



che
on
my
mind

margaret randall





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This book is for Roxanne Dunbar-Ortíz
with thanks, always, for conversations that matter

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Che dead, surrounded by his
captors, schoolhouse, Vallegrande,
Bolivia, October 9, 1967. Photo by
Freddy Alborta.



chapter one
a death that leads us back to life

Ernesto Che Guevara occupies a place in our emotional iconography unsurpassed by anyone with the exception of Buddha, Mohammed, Marx, Mary, or Jesus of Nazareth. Still contemporary—his death at the age of thirty-nine isn't yet half a century behind us—he is a figure revered in equal measure by both convinced revolutionaries and apolitical youth at the farthest reaches of our planet. All see in him a symbol of nonconformity and resistance. And as with so many humans we've embalmed in myth, scholars and those who don't think past the image, devotees and detractors alike, tend to ignore a more nuanced view of the man.

I am old enough to remember the world in which he lived. I was part of that world, and it remains a part of me. This won't be a political or economic treatise, except where that sort of analysis strengthens my observations. It is a poet's reminiscence of an era and of the figure who best exemplifies that era. These musings may also help us rethink revolutionary change and see how a reexamination of history may point to more productive ways of achieving that change.

This is the story of how Che haunts me. I call it *Che on My Mind*, mimicking the old Hoagy Carmichael and Stewart Gorrell tune

“Georgia on My Mind.” It’s that spirit and wandering rhythm I wish to evoke: moving in one direction and then another, exploring this texture or that, giving free rein to memory and to a consciousness Che helped to shape.

In these notes I want to remember that Guevara was first and foremost extraordinarily human. He felt the pain of others deeply and subverted every social hypocrisy, every greed-based corporate crime and mean-spirited exploitation. Without doubt, the quality he embodied that made him beloved by millions was his unerring capacity to be who he said he was. In Che, words and actions were one. What he did was consistent with what he said. In a world where corporate crime, governmental sleight of hand, and the deterioration of moral values are every day more evident and endemic, the man’s principles shine.

Because the energy of his internationalism burns as hot now as when he was alive, Che’s image moves beyond easy metaphor. His myth has remained alive in disparate cultures. That myth, however, has been woven by friend and foe alike. Che’s image, words, values, intentions, successes, and failures have all been shaped to symbolize that which he most deeply abhorred as well as that for which he died.

The most famous image of Che in life, the photograph of him wearing a black beret with the single star and looking into the future, was snapped by chance on March 5, 1960. A Belgian freighter, *Le Coubre*, had exploded in the Havana harbor, killing eighty Cubans. Che appeared at the mass funeral, and when he stepped to the edge of the speaker’s platform, Alberto “Korda” Díaz snapped two consecutive 35 mm frames. This iconic image has circled the globe; it has been featured on posters, clothing, and even in an advertisement for Smirnoff vodka.¹

Almost forty-five years after his assassination, some still remember his sacrifice with pride or nostalgia, others would say “Good riddance,” and many more have only the vaguest notion of who he was—or no notion at all. Yet from the grotesquery of his

severed hands, preserved in a Cuban crypt; through the hundreds of biographies, treatises, and poems written to or about him; to a million portraits spray-painted on walls and cheap T-shirts with his immediately recognizable visage sold in bazaars from Cairo to Siem Riep and Naples to his own Rosario, Argentina, Che is a name known in every language on earth.

The way he acquired that name is worth a few lines. In Ernesto Guevara's country of origin the brief syllable is broadly applied to all young males, much the same way Buddy or Dude or some other generic might be used in English. As a young man in Argentina, Guevara was Ernesto or Ernestito: the oldest son whose name echoed his father's. Occasionally and at different periods during his childhood or adolescence, he responded to a variety of nicknames. It wasn't until he arrived in Mexico and joined Fidel Castro and his group of Cuban exiles that he became Che: the Argentine. Meeting the man who would lead him to his destiny gave him the sobriquet that stuck, the one that would be inscribed in history. So Che denotes the foreign as well as the familiar. One of the twentieth century's most unique personalities assumed the commonest of verbal identities, one shared by hundreds of thousands in his native land. At the same time, once applied to him it took on a new and individualized meaning. In Che—the name as well as the man—the ordinary became extraordinary.

We may also coax out an additional layer of meaning from this name. Its Argentinean application to all males draws our attention to cultures—every culture I have known—in which the very terms *dude*, *guy*, *buddy*, *man*, *bro*, or their equivalents bring to mind a sort of macho stance, tolerated or even forgiven because “boys will be boys” and “men will be men.” In English, all one has to do with the visual iconography is to remove the C; what remains is *he*: he, him, the male pronoun. We remain unconscious of the leap our eyes make as they subtract the initial letter. Implication lodges itself in our cells. It is through the multiple and contested narratives of public discourse that reality, thought, interpretation, and

opinion constantly change, are made, unmade, and remade.² It is in this context that the name *Che* carries a distinctly masculine tone, one I will return to as I ponder the place of both man and myth in twentieth-century popular consciousness.

I never met Ernesto Guevara, but every so often, with an insistence as physical as spiritual, his memory draws me to revisit his life, ponder the attraction he exerts long past death, and read anew his writings and what others continue to write about him. My sources are mostly secondary, my intuitions those of a poet. I am mesmerized not by the man's power, which I often find to be exaggerated or hotheaded, but by his continued capacity to empower. I am moved more by his consistency and great generosity of spirit than by his sometimes-questionable political strategy or tactics.

I remember the moment of his death as vividly as if it were yesterday. October 9, 1967. Mexico City. A single mother, I had brought my ten-month-old firstborn to live in that city at the beginning of the decade. Now I also had a Mexican husband and two daughters. South of the border had become my home. The news came, impossible to believe at first but quickly and devastatingly confirmed, that the man my generation was counting on to lead Latin America's great movement for social change was dead. Young and rebellious myself at the time, I joined others who flooded the streets that night to paint "Che Vive" (Che Lives) on walls that had borne witness to struggle from the time of the Spanish conquest.

Three weeks later I traveled to the tiny island of Janitzio on beautiful Lake Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán. I was translating for a Canadian Film Board crew that was making a movie about Rufino Tamayo.³ It was Mexico's Day of the Dead, and a silent procession of indigenous men and women wound their way through narrow lanes to the island's cemetery at the top of the hill.⁴ These were Purépecha people, perhaps also Otomí and Nahuatl. On their shoulders they carried immense *ofrendas*, armatures of hardened bread dough adorned with painted flowers and birds. They

would spend the night with their departed, picnicking at gravesides, drinking and praying.

At that moment Che's assassination at the hands of my own country's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stood in for every death I had known. Witnessing the rituals of these indigenous poor, I thought of the Bolivians of the Altiplano for whom Che fought and died. Cultural devastation. Resignation and rebellion. The ugly residue of conquest. Mexico's elaborate ritual and Che's final effort in Bolivia became inextricably linked in my consciousness. Today, when I think of one, the others float to the forefront of my memory.

It would be years before I could begin to piece together how Che Guevara died. Were he and his two comrades ambushed at Quebrada del Churro or Quebrada del Yuro? Ñancahuazú or Mauricio? Did an enemy bullet incapacitate his M2, or did that even make a difference? Was he so doubled over with asthma, hunger, and exhaustion that he was unable to resist? Another member of the guerrilla force, one of the few who survived, describes his leader as weighing ninety pounds on that last day. Another portrays him dragging his rifle in the mud, without the strength to lift it off the ground.

At the moment of his capture did Che really say, "Don't shoot. I am Che Guevara: more useful to you alive than dead"? What of the mysterious young teacher some say brought him a last meal she'd cooked herself? Most men in that remote village oscillated between reactions of brutality and fear. A woman alone brought the doomed man sustenance and a few friendly words. What can we infer from this gender disparity among the villagers' responses when the mysterious enemy combatant suddenly appeared in their midst? The men were soldiers, firmly under the command of their superiors. Their meager paychecks demanded obedience to a chain of command. A few risked a human gesture; most mimicked a conqueror's stance. The lone woman was a teacher. In addition to