

We Are the Revolution

An Exhibition on the Life and Legacies of Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez

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In what ways do we honor and memorialize our ancestors? For many Chicano/Latinx peoples the response is we remember them. We remember them often. We continue to live with them, as it were. Although Disney tried to copyright Día de los Muertos, honoring and *conviviendo* con our ancestors is not something we

do just once a year...it is the way we live en las Américas. Many live in deep and conscientious connection to all dimensions of life—most importantly the spiritual and emotional realms which are given utmost reverence throughout a variance of Indigenous cosmologies in the Americas. Much ancestral wisdom that guides traditional medicina, such as the healing practices of *curanderismo*, render the material as constituted by the spiritual and emotional—made possible by collectivities of *energías/energies*. I humbly invite you, with joy in my heart, to join me in centering the spiritual and emotional *sabiduría* that recognizes the continuity and interconnectedness of being as we

honor and grow to know the life and legacies of Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez.

My Tía Alma once spoke to a church filled with so many of us gathered to mourn the loss of her son, our beloved primo (Al) Fonso. She said, “remember the best of what you loved in him and that will live in your hearts.” Our ancestors live through the gift of memory. What will you choose

to remember of your loved ones? What will you choose to remember of Betita? These are some of the ways Betita lives: in our embodied selves, in our *corazones*, and in our deeds. Betita lives through our connection to her in images and words/*palabras*. Here we testify to how she lived and loved, and to how she was loved by her relations, and Betita was so loved. She inspired generations to commit to the work of social justice and fighting injustice everywhere! With this exhibit we extend an offering, una *ofrenda* in words and images, a story to guide the journey into remembering our beloved Betita. We invite you to bear witness to a glimpse of some of the ways Betita Taught Us We Are The Revolution.

Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez was a revolutionary. Born to a father whose life was shaped by the Mexican Revolution, Betita was reared on the vibrant aspirations de los tiempos revolucionarios, the revo-



Betita at her Desk. Photo taken in Betita's home in the Mission District of San Francisco in 2002 by Janis Lewin. ©Janis Lewin

lutionary era. She grew acquainted with the revolutionary imagination at a young age. She often recalled how her father shared stories of a victorious Zapata riding into the capital on his horse con los campesinos. And the fervor of her revolutionary desire was awakened; she wanted to make a revolution “right

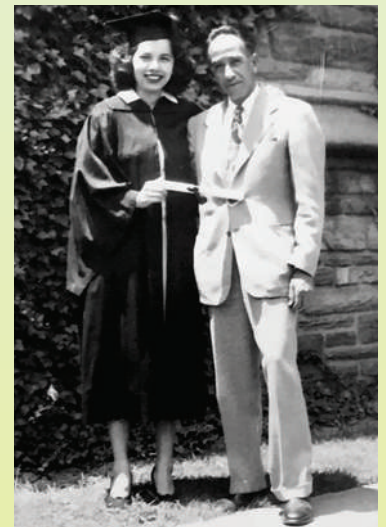
here!” Born in 1925, Betita came of age in Washington, D.C. where she encountered white supremacy in the all-white school she attended and where she witnessed her dark-skinned father face repeated derision and exclusion. At age 16, she wrote a manifesto expressing her commitment to “destroy hatred and prejudice.” Betita lived a nearly century-long life joyously writing, researching, editing, and movement building as she embarked on journey after journey to galvanize social transformation. “There’s a reason to keep going,” she said, “gains are made through struggle and the heart just insists on it, it’s the simplest thing, the heart just insists on it.”

Betita’s heart-centered wisdom and way of being in the world was deeply endearing to those around her—she often extended a generous, nurturing disposition while offering a contagious smile, comedic wit, and uproarious laughter. Betita also wielded a poignantly precise pen to edit and deliver the sharpest—and historically informed and astute—analysis, critique and strategy—on paper and at organizing meetings. At age 12, Betita expressed in her journal her desire to become a writer to effectively communicate with others. Betita served an impactful time on the editorial staff at Simon and Schuster and later edited several movement publications, including the leading Chicana/o and antiwar movement newspapers *El Grito del Norte* and *War Times*. She wrote and edited 9 books in total and penned dozens of essays. A complete list of her works can be found in this recent Bibliography.

My dear friend and former roommate, Nancy Marmolejo shared with me her impression of Betita at the Mission Anti-



Clarissa Rojas, author, & Betita Martínez. Mission District, San Francisco, 2003. Photograph courtesy of Clarissa Rojas



Betita and her father Manuel Guillermo Martínez at her graduation from Swarthmore College in 1946. Courtesy Tessa Koning-Martinez

Displacement Coalition meetings in the 1990's. "She was so patient," she said, "she listened to the rage young people felt and didn't rush to conclusion or action, she just listened calmly and eventually offered an idea or two." I also recall her presence at organizing meetings as a strong, calm and patient presence. I remember she asked lots of questions to deepen our analysis toward a more thorough and thoughtful assessment of the situation and the strategies that might prove effective. In hindsight her leadership style of that era reminds me of a combination of



Viva Betita, Favianna Rodriguez, Screenprint, 25" x 19", 2010.

the Zapatista leadership approach *mandar obedeciendo*, the practice of leadership that follows (does not dominate nor seek to dominate), and a Freirean praxis of *concientización* whereby a group gains an understanding of the conditions of their oppression and most importantly, the sense of themselves as capable of potentiating the transformation of the conditions that oppress them. And that is how Betita forged time and again new generations of social change makers.

As Lorgia García Peña recently shared, "we are not born but nurtured into rebellion." Betita tended to our potential as young activists. She recognized the skills and strengths of our contributions. When she first got to know me she said, "you talk like a writer, you are a writer." It wasn't a question. And I grew to believe her. In the eyes of Betita we were powerful, and she helped us see that in ourselves and helped us believe that about our efforts to effect social transformation. In part because Betita believed that we, as young people of color, could change the world, we came to believe we could! One of the many lessons I learned, and I am still learning from Betita is to nurture our relations, to build relationships, to struggle through the difficulties and disagreements, to bear witness to the magic of the people right in front of you. Betita frolicked across generational, racial, sex and sexual difference with a keen intimacy; I am sure I am not the only one who felt the near 50-year age difference between us dissolve time and time again. Who else had this experience? Maybe it was that her engagement with you made you feel so seen, so alive. I know I am but one of many, of hundreds across the span of continents and centuries who smile with an abundance of gratitude for having crossed paths with Betita.

Indeed, Betita's life was an arc that changed the course of social justice history in the Americas.

She traversed the Civil Rights Movement, working the frontlines of the Freedom Summer and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), feminist movements, the Chicana and Chicano movements, multiple anti-war movements, socialist movements, movements to end police violence, anti-colonial movements and more. Betita participated in the early moments of many movements when creative energies and a sense of limitless possibilities come together with fierce dedication and a kind of historical synchronicity. Betita was instrumental to the emergence of many movements, in part due to her willingness to experiment and try new things. She often took flying leaps of faith—to move across country or countries, to join a new movement, to try a new strategy, to run for governor of California, for example. One of the lessons Betita imparted was through her call to take risks, "to experiment." If you don't do anything, nothing will change, but if you try something, you might come closer to the possi-

bility of change. Betita shared the following story time and again but I first heard it when I was an undergraduate in the 1990's at UC Santa Cruz where she joined Angela Davis in a joint talk and conversation on building coalitions among people of color. She said:

THE SEVEN AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS who sat down at that Woolworth's lunch counter at the first sit-in, April 1, 1960, had no idea they were going to start a huge movement, a nationwide movement. No idea. They just did it. They got ketchup thrown on them and were beaten, arrested. But they took a chance. There has to be some of that spirit today. Let's experiment, we don't have to have all the answers; we certainly don't have to have the ideology down, you know, the whole package. But let's see some things that are wrong and try to change them and take risks.

Betita was fed by the spirit of rebellion and resistance; she came alive in the streets—she loved a good protest. There is a creative and experimental sensibility in the air during a protest—especially a spontaneous one—you don't know what will happen, but you just know something has to be done! There are so many historic examples to reference, but one that comes to mind is one of the moments that birthed the queer justice liberation movement when Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson and many more mostly Black and brown trans and queer folks fed up with police violence rioted at the Stonewall bar in 1969, and similarly at the Compton's Cafeteria riots in San Francisco in 1966. Marsha P. Johnson later said: "History... happens because people make decisions that are sometimes very impulsive and of the moment, but those moments are cumulative realities." There are times when you just have to do something and there are times when historical conjuncture uplifts the potential of your protest toward a greater probability for change, as we also witnessed more recently during the Black Spring of 2020 when the Black lives matter movements, the protests over the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade joined the public outcry over racial injustice in COVID risk and casualties. Betita encouraged everyone to take action for the change they want to see in the world. Her books and her writing serve as a testament to the brilliant and spirited resistance of people of color.

The story of Betita is the story of us as Chicana peoples, in particular. It is the story of trying to make sense of who we are when the social landscape does not reflect who we are. Betita learned the art of kaleidoscoping early on, of adjusting color and surroundings until she was able to see herself, to be herself, until the histories and entrapments of colonialism, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy were refracted into oblivion in her revolutionary imagination. And she was free. Free to organize, free to dream, free to write. Free. Gone were the 30 foot border walls, the detention centers kidnapping babies, the bullets finding Black and brown bodies, the sizzling trunks *cajuelas* stacking migrant sardine bodies breathing their last hope is not enough. Betita knew that so toiled the midnight oil she did. Dreaming up schemes and new paths to be. Free. Betita. Wanted to be free. Betita. Your story is our story Betita. Betita taught us we are the revolution.

Perhaps Angela Davis said it best, "(Betita's) ideas always served as a kind of model for the best kind of activism, the best kind of feminism, the best kind of anti-racism." ¡Gracias Betita! ¡Gracias Betita! ¡Gracias a todas las abuelitas! We will continue your long struggle for justice until all our peoples can live freely, leading heart centered lives that care and nurture our peoples, our wellness, our children and our futures.

NOTE: Visit the full online exhibit at: bit.ly/betita-taught/ Article footnotes and resources available on request: lavoza@esperanzacenter.org.