

Elizabeth Martinez: Feminist and voice of the Chicana movement

Tired of the discrimination she faced, Martinez fought to better the lives of Mexican Americans

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Throughout her life, she identified with outsiders and adopted a leftist, even radical political stance (*Bob Fitch Photography Archive/Department of Special Collections/Stanford University Libraries*)

Elizabeth Martinez, a writer and editor who took part in the civil rights movement and was best known during a long life of activism as an outspoken advocate for Mexican American and feminist causes, has died.

The daughter of a Mexican father and a white American mother, Martinez did not fit into the conventional racial categories of the 1930s, when she grew up in then-all-white Chevy Chase, Maryland. Because of her darker skin tone, she was told to ride in the back of the bus with black passengers.

“And the little girl next door whose family was white,” she recalled in 2006, “she was not allowed to play with me because my father was Mexican.”

During the early stages of her career, when she worked for the United Nations, a New York publishing firm and magazine *The Nation*, Martinez often went by “Liz Sutherland”, using her middle name. Her name later evolved to Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez and then to Elizabeth “Betita” Martinez.

Throughout her life, Martinez identified with outsiders and adopted a leftist, even radical political stance. She made the first of several trips to Cuba in 1959, months after the revolution led by Fidel Castro, and visited other Communist-led countries, including the Soviet Union, China, Hungary and North Vietnam. Her writings about her travels drew the attention of the FBI, and she was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In 1960, as the civil rights movement gained momentum, Martinez joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a civil rights organisation for young people. She helped edit an illustrated book on civil rights, *The Movement* (1964), with text by playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

During the Freedom Summer campaign of 1964, Martinez went to Mississippi to help register African American voters. She later became the director of the New York office of SNCC and edited *Letters from Mississippi* (1965), a collection of first-person accounts by young civil rights workers.

Gradually, however, she began to feel isolated as a non-black woman in the civil rights movement. “I am lonely,” she wrote in a 1967 memo to herself, recounted in an appreciation by a friend, Tony Platt, a scholar affiliated with the University of California at Berkeley. “It's time for me to search for my identity and go home to my Mexican-Americans.”

In 1968, Martinez moved to New [Mexico](#), where she took up the cause of Chicanos, or US-born people of Mexican heritage who wished to maintain a distinct culture of their own. (The feminine form of the term is “Chicana”.) She helped found and edit a bilingual newspaper, *El Grito del Norte* (*The Cry of the North*), which became an important voice in the Chicano movement. She established a Marxist collective in Albuquerque and helped lead protest marches for the rights of workers and women. She joined American Indian demonstrators

at Wounded Knee in 1973, when they occupied several buildings on the Pine Ridge reservation and were confronted by federal law enforcement officers.

Martinez also drew attention to sexism and homophobia in the broader Latino culture and wrote an essay, “Colonized Women: The Chicana,” for the influential 1970 feminist anthology *Sisterhood Is Powerful*. In 1974, she was the co-author of *Viva la Raza! The Struggle of the Mexican-American People*.

Two years later, she published *450 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, a bilingual book that was widely used in schools. In a later edition, published as *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, Martinez highlighted social issues that remain pertinent today.

“By the year 2050, there will no longer be a white majority,” she wrote. “I think the white people are more freaked out about that than we hear. That’s one reason for the anti-immigrant hysteria ... This country is heading for a collective nervous breakdown.”

After settling in California in 1976, Martinez sought to redefine racism in the United States as more than a division between black and white. She helped establish the Institute for MultiRacial Justice, which aimed to build a coalition of black, Latino, Asian, Native American, feminist, gay and lesbian groups – an idea now known as intersectionality– in a joint fight against what she viewed as an oppressive society built on white supremacy.

In a 1998 essay collection, *De Colores Means All of Us*, Martinez outlined a multicultural manifesto of how she believed Americans could forge a stronger society by understanding the many cultural strands that have shaped the country since its founding.

“Urging a more truthful origin myth, and with it a different national identity,” she wrote, “does not mean Euro-Americans should wallow individually in guilt. It does mean accepting collective responsibility to deal with the implications of a different narrative.”

Elizabeth Sutherland Martinez was born 12 December 1925, in Washington DC. Her father advanced in his career from being a clerk at the Mexican embassy to teaching Spanish literature at Georgetown University. Her mother was a high-school Spanish teacher, and the family often spent summers in Mexico.

Martinez graduated with honours in 1946 from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. She moved to New York to work at the newly formed United Nations, where she did research on colonialism and its racial implications.

From 1955 to 1957, she was an assistant to Edward Steichen, the noted photographer who was director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art. She was a book editor at Simon & Schuster from 1958 to 1964, then spent a year at *The Nation* as an arts editor. During those years, she also translated books from Spanish and French.

After settling in Oakland, California, and later in San Francisco, Martinez became a key figure in the Democratic Workers Party and edited its newspaper. She ran for California governor in 1982 as the candidate of the Peace and Freedom Party and won 66,000 votes.

“It seemed like a good opportunity to do educational work,” she told the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1993. “You get a platform rather easily. I could go into a high school in conservative California towns and they sat and listened to me because I was a candidate.”

Martinez’s marriages to Leonard Berman and Hans Koning ended in divorce. Survivors include a daughter from her second marriage.

She often attracted a coterie of younger activists as she lectured around the country and conducted workshops on understanding racism. “She was an elegant presence and a dynamic soul who wore red and purple together like no one else,” photographer Janis Lewin said.

Martinez also enjoyed a good party and, no matter how bleak the political situation seemed to her, seldom gave in to despair.

“Hey,” she once told Platt, according to his online appreciation, “I just finished watching a documentary about the Donner Party and, believe me, things could be worse.”

Elizabeth Martinez, author and activist, born 12 December 1925, died 29 June 2021

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