"The Work Said Who I Was"

Elizabeth "Betita" Sutherland Martínez (1925-2021)

By Tony Platt

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This tribute to Betita by Tony Platt gives us a comprehensive view of Betita's extraordinary life. Some of the photos relate to her connection to Esperanza who considers her a madrina (godmother) of the Esperanza.*

Betita first visited Esperanza in March of 1992 at 1305 N. Flores speaking for *International Woman's Day* and the opening of the exhibit, *Mujeres de Fuerza* by Terry Ybañez. It was the year of the *Quincentenary* celebrating *500 years of Indigenous & Popular Resistance.*

Elizabeth "Betita" Sutherland Martínez's hybrid name signals a great deal about the diverse contributions of a veteran activist who lived, as she recalled in 1998, through five international wars, six social movements, and seven attempts to build socialism around the world. "The heart just insists on it," she explained.

Betita is generally recognized today as a founding member of the Chicano movement and Latinx feminism. But long before she embraced her Latina identity, she was also a committed political activist, with roots in international leftism, as well as a fan of the Beatles.

Betita Martínez grew up between the world wars in the white middle-class suburbs of segregated Washington, D. C. Her father, Manuel Guillermo Martínez worked his way up from a clerk in the Mexican Embassy to professor of Spanish literature at Georgetown. Her blue-eyed, American mother, Ruth Sutherland Phillips, taught advanced high school Spanish. Groomed for the fast track to professional success, she felt like "a freak brown child" in Chevy Chase's "never-never land."

She was the first Latina at Swarthmore College, where she was deeply and equally affected by news of Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jews of Europe and of American war crimes in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Graduating with honors in 1946 and in pursuit of a career in the "Eurocentric publishing world," Betita Martínez became Elizabeth "Liz" Sutherland (adopting her mother's vaguely British middle name) and plunged into the post-war ferment of New York's cultural scene. She worked as a clerk, translator, and researcher at the United Nations (1946-1954); an administrative assistant to Edward Steichen at the Museum of Modern Art (1957-1958); an editor at Simon and Schuster (1958-1964); and Books and Arts Editor at The Nation (1964).

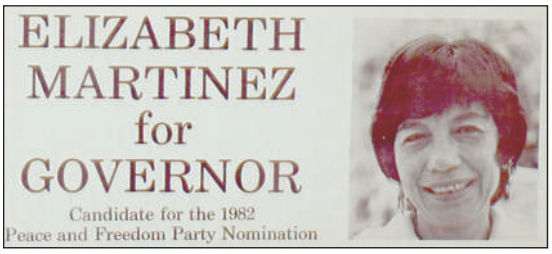
During this period, Liz had one foot in the world of upwardly mobile diplomats and the scribbling class, the other in the demimonde of outsiders, leftists, and Lower East Side rebels. At Simon and Schuster, she used her insider status to lobby for publication of an extraordinary photographic record of The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality (1964). As a reporter for the Nation, she sympathetically covered the "youngest revolution" in Cuba, the struggle for civil rights from the frontlines of the Deep South, and the "great stupidity, not to mention immorality" of the arms race.

In the early 1960s, Elizabeth hobnobbed with cutting edge artists and writers (including Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and Diane di Prima), moving easily between the "world of Beat poets, junkie painters, and LSD experiments" and Fifth Avenue soirées hosted by chic patrons. This ability to function in very different social worlds would serve her well later in life when she had to fundraise for leftist causes and translate radical rhetoric into palatable liberalism for middle-class audiences.

As a woman who clearly looked Latina, Elizabeth Sutherland had to work furiously hard to be noticed and taken seriously by New York's male, white literati. Unusually for somebody still in her 30s, she cultivated the literary talent of an accomplished editor, the eye of a rigorous graphic designer, and the ability to write passionate prose in sharply chiseled English.

Her productivity was prodigious. Between 1960 and 1963, she reviewed movies for Horizon and Film Quarterly, reported on her visit to Cuba in the Nation and Manchester Guardian, wrote about a labor dispute for the Nation, edited

a book of Ingmar Bergman screenplays, translated a French novel, reported in Evergreen Review on her trip to Moscow to interview leading Russian poets, edited a SNCC pamphlet illustrated with Danny Lyon photos, wrote a hilarious column for the National Guardian about her appearance before HUAC, and sent a letter to the New York Times criticizing their coverage of the state of Soviet theatre – and still found time to do political work with the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and Friends of SNCC, and endorse Robert Williams' advocacy of self-defense in North Carolina's Black communities.



Betita ran for Governor of California on the *Peace & Freedom Party* ticket in 1982, then went on to build new organizations like the Institute for MultiRacial Jusitce in San Francisco.

In 1965, making a shift from reporting to joining the Movement, Elizabeth quit her job at the Nation and became director of SNCC's New York office. She had already committed herself to SNCC's politics, serving as its representative in a 1964 Wall Street coalition organized to protest Chase Manhattan's involvement in South Africa's apartheid regime. It was here that she dazzled a young Mike Davis, then a political neophyte in New York's SDS office, with her tactical savvy and snazzy outfits.


Haydée with Betita Martínez and Stokely Carmichael of the United States, 1970s.
PHOTO COURTESY CASA DE LAS AMÉRICAS.

Betita in Cuba with her friend, Haydée and Stokley Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) with whom she worked in the 60s.

When she wasn't getting the word out and raising half a million dollars, she was on the road in the South. For at least a year, SNCC offered Elizabeth "a sense of effectiveness and a minimum of lies, maximum of truth." She didn't grapple then "with my particular identity, with being half Mexican and half white," she recalled many years later. "The work said who I was."

Beginning in 1967, a conjuncture of three pivotal events propelled Elizabeth Sutherland in new directions: SNCC's turn to black nationalism, the compelling presence of a radical feminist tendency in New York, and the rise of the Chicano movement in New Mexico. She emerged from this political moment with a new identity and a new name.

Elizabeth quickly moved from a central position in SNCC to the status of an outsider. The organization had, as she put it, "an identity crisis" and decided it "should be an all-black organization." Publicly, she acknowledged the strategic necessity for nationalism. Privately, she seethed at being "classified as white" and told in effect, "Get out." She drafted "Some Thoughts on the 'Black-White' Issue" and, for the first time, signed it Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez. "That's my full name up there," she wrote, testing her new identity.

For a while feminism filled the space once occupied by SNCC. She "looked hard" at the sexism within the Movement and didn't like what she saw: images of "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/ BASTA!"

With other refugees from SNCC, Elizabeth joined the New York Radical Women's collective – a group that included Joan Brown and Shulamith Firestone – and with Carol Hanisch (instigator of the celebrated protest of the Miss America pageant in 1968) wrote "Women of the World Unite – We Have Nothing to Lose but Our Men!" for the first issue of Notes from the First Year. From that moment on, there was no separating the political struggle against racism and sexism. "The two cannot be honestly divided," she believed.

"I am lonely," she wrote in 1967 in one of many memos to herself. "It's time for me to search for my identity and go home to my Mexican-Americans," even though by this time in her life she had little in common with Mexico, her father's birthplace. In 1968, attracted by the Alianza Federal de Mercedes, an organization led by Reies Lopez Tijerina, Betita Martínez moved to New Mexico to support the Alianza's struggle to recover lands that had once been communally owned. She arrived, she admitted, "totally ignorant of the Southwest, almost totally ignorant of Chicano culture and life." But as a voracious reader and quick learner, it didn't take her long to become deeply knowledgeable about the Southwest and its history, and to feel a cultural connection that had eluded her all her life. She was 42 years old. "The ground of my life was shifting, stretching. A voice inside of me said, You can be Betita Martínez here."

Along with Beverly Axelrod, a movement attorney, Betita created El Grito del Norte (Cry of the North), a newspaper that included favorable and in-person coverage of Vietnam, Cuba, and China that left no doubt about its left politics. Betita herself was the first Chicano organizer to visit North Vietnam in 1970.

As Elizabeth Sutherland became Betita Martínez, she made sure that issues of gender were not put on the back burner. She spoke out against sexism and homophobia within the Chicano movement. "The super-macho," she wrote, "is haunted by the need to prove his manhood." In 1970, her statement on "Colonized Women: The Chicana" was published in Robin Morgan's Sisterhood is Powerful, an anthology that became required reading for a new generation of feminists.

When El Grito ended in 1973, Betita moved to Albuquerque and with a group of like-minded leftists established the Chicano Communications Center, a Marxist collective. Leading a demonstration at the courthouse in

Albuquerque, Betita "exuded an air of serene authority that I had rarely seen in a woman," recalls Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. But her new political home was short-lived. The Center degenerated into internecine battles, wrecked by "vanguardism and sectarianism." She left New Mexico in 1974, politically defeated and personally devastated. As a single parent of Tessa (after her divorce from writer-activist Hans Koning) and a cosmopolitan leftist "with a horrible amount of education and verbal skills," she felt uneasy with young working-class families, deeply rooted in local communities.

In 1974, Betita made the third and final major geographical move in her life, this time to the San Francisco Bay Area, a site of leftist ferment. By now she was a committed Marxist, looking for an organization that would transcend identity politics, take women seriously, and demand full-time commitment. Her new organizational home was the Democratic Workers Party (DWP), a Leninist organization led by women, with a world-systems framework and a wide variety of projects. Betita quickly moved into a leadership position and kept up a furious pace of activity. She designed and edited the party's newspaper and ran for Governor of California on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket in 1982.

By 1984, the DWP, as well as the rest of the Marxist-Leninist left in the United States, had imploded, leaving in its wake a sense of impotency and bitterness among former cadre. When Betita finally slowed down enough to think deeply about how she had spent the last decade of her life, she realized that "in the name of fighting for freedom, many left collectivities organize with great un-freedom. Experience indicates that democratic centralism tends to become all centralism and no democracy."

Most people at Betita's age, then close to 60, would be satisfied with four decades of political activism, punishing work routines, and almost no time for a personal life. But there was no stopping her now. She helped to build new organizations – The Institute for MultiRacial Justice in San Francisco – and new publications – CrossRoads magazine and War Times. Still ahead were five books, more than one hundred published articles, not to mention countless conferences, guest lectures, and public speeches. She also returned to grassroots activism, searching for ways to bring communities of color together, saying "NO to any definition of social justice that does not affirm our human oneness."

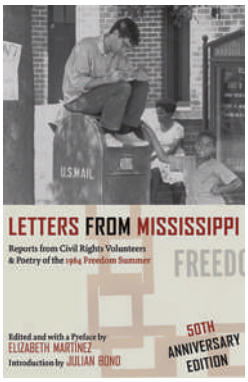
Without a university base or philanthropic support, she accomplished what most academics never do in a lifetime: write several books that leave a deep impact on readers searching for socially relevant, well researched, and thoughtful analysis.

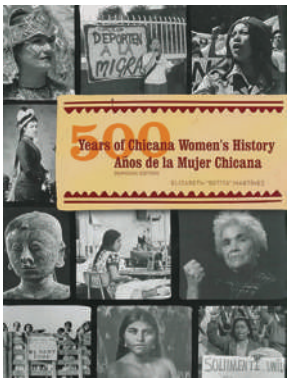
As a writer, always a writer, Elizabeth Sunderland and Betita Martínez established a unique voice. Her 1965 book, Letters from Mississippi, was an important chronicle of the struggle for racial equality. Her first-person account of revolutionary Cuba (The Youngest Revolution, 1969) had an impact on activists such as Angela Davis, who appreciated her anti-imperialist perspective and "careful eye." Her two books 500 Years of Chicano History (1976) and 500 Years of Chicana Women's History (2008) resonated with a new generation of Latinx activists, whom she tirelessly mentored as though their lives depended on it.

In 2000, she received an honorary doctorate from her alma mater, but not the private pension, home ownership, and other perks that typically crown an academic career. Comrades and friends returned her devotion to the Movement by establishing a fund for her health and basic needs.

During the last decade of her activism, before the limitations of age and illness took their toll, Betita began to look more deeply and honestly into the self-inflicted wounds that can't simply be blamed on "the man." Back in the 1960s, she recognized that "the enemy is within as well as without," but she kept this concern private. It troubled her that "sometimes/in this here movement/you go down, down, down/dragged by the smallness of people," but she was careful then not to wash the Movement's dirty laundry in public.

Betita was at the Esperanza multiple times to do presentations on her *500 Years'* books and *De Colores Means All of Us*. Pictured in 2008 signing *500 Years of Chicana Women's History*.





Among the plethora of books and articles written and edited by Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez were these four: *Letters from Mississippi, 500 Years of Chicano History in pictures, 500 Years of Chicana Women's History and De Colores Means All of Us*—most of which have been published more than once and are still relevant today.

Later in life, returning to her feminist roots, she felt a duty to speak out on these issues. For too long, she said, the Chicano movement was seen as a subsidiary of the African American movement; that women in SNCC and Chicano organizations were typically considered subordinate to "male warriors" and assigned housewifely duties; that in the name of fighting for a "humanist society," revolutionary Marxist groups treated its cadres callously and other progressive organizations with sectarian venom. While she gave all to her political family, she regretted "neglecting another identity: being the mother of a young daughter."

Betita's extraordinary experiences in five decades of movements for social justice are a window into the American left, with all its passion, sacrifices, missteps, and contradictions. Her own political worldview was a complicated mix of Leninism, civil libertarianism, and populism. She joined vanguard organizations in the belief that structural change in the "belly of the beast" is only possible with steeled cadre in hierarchical, quasi-military organizations leading the way. Yet, her experiences in these organizations left her highly critical of the lack of internal democracy and abuse of cadres. She defended communist and socialist regimes in the hope that one day the world system would tip in their favor. Yet, there wasn't one state socialist regime that she really admired. Visiting Cuba soon after the revolution, she felt a "unity with the Cuban night," not Fidel, and was glad to see that a "tolerant spirit" still prevailed, including the showing of The 400 Blows and Brigitte Bardot movies. In the USSR in 1962, she hung out with dissident poets rather than party apparatchiks. In 1989, she welcomed the pro-democracy movement in China, siding with demonstrators in Tiananmen Square.

Despite long bouts of personal depression and political despondency – "feet chained deep in shit and no wings," as she wrote in a 1971 poem – Betita retained an affinity for the singing landscape, the road that glitters, and optimism of the heart. "Hey," she once responded to my political melancholy, "I just finished watching a documentary about the Donner Party and, believe me, things could be worse."

Comrades remember her dressed to the nines in her miniskirts and bold fashion sense in New York; her silver accessories, bright red lipstick, and Go-Go boots in New Mexico; dancing, swilling gin Martinis, and having a ruckus of a good time in California. She was the toughest leftist I've ever known, never without a sheaf of leaflets, but she was also delighted by how the Beatles in A Hard Day's Night celebrated the "sweet parade" of life – "parading the streets, trail ing their coats, bowling along and living!"

Betita with Esperanza staff & buena gente after her plática on *500 Years of Chicana History* on March 18, 2008. Staff assisted in finding photos for the book. The art exhibit, *Ofrenda*, by Liliana Wilson, graced the walls of Esperanza at 922 San Pedro.

BIO: Tony Platt is the author of ten books and more than 150 essays and articles on race, inequality, and social justice in American history. A longtime friend and colleague of Betita, his blog can be accessed at: goodtogo.typepad.com/tony_platt_goodtogo/

Letter to the Editor

Betita was especially close to her only child, daughter, Tessa Koning-Martinez, an actor, writer and educator living in the Bay area.

Hello Gloria,

I feel so good as I read your letter to Tony Platt here. My mother loved The Esperanza Center, loved visiting you all en San Antonio, it was a place and people very dear to her. Betita knew many more folks than I could have ever kept track of, but this I did for sure know, that Esperanza Center held a big place in her heart. I often used to pick her up at the airport when she returned to San Francisco, and she was always real happy after being in San Antonio!

Tessa