History Makes Us, We Make History

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It has been a terrible century, has it not? In the sense of: awesome. Not just bad, more like extreme. Such high hopes of profound change, such setbacks—the clock of justice leaping forward, then grinding in reverse. Revolutions rising and falling, leaders rising and falling, hopes rising and falling and rising again.

This I have come to know in the course of living through five international wars, six social movements in these United States, and seven attempts to build socialism in other countries. (Yes, I went to see those societies for myself, from Cuba to Russia to China.) Here at home I spent ten years in each of three movements: the Black civil rights struggle, the Chicano movimiento, and the Left effort to build a revolutionary party. The struggle that grips me most today is the one to uproot racism, that pox on this land where I grew up brown. Fighting it soon became linked to women's struggles; the two cannot honestly be divided—although some would have it otherwise.

From all this living and struggling, one lesson looms large: there is no separating my life from history. There is no separating anyone's life from history.

When World War II ended, humanity longed for peace and created the United Nations to help that dream come true. So my first job just out of college had to be working for the UN, for five years, researching the effects of colonialism upon Africa. Later the postwar smugness of white middle-class U.S. society sparked an alienated, mostly white middle-class generation of poets and pot, anger and angst. So I had to link up with the Beats of Lower East Side New York in the 1950s, while working in publishing and the photography world.

Then great mass movements exploded in these United States, sparked by the spirit of upheaval around the world. So I went to work, first part-time and then full-time, for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and from there to the movimiento in New Mexico. And when most of the mass movements declined in the early
1970s, it seemed clear to many who had been fighting for social change that we needed more committed, permanent organizations, in particular a Marxist party, and so I joined one.

Thus it went, on to the present, together with the inescapable awareness of being a woman in a world dominated by men no matter how revolutionary they might otherwise claim to be. Chingado, I had more wondrous and disastrous relationships than you can count—with poets, artists, revolutionaries (a few really were), junkies, and various combinations thereof. Not to mention a beautiful and amazing daughter who survived us all, Tessa, now a fine actress. Not to mention the hundreds, maybe thousands, of youth whom I have met or come to work with, and their passion for justice today.

It's been almost half a century of hating injustice, laughing at our own mistakes, loving the beauty of the planet, and cherishing so many compas. Out of all that have come many writings, with the early books on the Mississippi Summer Project and on revolutionary Cuba published under the name Elizabeth Sutherland because I thought it would have a more literary ring in the Eurocentric publishing world. Who would publish someone named Martinez then? Also out of that half-century came many letters, poems, and diary entries, which whisper some truths.

1958. In that Lower East Side Manhattan world of Beat poets, junkie painters, LSD experiments (in my living room, yet), where Black and White hung together better than anywhere else in society, I found my poet too. Small, with wild eyes and long spells of madness, soon lost to heroin, but for a while I loved his fire and stood guard over it. He and I went to Cuba together, three months after the January 1959 triumph of the Revolution, and that lit a flame that never went out. Until then life had seemed to leave me ill-defined. The UN had remained dominated by imperialist powers, not the road to peace and justice I sought. Cuba changed that. I began to see who I was.

September 15, 1960. An experience she called mystical: In Cuba, again, two years after the Revolution. She was on a bus tour of the island with a load of lefties from many countries—middle-aged people nostalgically singing Spanish Civil War songs and lumbering off the bus to look at some fishing cooperative or to be herded into their hotel for the night. It was about the fifth day of the tour and the bus was headed for that night's sleeping place. Nobody was singing; it was dark inside the bus except for little lights at some seats. The feeling came like a flood, a feeling of unity that she called god. She waited for it to recede, not trusting it, but time passed and the feeling lingered. If it could be defined, it was unity with the Cuban night: the hard bright stars and the softness together made the Revolution.

Her lover was with her and she told him about it, but he could hear only Church talk. It seems some things are not to be shared.

What can be shared? And with whom? How? Were ancients people as lonely as modern people? Are men ever as lonely as women can be?

1964. I could no longer see my life separate from history. But where was I in this history? Whose is my struggle? Questions rampaged through my mind, way down under the surface, but on top it was one big love affair with revolution and social justice and the infinite courage of these 1960s. I had begun working full-time in the Black civil rights movement, with SNCC, and it would have been foolish to ask, "Are you willing to die for justice?" Of course I was—so were thousands of people in this nation and all around the world.

There were also hours of sheer delight in being alive and kinda crazy.

New York City, August 27, 1966. I took my daughter, Tessa, and her friend Valerie to the Beatles movie A Hard Day's Night. Nobody screamed, but they sat there speechless. When it was over we all got up without a word and RAN out of the theater and across Second Avenue, Valerie in front and then me and then Tessa, running running up three blocks to the car which we jumped into and I started it in a sec and drove sixty miles an hour up Fifth Avenue to Doubleday bookstore, which is open until midnight, yeah yeah yeah. And I parked the car where it says NO PARKING NO STANDING NO LIVING NO NOTHING and we all raced into the store with Tessa leading this time and zoomed up to the record counter where we collapsed with our tongues hanging out.
WHERE ARE YOUR BEATLES RECORDS SIR?? There it was, the movie sound track itself, what could you want in life now? WRAP IT PLEASE. The open-mouthed clerk held out the change but we had no time for that, had to get home to play it play it play it. So I drove up Park Avenue through 3 red lights, Valerie had to go home because her mother doesn't believe in beatles and she was late for dinnah, and now I am here with the music and beloved Tessa and 2 jumping kittens.

and there is no death tonight.

Sometimes life seems to come down to great simplicities, like: figuring out how to be useful to humanity. But that can be very complicated, even painful. How to be useful, with whom, and under what conditions? For example: in 1966 when SNCC voted to expel all white staff members it did not address the question of two Chicanas on staff, including me. I wasn't Black but I wasn't white either, what the hell was I? It was too early, perhaps, to expect an answer to that from SNCC. Then and in years to come, those questions continued to roll in and out, like a relentless tide.

The next year brought the women's movement home for me, through New York Radical Women, a small but potent group in the "consciousness-raising" tradition that included Chude Pam Allen, Kathie Amatniek Sarachild, Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt. It was almost entirely white but that did not bother me at first. So many moving moments, as when Shulie told of going to an Orthodox Jewish school where the boys said in morning prayers, "Thank you, lord, for not making me a woman." I still see her sad, angry eyes and dark hair when she spoke.

Then came the night that Martin Luther King was assassinated, April 4, 1968. The streets of New York and the nation, the hearts of people everywhere, were filled with rage. But at our women's meeting nobody mentioned King's death, no one said we should talk about it before our usual business (some who might have done so were absent). Stunned and speechless, I left and walked down 14th Street on the Lower East Side toward the subway. Big glass store windows were asking me to break them with any handy object. It was a night of more anguish and anger than I could remember. It was a night to realize that the struggle against sexism did not see itself as profoundly entwined with the fight against racism, I was gone.

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Three months later I went to New Mexico and the Chicano movement; the question of Who-am-I had been demanding such a move for a long time. Nuevo Mexico, New Mexico, brought love at first sight. When I arrived on the plane after dark and saw the silhouetted mountain range called Blood of Christ, Sangre de Cristo, there was no doubt; I smelled Home.

I settled in impoverished northern New Mexico, 150-year-old center of resistance to the Anglo occupation, to start a newspaper of the struggle whose name in Spanish means: Cry of the North, El Grito del Norte. We of the newspaper often went to the village of Tierra Amarilla, Yellow Earth, where armed Mexicans had been rising up against the gringo land robbery since 1848. Just the year before, on June 5, 1967, they took over the village courthouse. Tanks with a thousand National Guardsmen were sent down the narrow dirt roads to crush a spirit of resistance that had no intentions of dying. It was nurtured then, as before, by poverty, patience, and a capacity for surprise no outsider could foresee. I learned of a whole new world in northern New Mexico.

Tierra Amarilla at Dusk

Birds make evening noises, tired and dreamy
Fields stretch toward blackening mountains
and dry cows low.
Ugly dogs bark, brown-eyed children whine
Across town, women stoke their wood stoves,
starting into quick flames,
Their old young faces unreadable.

The sun goes down in an orange universe
a young macho walks the dirt road alone
where there is nothing to do at night,
just barren streets, shabby bars, abandoned homes,
a sad brown squatness, an ancestry of failure.

Then I see it!
A big, black top hat sits on the young man's head
crealy crowning his work-shirt and muddy boots.
It says: I am special, rich in my own way,
centuries of pride course through my veins.
And the laughter of survivors rings out in the dusk—
it's those unreadable women who never give up.
'My heart runs to meet my love,
this town I love, this Tierra Amarilla.

August 25, 1969. A lot of feminism—both rage and celebration—had
traveled with me to New Mexico. The women's movement there was
mostly university-based and white at the time, and even independent-spirited Chicanas saw it as alien. They believed that the feminism of those
years required a declaration of war on all men, which made no sense in the
face of the constant racism against Raza men as well as women. Yet many,
especially the younger Chicanas working with El Grito del Norte, did rec-
ognize the inequality and how male self-respect often rested on the disre-
spect of females. As for myself, I looked hard at the sexism in the
movimiento, and knew a Chicana feminism needed to be born.

I am Elizabeth
Angry and proud and ancient
and beautiful, but not for the reasons you think.

This is the age of newfound heritages
When black calls back to African queens and Nat Turner
When brown calls back to Cuauhtemoc and Zapata
When red calls back to so many bravehearts
But who do I call back to?
What did you men with your history books ever give me
Except a token female who never fought for her kind?
Except “our women,” always “our women,”
in postures of maternity, sadness, devotion,
tears for the lost husband or son
“our women,” nothing but shadows
reflections of someone else’s existence

Sexism from Chicano movement stars sometimes compelled
proclamations from me that do not read like news today but at the time
were uncommon. So much so, and so threatening to men, that I did not
circulate this statement when written in 1970. It became part of a pam-
phlet on Chicano movement problems distributed four years later.

April 1970. First, we should define sexism. Sexism is an institu-
tionalized social reality, like racism or capitalism or colonialism. It
is a system of power relations, the system that says men as a group
are superior to women as a group, and therefore deserve certain
privileges. That certain social roles should be assigned to men and
other roles to women; that women’s roles and women’s work have
less dignity and status than those of men, with the exception of
child-bearing (for nine months, a pregnant woman has a certain
status); that women are essentially objects, possessions of the man
or the male-dominated society.

Women are oppressed primarily by that system and secondly by
men who believe in that system. Women as a group cannot oppress
men as a group because—as we said before—sexism is an institu-
tionalized reality, and there are no institutions which give women
power over men . . . This doesn’t mean there are not some women
who oppress some men. The rich white woman with a Black chauffeur
obviously oppresses him but women as a group cannot oppress
men as a group.

There are three major reasons why the oppression of women and
sexism must be dealt with in any movement organization (including
Chicano groups):

1 Because as people fighting oppression, we must be con-
cerned with all forms of oppression. It is a matter of
principle and revolutionary consistency. We cannot have
a double standard, we cannot be hypocrites, in the fight
against oppression . . .

2 Because the oppression of women weakens our
strength as a group. We have less force and less unity.
This is a matter of tactics, not principle, but it is just
as important.

3 Because sexism is the cause of serious problems in many
organizations. In one case, a man who ran an alternative
school eventually forced it to close. He put the women
down when they criticized him; he frightened into
silence women who might have criticized him; he drove
out women who were hard workers. Although he did this to a few men also, his basic strength came from getting men on his side, and thus dividing the sexes.

The super-macho is haunted by the need to prove his manhood. We understand that gringo colonialism and racism have made the Chicano insecure about his manhood. But it is time to snap: we can't go on blaming the gringo for this, or defending sexism.

The super-macho is very disturbed by homosexuality. He doesn't like it in women because that threatens his importance. Women who do not need men for sexual satisfaction are a put-down in his mind. Homosexuality in men bothers the super-macho even more. It challenges his definition of himself and his manhood. The oppression of homosexuals is wrong.

The more that we free ourselves and our culture from all these oppressive attitudes, the stronger our movimiento will be.

New Mexico also brought a love affair that seemed uniquely happy by virtue of our lives spent in joint political work. It ended with dramatic betrayal of the values which the collective built around El Grito del Norte had aimed to observe: among others, absolute honesty in relationships, mutual accountability and respect, no sexism.

The pain faded with new work and the building of lifelong friendships, especially with women. Then another betrayal—this time political—brought more loss and loneliness. This one was a classic of the movement years, complete with strong suspicion that it had been engineered by a government agent who infiltrated our organization and then destroyed it. With a move from New Mexico to California came new hope for me, in a new party-building organization. Ten years later it too would collapse.

But even as the century ebbs, a whole new life shines before me: creating tools to empower young people—especially young Latinas—with knowledge about themselves, about their own history, a knowledge that they rarely find in school. With such tools they can tear down an old world and fight for a new one. They can envision the end of inhuman history: the countless millennia of domination and suffering.

In these same recent years a song of balance began to hum inside my head, a woman's song. Replacing deadly dogmatisms with a dialectic of human change, I became proud, not ashamed of our long, long march toward the beauty that could be.

*In China twenty-five years ago they told me:
A communist is straight and sturdy as a pine tree,
supple as the willow.
I have remembered those words a long time.
How splendid to be two kinds of trees at once,
Honor the pine-willow,
Seek to be like the pine-willow,
raise your children to be pine-willows,
small or tall.
When pine-willows fill the forest
Then human history begins.*