parents' second car, telling them I was going to spend the night with a girlfriend, and park along old Route 85 that ran from Albuquerque north to Santa Fe. And I would leave the car there. Then I would begin to walk until I came to a place where there were no visible signs of human presence. I wrote about this long ago in a prose piece I called "Until There Were No More Bottlecaps." So I would find a flat rock or level space on the ground, I'd undress, and spend the night. I went to sleep imagining I was a woman on that land before the Conquest.

Of course, those were different, safer times; it's not something a young woman could do today. In more recent years, the experiences I've fashioned for myself have been perhaps less radical but very important nonetheless: hikes to ancient ruins or up to the crest of the Sandia Mountains to the east of my city, down Grand Canyon, and to Ancestral Pueblo ruins throughout this area. But the experience of this landscape has always been very present in my work. Elements of it have become metaphors for what I want to say.

As far as my concept of home is concerned, as I try to make clear in my memoir, I believe one carries one's home within. Of course, there are important aspects of home that have to do with physical place, climate, culture, language, and so forth. But I think we end up making home wherever we choose or happen to be.

TMD: That's such a lovely story about the way you connected with the ground, place, and memory, and, building from that, time and place are so central in your work. Ruins in particular, as you said, are prominent in collections from *Stones Witness*, *Into Another Time: Grand Canyon Reflections*, and *Ruins*. I would love to hear more about your relationship to ruins. Can you speak a little bit to what memory, time, and ancestors mean to you?

MR: I find ancient ruins endlessly fascinating, I would say necessary, to my ongoing experience of the world. They nudge my imagination about the people who inhabited them, how they must have lived, what they may have felt. When I visit an ancient ruin, I feel the presence of those who came before, their experiences and desires. I have long found the term "pre-history" to be absurd.

I don't think writing is the only evidence of how people lived, thought, and created through time. I've visited dozens of ruins around the world, and I've always found them to contain clues to how our predecessors experienced their lives. I don't really subscribe to the idea of "ancestors" in the usual sense; it isn't important to me if the people who built and inhabited what we now know as ruins were directly related to me in any way. They're simply my link to time and memory in a more general sense.

TMD: In using the term “ancestors,” I was thinking something more general. Not necessarily a family lineage, but people who came before, animals that came before, objects that came before. Thanks for speaking to that. I want to shift gears to some questions about poetry. I see poetry as a way of knowing the world and making sense through feeling and naming. I think there is this current in society—it’s not new, it’s been around for a long time—that still views poetry as inherently elitist or worse, a luxury, something we don’t need. We see this in the way humanities and creative writing programs are on the chopping block across the country. I’m thinking, of course, here of Audre Lorde’s work, but I’m curious what you might have to say about this, how you view poetry connected to class and why we really need poetry.

Poetry Appreciation Differs: US in Contrast to Cuba, Nicaragua

MR: That’s a great question! It’s true, poetry is considered an elite genre in the United States, where our commercialized society considers it—if indeed it considers it at all—as frivolous, useless, disconnected from life. My own public-school education taught me to hate poetry. It was taught in such a rote way. Memorization stood in for understanding, and the poems we were made to memorize didn’t seem to have anything to do with my own life. It wasn’t until I was in my early twenties and I heard “Howl” recited out loud at a party that poetry began to make sense to me. And it was from that moment that I knew I wanted to be a poet.

In this country we really don’t honor poets. Poetry readings, unless by the very famous, attract extremely small audiences. It’s not easy to publish and poets aren’t paid much for our work. But this isn’t the case in other countries in which I’ve lived. In Cuba, for example, there’s a love of poetry that is nurtured from childhood. Editions of poetry collections sell out quickly. I can remember the first few years that we lived in Cuba, a relatively unknown or incipient poet would publish a book, and it would be published in an edition of 35,000, and it would sell out in a couple of days. That’s just unheard of here. Poetry audiences in Cuba were large and enthusiastic, and I think they still are.

And, of course, Nicaragua is a nation of poets, and the early Sandinistas built on that love, organizing poetry workshops throughout the country. In all kinds of venues in neighborhoods, in military units, in factories, on farms. It wasn’t unusual, when I was in Nicaragua, for a poetry reading to draw a crowd of thousands. And writing and reading poetry crossed all class lines.

So I think it’s more classist here because it’s so elite. But that’s not true in many other countries. I have a photograph, for example, that I made on Rubén Darío’s birthday—Rubén Darío, you may know, was a great modernist Nicaraguan poet from the nineteenth century—and the little town where he was born was rechristened Ciudad

Darío, and on his birthday each year hundreds of peasants came to a poetry reading that included local and international poets. I have this photograph of a line of farmers sitting on a low wall listening intently to one of those readings.

Vietnam is another country I've visited where poetry is important. I think that we need poetry because it distills the most intimate and profound of our experiences, and I think that's true everywhere. It's really the society that chooses to ignore or trivialize it or celebrate it.

Experiencing and Translating Feminism: *Las mujeres* (Women, 1970)

TMD: Thank you for drawing on those experiences in Cuba and Nicaragua to demonstrate the need for poetry and that it doesn't have to be the case that we view it as a luxury. What does being a feminist poet mean to you? How do you feel your feminism has shaped your work? I realize this might be a difficult question, because I think for many of us—I know it's the case for me—it's just part of our everyday life. Could you share more about how you came into your feminism?

MR: I experienced feminism for the first time in 1969. I was living in Mexico at the time, and the first texts by US feminists arrived in my mailbox. Not my inbox because we didn't have inboxes at the time. Just in my regular mailbox. I read them and they impacted me in a way that is hard to describe. They completely changed my life. Very suddenly, I understood that the problems I'd had with men weren't personal but societal. And I began to understand the patriarchy, how it's constructed and what it does to men as well as to women. This understanding effected every aspect of my life and work including, of course, poetry.

I collected a small sampling of texts from diverse versions of feminist thought at the time. I had them translated into Spanish, wrote an introduction, and Siglo XXI, which is one of Mexico's most important publishing houses, published the book. I remember that the director of Siglo XXI, Arnaldo Orfila, suggested that the book be called simply *Las mujeres* (Women). He knew that was the only way for it to pass the censors in many Latin American countries at that time. Had the word "feminist" or "feminism" appeared in the title, it wouldn't have made it through.

So that little book proved to be the introduction to feminism for many women in the Spanish-speaking world. I received hundreds of letters from women throughout the continent telling me it changed their lives. As the years passed, I began to receive letters from women telling me it had changed their mothers' lives. Even today, I may receive a letter once in a while from someone saying that her grandmother was introduced to feminist ideas through that book. The book is still in print. I think it's in its eleventh

edition. Since then, of course, many important Latin American feminists have emerged, writing and speaking about feminist experiences out of their own histories and cultures. So we have a much broader literature today.

TMD: Who are some of the Latin American feminists that have been influential to you or foundational for you?

MR: That’s an interesting question because I know many Latin American feminists that have written texts about theory. I’d include among them Dora María Tellez and Sofía Montenegro, who are Nicaraguans. There’s Zaida Capote in Cuba. Isabella Cosse in Argentina. Those are just a few.

But I’ve been influenced by women who didn’t use the word feminist or didn’t call themselves feminist long before the idea of feminism was in the public domain but whom I consider feminists, such as Haydée Santamaría, who was a Cuban revolutionary. I remember she told me in an interview in 1970 that she was wondering why the Spanish language always refers to men and women only by male pronouns. So, she was thinking about those things long before they were even subjects of discussion in most parts of the world. There are also women like that who might not have called themselves feminists because they didn’t know the word, but in my understanding of feminism, they were or are feminists and were very influential in my life.

TMD: In your online biography (2019) you write: “I deeply believe in humanistic values, combating our culture of violence and greed, and art as a tool for change.” I was hoping you could say more about art as a tool for change. What is the connection between literary and social revolution and rebellion? What is the role of the artist or poet in liberation?

MR: That’s another important question, but I guess it’s also a tricky one, because I don’t really believe that poetry or art of any kind must, of necessity, be a tool for change. I very much believe, as Art Reinhardt said so wisely, that “Art is art and everything else is everything else.” In other words, art is its own self. It may project many different realities and emotions. So, the labels “political poetry” and “political poet” annoy me. I’ve been called a political poet more than once, and I’m always slightly annoyed by that label. I write about everything. I write about social issues, political change, love, death, landscape, so forth and so on.

Having said this, poetry can describe and also encourage social change. I’m thinking of Berthold Brecht, Walt Whitman, César Vallejo, Juan Gelman, Audre Lorde whom you mentioned, Adrienne Rich, Joy Harjo, among many others. Because artists and poets are the scribes of history, they often speak of change in concise and original ways, and I think in that sense their work informs generations.

TMD: I wanted to be careful with how I phrased that because I didn't want to deny the fact that art can just be art. We don't want to put too much on it. But also, there's the potential for something more.

El Corno Emplumado

TMD: I have some questions for you about *El Corno Emplumado*. I was introduced to it by Professor Sandy Soto and then watched a documentary on it and have been reading archival materials. I see the journal as having crossed boundaries and borders so fluidly and, in doing so, creating this transhemispheric politics of solidarity. It was accessible to people on a transnational scale because of the pricing mechanism, which in the documentary on *El Corno* you named as being "whatever a poor poet in that country could afford to spend." So it's not just that the content of the journal was rebellious and innovative, but the way it was produced and sold went against the grain of convention. I found this very radical, particularly in this moment we are in of ever increasing corporate greed that commodifies art and poetry more and more. How did the magazine help cultivate cross-cultural and multisited solidarity, and I would say consciousness-raising? Did you see it as doing that?

MR: Yes, we did see the journal as doing that although our ideas were still very incipient. You know, when you talk about our commodity society, I'm reading a book at the moment, called *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. It's a really important book, and it points out how the society we live in today is not only a commodity-oriented society, but we are the commodity now. The Internet, our computers, our smartphones, our cars, even our beds collect information on us and sell it to Google who then sells it to the highest bidder so that they can use us as raw material for their profit. That situation just keeps moving. But to get back to the journal, we did see the journal in this way. Although, as I say, our consciousness was still somewhat incipient at the time.

I also think that the creative world in the early 1960s was really ready for such a form. We hated the commercial commodification that was evident at the time and is much more so today. But we were young and naïve and believed we could sustain a venture that went against every social convention, as you point out. Of course, we also needed money to produce a magazine that averaged 200 or 250 pages an issue and came out punctually four times a year. So, this was one of many contradictions, but it was one that we dealt with for the entire eight years of the journal.

Eventually, the project was forced to cease in the repression following the 1968 student movement; because we supported the students both in the journal's editorial stance and in our own lives. It was a moment that marked the end of my own innocence.

And all these years later, when I think of *El Corno Emplumado*, I’m always struck by the immensity of the project—especially in an era before the Internet when we had to go door to door, literally door to door, to beg for funds, and we refused to give in to several offers to help that had strings attached. We also had to contend with a slow international postal service because it took three to four months for a poet in Buenos Aires or India or Peru to send us work and then three or four months for our response to get back to that poet or artist. So, everything was very slow. Very artisanal.

But we did it somehow and I remember sitting on our living room floor for hours making parcels of ten or twenty copies to send to different parts of the world each time the magazine came out. Sometimes friends would help, but the journal essentially depended upon the work and passion of the two of us, and I was twenty-four, Sergio was twenty-five, when we started. We were young and naïve, and we believed that poetry could change the world. But I think that—and of course I know that poetry can change the world today—we did do something important that had an impact.

TMD: I would absolutely say so. I would love to hear more about the everyday life of *El Corno*. I’m very curious about your decision-making models, how you decided what to include, how you navigated debates and disagreements. What political and social visions did you have for the magazine?

MR: I almost have to laugh when I hear you say decision-making models because we were just two spontaneous kids. We never thought about anything like that. At first, we just wanted to produce a venue for good translation, from English to Spanish and Spanish to English. You know the translations that appear in *El Corno*, I look at them today, and many of them could be improved. I’ve learned a whole lot about translation that I didn’t know at the time, and I’m sure Sergio has too and the other people who translated for us. Still, many of them were good and solid. Translation was very bad at the time, translation of poetry.

We wanted the best of our poetic mentors and the younger poets writing at the time to be available to both readerships. So Sergio was mostly responsible for the work in Spanish, and me in English. We were determined to publish what we liked and not to fall into the model of printing work by our friends or by a small clique or in a single poetic style, which was what most independent literary publications were doing back then. And I venture to say a lot of them are still doing that kind of thing.

As you know, Sergio and I were not only the founders and editors of *El Corno Emplumado*, but we also married and had children, so our literary and personal lives were deeply entwined. I think that’s important to point out because gradually, over the journal’s life, we went in different directions, literarily and also to a certain extent

ideologically. I was more and more influenced by the social revolutions taking place in the world at that time, and Sergio was beginning to adopt Buddhism as his core philosophy. And I think this is reflected in *El Corno* if you look at the issues and follow them from the first to the last, you'll see this change taking place until finally it began to resemble two distinct journals under a single cover. So, more than navigating debate and disagreements, we just traveled in different directions. Eventually, of course, that was unsustainable, and Sergio relinquished his coeditorship, and we got a divorce. I began a relationship with a US American poet named Robert Cohen, and he helped me edit the magazine's last two issues.

But I think that in many ways I was the thread that continued from beginning to end. I know people today, I'm thinking of Roberto Tejada, who's written extensively and brilliantly on *El Corno*. In his case, he's written about our graphic design and how cutting-edge it was for the moment, but again we sort of bumbled along, you know, and I think we were fortunate, and perhaps fortunate isn't the best word because we also followed what was happening, and we made choices. But I really do believe that we never understood how cutting-edge many of the aspects of the magazine were.

TMD: It's nice to hear that you were able to fumble along and there was this element of serendipity, that it wasn't all set out. That's really encouraging and interesting to hear about.

MR: One thing that I think speaks to that is, very soon after the magazine started, the demand for it was just passionate throughout the world. It became very clear to us that poets from all over the world—Australia, Greece, India, England, Ireland, South Africa—I mean all over, of course especially Latin America, the US, and Canada, they began to write to us about the magazine, how important it was to them. Much of that is reflected in the letters section, which is featured at the end of each issue, which I think is a very interesting part of each issue. So I think it was also that enthusiasm and that sense of need on the part of young poets like ourselves all over the world that also stimulated and motivated us to keep going.

Contact is Community: *el encuentro*

TMD: That's a great motivating factor. I'm also interested in talking about the role of connection and contact. In the documentary on *El Corno* you say: "We need contact to understand and be with one another." I was also wondering if you could say a bit about the *encuentro* as a political form, but also a creative form, that makes possible the exchange of voices and ideas. What sort of world-building work does this do?

MR: Again, contact is community. I think in some ways I’ve already answered this question, but it’s interesting that you bring up the word “encuentro” in Spanish which means meeting or gathering.

In February of 1964, *El Corno* and two other independent literary magazines—*Eco Contemporáneo* of Argentina and *Pájaro Cascabel* of Mexico—organized what we called an “Encuentro de poetas,” or gathering of poets in Mexico City. We invited poets from all over the world to come for a week. Many of them used “buy now, pay later” plans or sold possessions to make the trip. I remember one poet sold a grand piano to be able to afford the trip. They slept on our floors, ate our food, shared our lives. We held a mammoth reading, today we’d call it an “open mic,” in Chapultepec Park—I think this comes out in the documentary—where we read for close to thirty hours running.

We were open to all sorts of experiences and forms of expression. Experiences such as this one showed us the importance of community and undoubtedly it influenced our work at the time. But again, I think we were also naïve, I think now, in believing that we were changing the world. We were changing the consciousness of many poets and artists, especially young poets and artists, and of course this has a role in shaping overall consciousness. But we saw ourselves as more central to social change than I think we were.

With Translations, You Can Inhabit Another Language

TMD: Thank you for sharing about that *encuentro*. I was thinking about that from the documentary and about space, coffee shops, poetry readings, and how those cultivate community. I have a couple of questions about translation, specifically the political work translation does in terms of access, rupturing borders, creating awareness. Could you speak about that?

MR: Of course. As you know I’ve done a lot of translation. Good translation opens the possibility for readers of one language to inhabit another. Not just to read it or know it, but to actually live in it. In the sense that it breaks down literary borders, it does create new cultural awareness. But I also think that translation is important in and of itself, beyond political considerations. More personally, I came of age in the 1950s, when the United States was still under the shadow of McCarthyism. For artists and writers that meant that writing about political themes was discouraged or, in some cases, actually prohibited. Traveling to Mexico, being in touch with poets of my generation who knew they could write about anything and everything, was important to my growth as a reader and a writer. Good translation was essential for this. So that’s the way I see the political or social role of translation.

TMD: From a more logistical perspective, I was curious if you could speak to the intricacies of translating poetry. What is your process? I know you've said you've grown in that process as you've done more and more translation work.

MR: I almost always translate work that moves me deeply. Usually, it's something I choose because it moves me deeply, and I want to reproduce it in English. It always helps if I know the poet, if I have heard her or, or him, or them read their work aloud, if I am familiar with their themes, voice, inflection, and so forth. I read and reread the original, familiarizing myself with the poet's voice, style, sense of humor or irony, and other idiosyncrasies that might be involved. Then, I make a rough draft which I then refine until I'm satisfied that the poem works in English as it does in Spanish. If the poet is still alive and is a friend, it's even easier because if I have a question, I can ask them and get that kind of help. Often when you're translating from one culture to another, it's very helpful to have that. I've done translations of poets who are long gone or with whom I have no contact, but that's my process anyways.

Death, Dying, Grief, Aging, Risk-taking

TMD: There are some very helpful tips in there. I love that idea of, if the poet is still living, asking them questions. I have a few other questions. I was reading your *Vertigo of Risk* and was really moved by the series of poems in the section "Dearest." I read the poems in "Dearest" as love letters or even alternative obituaries to friends and other loved ones in your life who have passed. You have "Aging Poet Number One" and "Aging Poet Number Two," for example, and I was wondering how you are taking up death, dying, grief, and aging in your work?

MR: That's a deep question. I'm eighty-seven, and especially this past year, I had two big health crises, both of which landed me in the hospital. I've really come back from both experiences, but of course being eighty-seven and having had those two relatively recent health challenges, I do think about death, dying, aging, and grief, although I should say these are themes that have been in my work for quite some time, I think since my sixties. I remember a book I published in the 1980s called *Where They Left You for Dead*. That was about my wife's experience with multiple sclerosis, endlessly going to doctors and so forth. That book is actually two little books under one cover: *Where They Left You for Dead* and *Halfway Home*.

I think that those themes have been in my work for some time, but they're becoming more central. I don't believe in any sort of life after death, so a person's legacy, in the memories that others have of them, is what remains. I love your description of my "Dearest" poems as love letters or alternative obituaries because that's exactly what I think they are, and I mean at this point in one's life, in your late eighties, approaching

your nineties, it’s logical that you lose a lot of people, close friends, and people who have meant something to you. Those are tributes to some of those people.

TMD: They were beautiful to read. Speaking of risk, in your foreword to Julie Shayne’s *Taking Risks: Feminist Activism and Research in the Americas* (2014), you write: “In my opinion, risk-taking is one of the most important actions in which we can be involved.” I couldn’t agree more! Can you say more about how risk is a vital necessity?

MR: Especially in the case of women, our society teaches us to be safe. “Rather safe than sorry” is something that’s often repeated to us. Too frequently we are taught that we have only one choice. We can do this, and, if we do anything else, we fail. I believe that taking risks helps us know ourselves better and grow in ways that are true to our beliefs. Of course, risk doesn’t always work out the way we hope. Things can go wrong and there may be undesired consequences. But I do think that, more often than not, it pays to be adventurous, to defy the strictures that society places upon us, especially women, and I guess there’s also an element of one’s character, one’s nature, you know. I think that my character is a risk-taking character. For other people, it may be more difficult to take those risks. For me, it’s always been relatively easy. Sometimes I’ve been sorry afterwards, but more often than not, I’ve been glad.

Independent Presses Are the Lifeline of Creativity

TMD: There’s something to be said for the importance of learning from risks, learning from failure, not being afraid to fail. All easier said than done, of course, for some of us. You spoke a little about this when talking about *El Corno*. A lot of your poetry has been published by small, independent presses. In a time of increasing monopolies and capitalistic greed, there is so much to be said about the possibilities—and possibly even constraints—of working with small, independent presses. What has your experience been, and what do small presses mean to you?

MR: I’m really glad that you include this question. I think independent presses are the lifeline, the lifeblood, of creativity, especially in this country where most major publishers don’t care about the more adventurous work or the more experimental work, or however you want to characterize it. I have published with large commercial houses, university presses, and, as you say, most often with small, independent publishers. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Some try to mold your work to meet commercial expectations. Some have better publicity and distribution possibilities. Some can even tour you. Most of them can’t.

I value small, independent publishers because they are often willing to take publishing risks, supporting work that wouldn’t be published elsewhere. I’ve been

immensely fortunate to have several independent publishers willing to curate my work. Their editors have been more important than I can say in helping me improve my writing.

I don't think it's only independent presses; I think independent bookstores are important and need to be supported. I know it's really tempting to buy books from Amazon. I do it, and I'm not condemning people who do it; you get the book in two days, often even less expensively, but I think whenever possible, we need to support our independent bookstores because without them we wouldn't have places where we can go browse and make discoveries. Many of those bookstores hold readings and create community, which we've alluded to a lot. All the independent possibilities with publishing and bookselling are really important.

Cocreating with Your Partner

TMD: I'm there with you too on the Amazon thing. I don't want to use it, but if I need a book, and it's here in two days and \$10 cheaper, it's going to happen. That resonates a lot. I have a couple other questions. I noticed you have collaborated a lot with your wife, the artist Barbara Byers. I was wondering what that creative process is like and how you and Barbara draw inspiration from one another. I think it's really beautiful to coproduce knowledge with someone who is a partner.

MR: I'm glad you asked about that. Over the thirty-seven years we've been together, we've really built a life with art at its center. As you say, she's a visual artist, I'm a writer. Our collaborations are almost magical, I would say. I don't think we've ever really set out to work on a joint project. It's not in our nature to say: "Let's do a book about such and such. You do the drawings. I'll do the text." That's not our process.

Rather, what she does visually every day and what I do with language, both of our processes reflect a shared experience which is just our living together. I might have a group of poems and notice that she has a series of drawings or prints that seem to be in conversation with them or vice versa. I don't think of her work as illustrating mine or mine as illustrating hers, but rather the two expressions as independent parts of a whole that is made richer by including both of them. That's our process. I guess you would call it a nonprocess. It's just sort of what happens in our relationship. She'll be working, she works every day, I work every day. She'll show me what she's doing. I'll read to her what I'm doing, and because we live together and have similar interests, concerns, and beliefs, those are reflected in our work. It just turns out that it would make a good combination.

TMD: I had a feeling it was an organic process. That's how I imagined it. It's beautiful that you draw inspiration from one another, and it's very much your daily lived experience.

MR: We’re lucky!

Scholar-Activist, Teacher

TMD: What is your relationship to academia? And to teaching? How has your relation to academia and teaching been shaped by your activism? I think about this a lot as someone who identifies as a scholar-activist and how those two spaces can be really in tension sometimes for myself. I wonder what your experience has been.

MR: I also think of myself as a scholar-activist, but I must say I really have no relationship to academia. I myself only had a semester or two of university. For better or for worse, I chose other pathways to learning. Years later, when I returned from Latin America to the US, I had to do something to earn a living. I had been living in revolutionary societies where you naturally do work that is meaningful to you, that you can contribute to. That’s not really the case here. I was close to fifty when I returned, and I didn’t have a degree in anything. I didn’t know what to do.

It occurred to me that I could teach, and several friends suggested that. I remember I didn’t even know what a curriculum vitae was or what a syllabus was. I had to learn all that stuff. I did apply to teach at several universities. I taught adjunct courses at the University of New Mexico, and then I was hired at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. I taught there for nine years. That was a really wonderful experience. They allowed me to design my own courses, and I enjoyed the teaching.

I learned a lot from my students, especially about what young people were thinking and feeling, which was important to me because I was coming back to a country where I had no idea what young people were thinking. But at the same time, I was never tenure-track, and I never had to be on committees. Teaching was always secondary to my creative endeavors. I formally retired in 1994. I’ve taught since then. I taught a one-week writing workshop at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, summer courses, and a workshop here and there. My semester-long, formal teaching stopped in 1994, so I haven’t done that in a long time.

Poems and Photographs for *MARLAS*

TMD: As we wrap up, I would love for you to elaborate on the poems and photos you are sharing with *MARLAS*.

MR: The poems are all recent. They were all written within the past year. They are all coming out in a new book called *This Honest Land*, which will be out in May from Wings

Press in San Antonio, Texas, another independent publisher that's published quite a few of my poetry collections and some of my translations.

So, as we talked about, at eighty-seven, I am involved with the process of aging. I'm also concerned with the big questions of these times: climate change, war, migrations, the increased prevalence of violence around us. And my lifelong themes of landscape, memory, and human connection continue to be present in my work.

As for the photographs I shared, they have an interesting story. My younger brother lives here in Albuquerque, and we're very close. He came over the other day bearing two envelopes of 8x10 prints. He told me that all the photographs he brought me were from Cuba and Nicaragua, but I never remember giving him my prints. They are my photographs, but I neither remember giving them to him or making them. I don't have a record of them elsewhere.

All my photographic negatives are with my written archive at the University of New Mexico at The Center for Southwest Research. I assume that the negatives for these photographs are there, but I'm not sure. They weren't in my computer in digitized form. They surprised me, and they fell into my hands just a couple of days before you asked me for some photographs, so I decided to digitize them and offer them to your readers and viewers with the hopes that they would also surprise some of them. They're not my usual images for which I've become better known.

TMD: Thank you again for sharing these with us. I noticed they were different from your usual images and feel so lucky that we can view these. I was looking again at the poetry you sent over. The poem "Silence" really resonated with me, especially that silence is not absence. It has a language, a lexicon. It reminded me a lot of one of my favorite lines from Adrienne Rich, about silence having a presence, a history, a form, and to not confuse it with absence, from "Cartographies of Silence" in *Dream of a Common Language*. Your poem really invoked that. I spend a lot of time thinking about silence and archives and how it's not really silence. It's an enactment of power. That poem really resonated with me, and I just wanted to share that. Thank you so much for your time, these lovely photos and words that you are sharing with us.

MR: Thank you, Taylor. It was my pleasure. I'm really excited to be included in *MARLAS*.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Margaret Randall for her incredible generosity and time. I am grateful for Sandy Soto who first introduced me to *El Corno Emplumado* and connected Margaret and me for this interview. Mil gracias to María Roof at MARLAS for her stellar copyediting, patience, and kindness.

Taylor Marie Doherty (she/they) is a PhD candidate in Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Arizona with PhD minors in Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory and Information (Archives). Their work theorizes the queer feminist archive. She holds an MA in Political Science from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a BA in Latin American Studies and Political Science from the University of Massachusetts Boston. Their interdisciplinary research interests include political theory, comparative politics, Black feminist theory, queer of color critique / queer studies, trans studies, transnational feminisms, social movements, protest ephemera and street art, community archives, archival theory, care and social reproduction, and cultural studies. Her in-progress dissertation examines the archive in/of/as protest across the United States and Latin America and the political effects of how the traces left by queer feminist protest are curated and (re)memorialized. Her work poses the archive as a world-making project of resistance, prefiguration, and desire beyond a mode of exploitation, repression, and control.

Works Cited

Colby, Pamela, and Lu Lippold, directors

2002 *The Unapologetic Life of Margaret Randall*. Documentary, color, 59 min, Cinema Guild.

Mondragón, Sergio, Margaret Randall, and Harvey Wolin

1962 *El Corno Emplumado / The Plumed Horn* 1. *Open Door Archive*, Northwestern University. <https://opendoor.northwestern.edu/archive/items/show/35>.

Nielsen, Anne Mette, and Nicolenka Beltrán, directors

2005 *El Corno Emplumado: una historia de los sesenta*. Documentary, color, 54 min. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wc37Nal2EOI>.

Randall, Margaret

2007 *Stones Witness*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

2014 “Foreword: The Thing about Taking Risks.” In *Taking Risks: Feminist Activism and Research in the Americas*, edited by Julie Shayne, xi-xvi. Albany: State University of New York Press.

2019 “Biography - Margaret Randall.” Author’s website, labeled “25 February 2008” but updated in 2019. <https://margaretrandall.org/Biography-21>.

2020 *I Never Left Home: Poet, Feminist, Revolutionary: A Memoir of Time & Place*. Durham: Duke University Press.

2020 *My Life in 100 Objects*. New York: New Village Press.

This Espacio Creación / Creation Space presentation was reviewed by members of the Editorial Board of the *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* (MARLAS) and recommended for publication. Poetry and photographs © Margaret Randall.

Poetry by Margaret Randall

The Fairytale

In that high mountain world
left after flood and fire
destroyed earth’s lowlands,
a mother reads a bedtime story
to her child.

The screaming digital games
of her own youth
were silenced long ago.
A few cherished books survive,
deep comfort now.

The mother reads about an army
of wicked men called presidents.
They lied and cheated until
all power was theirs,
life itself at risk.

They targeted women especially—
the mother shudders
as she reads. But those presidents
didn’t count on the power
of our resistance.

The mother smiles as she tucks
a frayed blanket about
her child’s sleepy body.
The child squirms in anticipation
of the story’s end.

She knows it by heart: All women
unite to achieve survival
even as they mourn their dead.
The story brings joy
but also dread

to the child about to fall asleep,
so the mother,
fearing her child's fear,
reminds her it's just a fairytale
after all.

Inhabiting Worlds

We applaud other species
for their learned abilities:
the dog who guides her diabetic owner
through the perils of his day,
the elephant who paints its portrait
or a flower, the cat who nestles beside us
when we're sad.

All activities to gratify our needs,
not theirs. And we claim
they are content
like the southern master said
of his slaves: *We treat them well,*
they rarely complain
and almost never run away.

Given freedom, I wonder what
those animals would do
for themselves, their own desire
and future, how they
might grow
in the context of a world
they owned.

Instead of commanding *fetch* or *sit*
what if we provided a life
to rival Einstein's, encouraged a will
like Rosalind Franklin carved
from the pure humiliation
of her sex?
What if we set them free?

Who would go to war, restrict
their children’s knowledge
or experience, invent religious dogma,
spend time on fashion
or indulge in gluttony?
Who would learn another language
or create a government for all?

The farther the species from our intrusion
the greater its range of exploration
and discovery,
inhabiting worlds that wake us
to unimagined possibility.
Take whales in the depths, penguin colonies,
or bees operating in instinctual cooperation.

The octopus might be the best example,
its multiple tentacles each possessing
an independent brain
that can remember,
navigate mazes, use tools
and has been known
to build underwater cities.

This is about consciousness, ours
but mostly theirs.
This is about how we,
in our alpha role, use and use up:
earth, air, water, love, and every other
element we have made a commodity
and destroyed.

This Honest Land

This land is honest as it stretches either side
of a highway that wasn’t here
one hundred years ago
and may not exist in a hundred more.

This honest land sometimes appears undressed,
naked in its closeness to pure earth.
Sometimes it wears trees
so voluminous I cannot see its skin.

The crime of war has come to this land:
ravaging Indians and other battles
no one speaks of now.
Still, the rock and sand remember.

On honest land like this, I can touch
its scars, dried blood faintly etched
on rock, lingering ghosts
of children crying in friendly brush.

We won't have to give this place
a new name like the one
on the nightly news,
foreign to those who live there.

Nothing but endurance is demanded of us,
no secret password or recipe
for avoiding disaster when you are
the one who knows the riddle's answer.

Miles and their energy. The ominous sound
of thousands of birds flapping their wings
in unison, translating poems
that bloody us with their truths.

I close my eyes and watch the land disappear
either side of this highway
to somewhere
I have been before, a place

where lies don't stand a chance. On land
as honest as this they disappear
the moment they hit the ground
as if they were never uttered at all.

Heat

I want to write a poem about heat,
that fearful adversary
now moving in for the kill
but the page resists my words,
its body mute.

My tongue is paste as I reach
for that horizon once
so ripe with hope,
nothing rising to meet my need
but fever and loss.

Sanbao Village in the Xinjiang region
of China was 52.2 degrees Celsius
at 7 on the evening of July 16, 2023.
That’s 126 Fahrenheit.
How many died?

Weeks before, Hermosillo, Mexico,
was 121 Fahrenheit for weeks.
Cows fell dead in pastures
as farmers wept
waterless tears.

Greece, Iran, Uruguay, every nation’s
obituary whispers on winds
that shear the flesh
from bodies struggling
to breathe.

In this country, we endure records
of our own: Death Valley,
Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Houston.
Smoke from Canadian fires
continues to clog our lungs.

Oceans boil, ice caps melt, crops
wither before they reach
our tables. I try to express myself

but only silence sounds
where a lover once spoke to me.

The news brings color-coded maps:
pale yellow to orange and deep red,
warning us to hydrate, stay safe,
and indoors
where we can escape the truth.

This earth, this place that could
have been our children's legacy
with its familiar seasons
and patient ether,
is burning up.

A future we refuse to contemplate
may read class struggle
between those with cooled homes
and those without,
climate replacing oil and water.

I want to write a poem
about heat and try.
But these words too will go
up in flames as we move past
our point of no return.

Silence

Silence is not the opposite of noise,
nor the absence of noise
but its own lexicon, a language
that invites you to listen carefully,
parse tempo, tone, bright lights, and shadow,
and then translate it all
in the eye of the storm.

If you are not a dog, you may
miss the highest register.
If your memory is less than elephantine

you don't have a chance
of engaging history. Only blue whales
pursue their vowels and consonants
through the coldest waters.

Don't be deterred by the shape of your ear,
how close your lips are to the desert
in pre-dawn cold, or where your eyes
meet the voices of the universe
transcribed as abstract color,
messages that live for centuries
never reaching their destinations.

Silence is bigger and busier,
it embraces a code no Rosetta Stone can crack,
whispers as it conveys its imaginary history
and deepest secrets.
If you can write and recite it at bedtime
to the one you love,
the poem will come to your rescue every time.

Photographs by Margaret Randall

The images below are published here for the first time, courtesy of Margaret Randall. They may not be reproduced outside this interview article without explicit written permission from Margaret Randall.



Image 1. Camaguey, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall



Image 2. Camaguey, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall



Image 3. Cienfuegos, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall

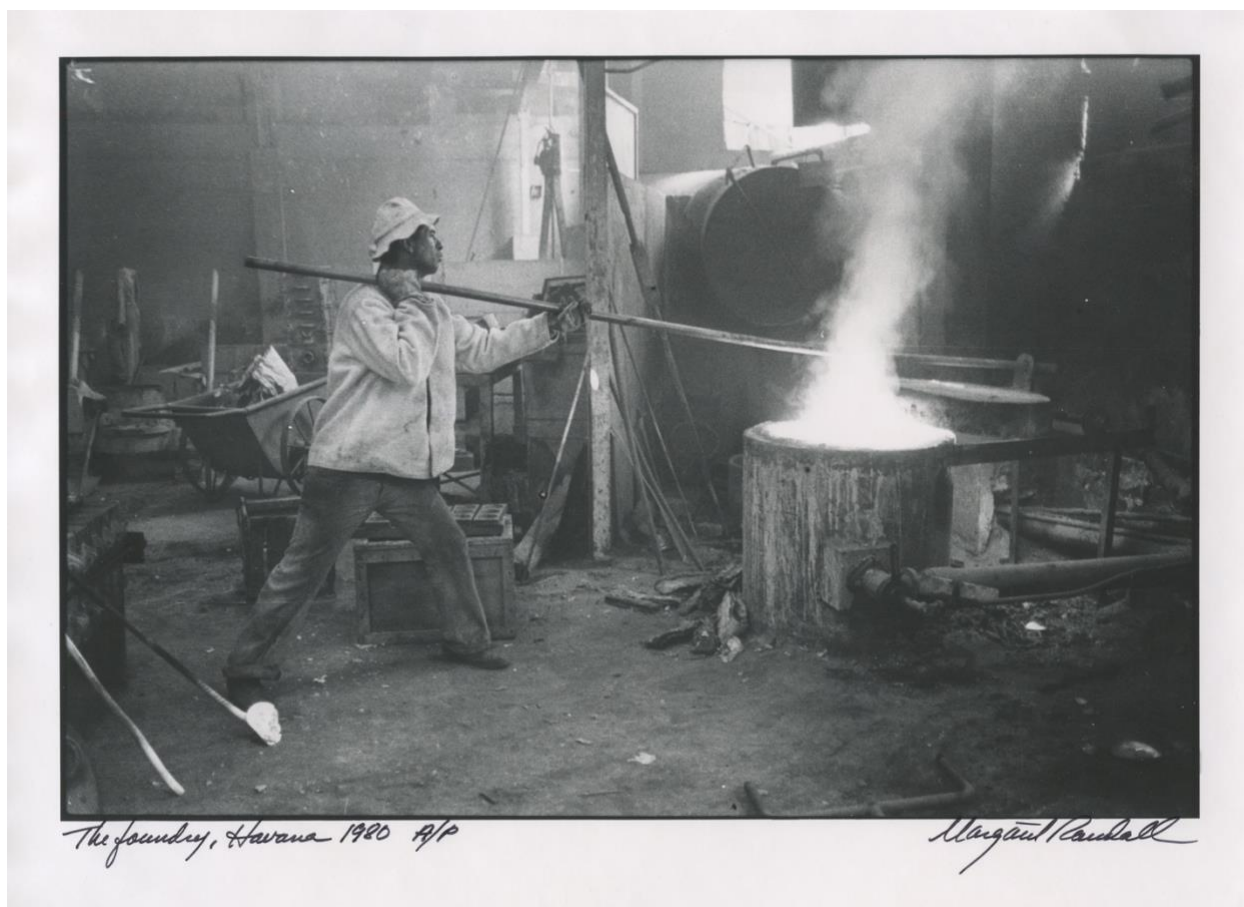


Image 4. The Foundry, Havana, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall

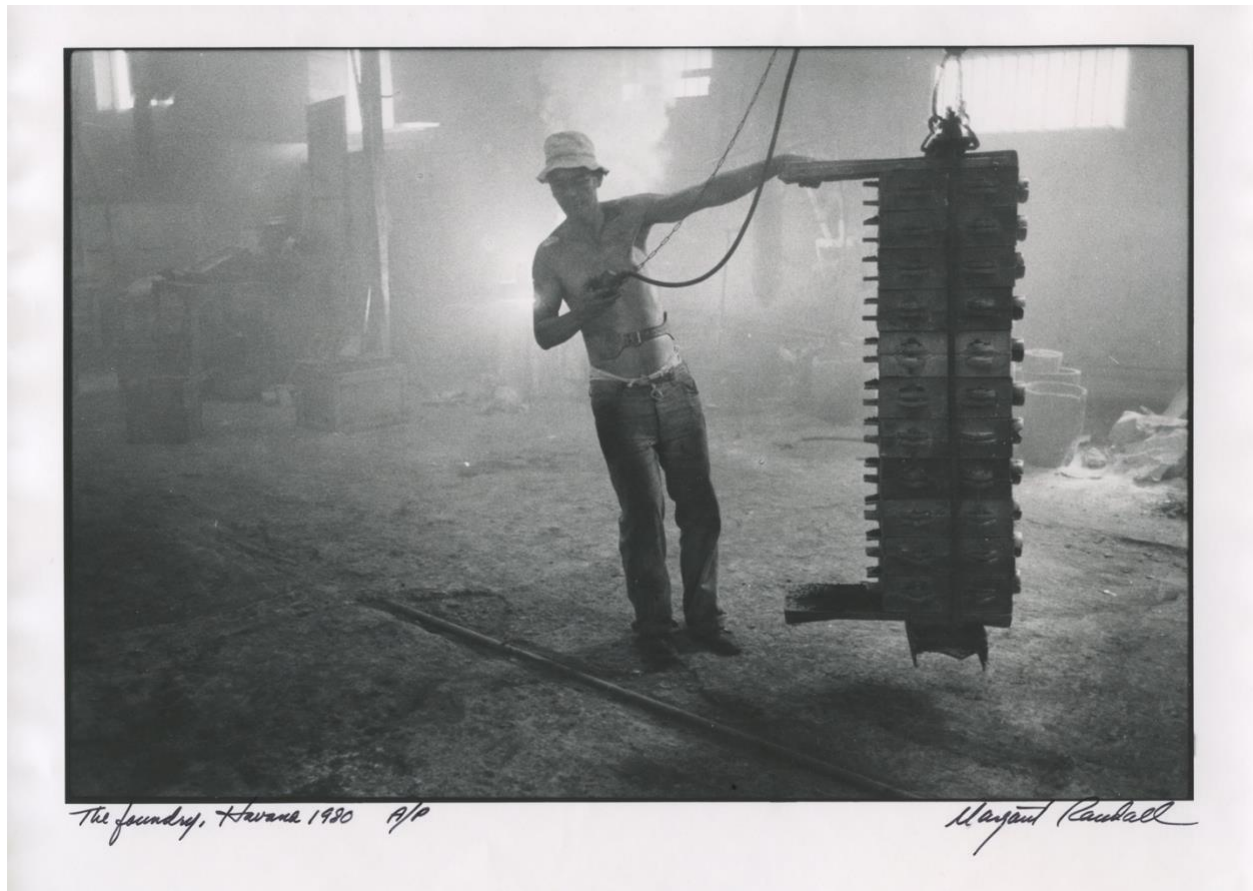


Image 5. The Foundry, Havana, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall



Image 6. Barrio El Sueño, Santiago de Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall



*Santiago de Cuba 1980
Barrio El Sueño*

Margaret Randall

Image 7. Barrio El Sueño, Santiago de Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall



Image 8. Barrio El Sueño, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall



Image 9. Barrio El Sueño, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba, 1980
© Margaret Randall

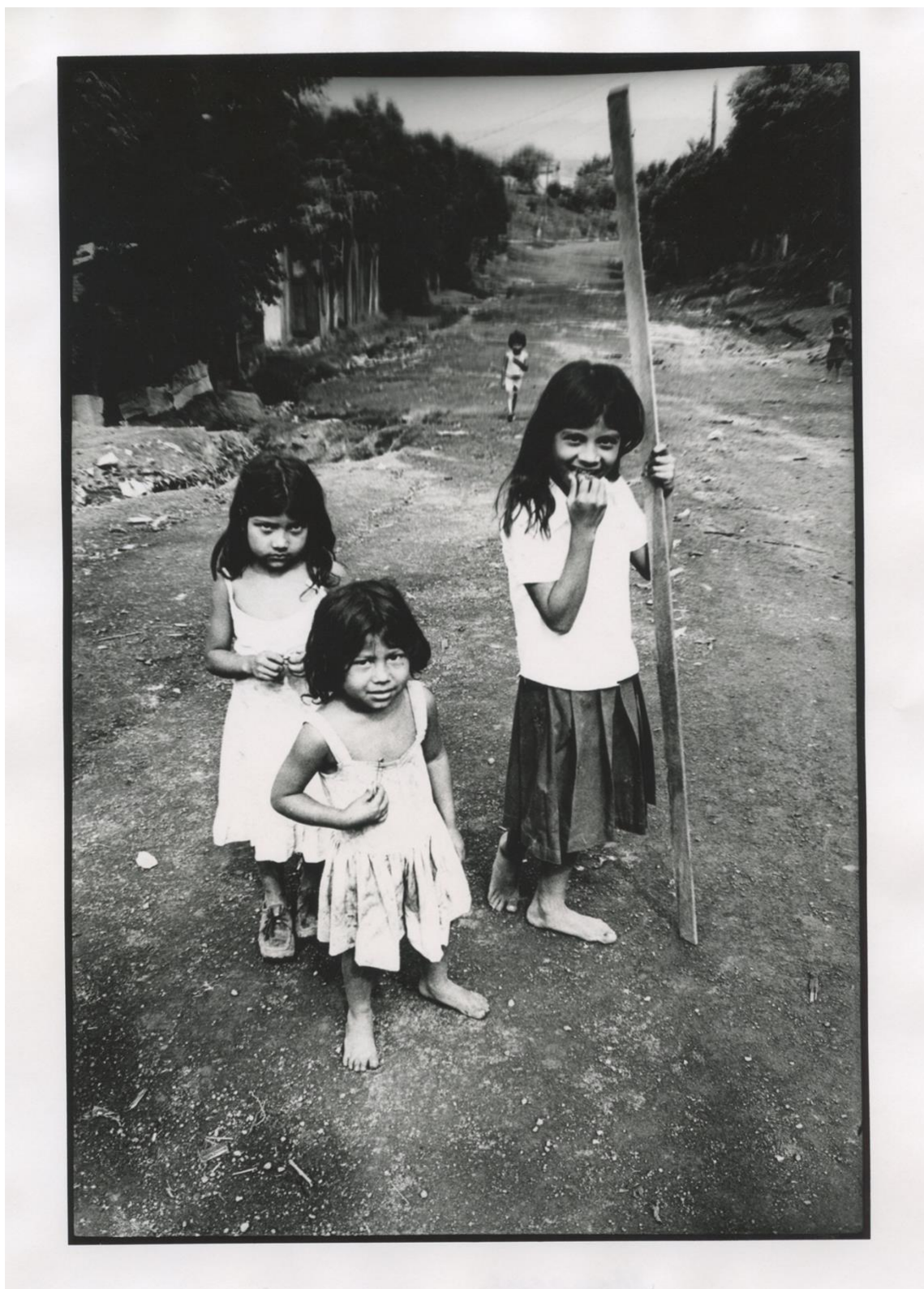


Image 10. Children in Managua, 1980
© Margaret Randall

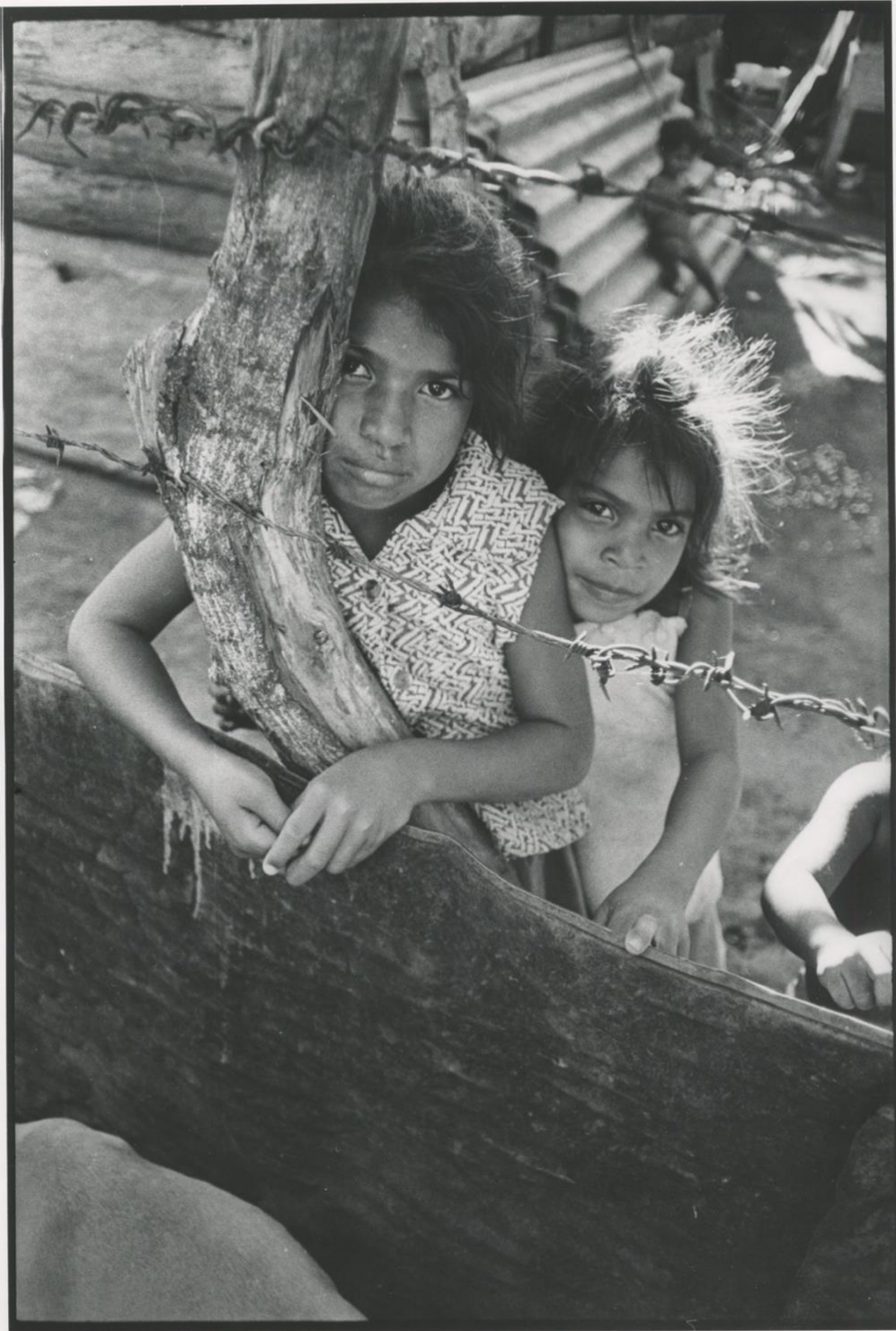


Image 11. Sisters, Acahualinca, Managua, 1980
© Margaret Randall

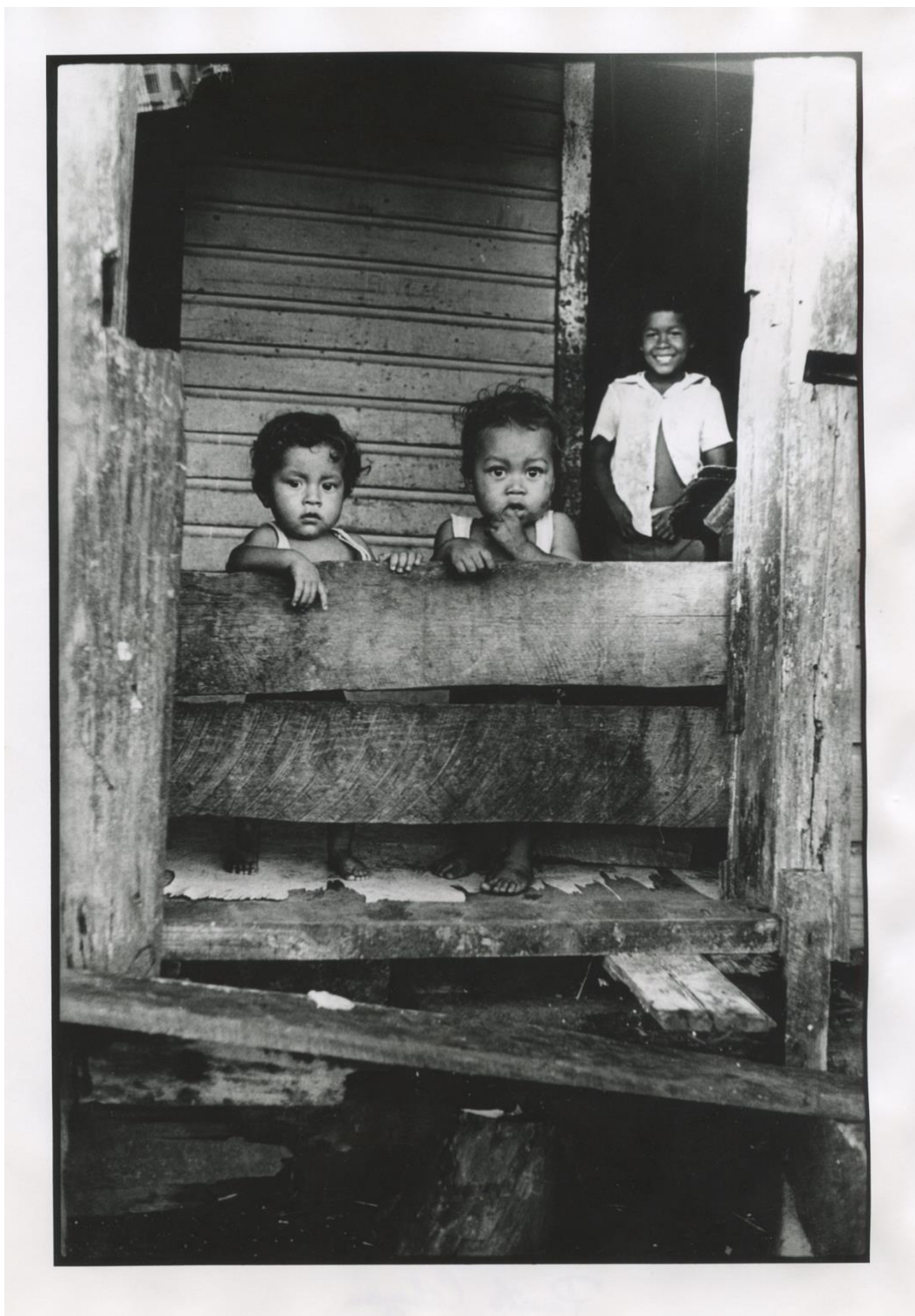


Image 12. Children in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, 1981
© Margaret Randall