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Women Remember 1968

My Year of Transition

Tuesday 10 June 2008, by [MARTINEZ Elizabeth "Betita"](#) (Date first published: March 2008).

THE YEAR 1968 was a crucial transition for me, from the Black struggle against White Supremacy to the Chicano struggle against White Supremacy. The first struggle began in 1959, when I became involved in the Robert Williams Defense Committee.

In Monroe, North Carolina Williams as head of the local NAACP had organized Black youth to shoot back when KKK members regularly shot up the Black neighborhoods of Monroe. He was charged with kidnapping a white couple whom, in fact, he had saved.

Then came the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in 1961, where I served first as a volunteer, and while an editor at Simon & Schuster produced such things as the photo book *The Movement*, with royalties to SNCC. I served in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and then as coordinator of the SNCC New York office. I was one of two Chicanas on SNCC full-time staff.

By 1966-67, SNCC's future direction had become unclear. A merger with the Black Panther Party was considered but no go. In 1967 I went to Cuba with two other SNCC staffers (Black), and Stokely Carmichael flew to join us from England. The occasion was a huge meeting of Latin American revolutionaries of the OLAS (Organization of Latin American States) where Stokely spoke.

I had been to Cuba twice before — the first time a few months after the overthrow of dictator Batista in January 1959 and the second in 1961. It was time for me to write a book, *The Youngest Revolution: A Personal Report on Cuba* (published by Dial Press, 1969). I left SNCC then, with people still not quite sure what I was — not white, but not Black either, soooo? What's Mexican?

In 1968, still not in conscious search of an answer to that question, I was asked by another left friend to go to New Mexico where a movement had exploded to recover land lost by Mexico to the United States in the 1846-48 war. The friend wanted me to start a newspaper of that struggle, given my experience as a journalist, Nation editor, etc. I told him not to be ridiculous, I was a New Yorker and knew nothing about New Mexico; it would be too arrogant of me to go there and tell people what to think.

But I finally agreed to go for a week, stay with friends, and just visit. When I stepped off the plane in Albuquerque late one night, looked at the mountain and smelled the air, it was instant love. So I stayed from 1968 to 1976, working closely with local activists to put out the movement newspaper *El Grito del Norte*. There were many Chicano movement newspapers then; ours was probably the most openly left, even socialist without the big words.

For me, those eight years were about understanding colonialism and above all the centrality of LAND globally in the ongoing struggle for justice. I also learned to see my Chicana identity as basic to my life and politics: With my father from Mexico (so dark that we were once sent to the back of the bus in segregated Washington, D.C.), and my Anglo mother (who became a Spanish teacher, fought to have Spanish taught in high schools, supported the farmworkers), it made a complicated kind of sense.

Full of anger and struggle, and pride in the definition of myself as Chicana, as part of a long fight against the colonized mentality — out of that came the book *500 Years of Chicano History*, done in New Mexico in 1976 and still in print inspiring young Chicanos/as.

In New York, where I lived from 1947-68, there was an emerging group of women's liberation activists called New York Radical Women (I believe), and I started going to their very small meetings in late 1967 or spring '68.

The meetings were all white and included some very smart women who later became major feminist figures. But one night the meeting took place on the day Martin Luther King had been assassinated. To my absolute amazement, no one in the group mentioned that fact or talked about it. When I left the meeting that night, I never went back.

Women's Liberation

On to New Mexico, where I worked mostly with women on *El Grito*. They included a key Anglo, attorney Beverly Axelrod, who was emerging from an affair with Eldridge Cleaver (and the book *Soul On Ice*, which she actually wrote in her efforts to get him out of prison). She did not see his sexism as I did at that time. Nor was I consciously feminist yet. But I noticed things and finally took a stand defending a Grito writer whose husband (a leader in the land grant movement) did not want her to go to a conference for the paper.

Still, I did not organize women in a feminist organization; we were just THERE, and the men knew not to mess with us. The newspaper also carried many articles, poems, etc. about women's activism and leaders in New Mexico and around the world.

El Grito was by far the most internationally focused Chicano movement newspaper of the times. We sent people to Vietnam, China, Cuba. We saw the New Mexico land struggle in relation to the struggles of those and other peoples.

Lessons to Pass Along

From New Mexico I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1976 and soon after joined the Democratic Workers Party, a Marxist group headed by women — the first of its kind. Many lessons come from that 1977-85 experience, including that it is possible to organize working-class, grassroots people of color into campaigns and other work that advance socialist goals.

Another lesson: women can be as tyrannical as men.

But that did not and should never end my feminism. It is also there, in my 2008 book *500 Years of Chicana Women's History*.

Lessons to pass along, very crudely and briefly:

Especially for young warriors, try to maintain two clocks in your head: 1) a sense of the immediate, what you are doing, how to do it better, NOW. This includes allowing for burn-out and planning to avoid it. 2) a sense of history. Progressive change takes a long, long time.

Look back 50 years and then forward, to improve your vision. Try to bring a radical definition of goals into your work.

We spend so much of our time exposing and fighting what is wrong with this society. We talk about capitalism and imperialism as dutiful lefties, and we are right of course. We may say we want an anti-capitalist society. But how often do we describe the positive form of that alternative?

Mostly we don't, and that is mostly because of association with the unsuccessful forms the world has seen of those alternatives. Time to stick our necks out, methinks: Advance socialism, even communism as visions of what we, the people, need and can grow to want.

P.S.

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