“The heart insists on it.” Odes to Betita Martínez, the Chicana pioneer dedicated to political activism

Besides her political and professional accolades, Bay Area friends remember her character.

by ANNIKA HOMJULY 13, 2021

Portrait by John Kaine. Acrylic on canvas, 2009. Based on a photograph taken by Margaret Randall

When all is said and done, perhaps our loved ones are our best keepers. Despite the nationwide recognition of the political force Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez — marked when she died at 95 from vascular dementia on June 29 with obituaries in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *the Washington Post* — one of the most impressive collections of her work resides in a friend’s home in Berkeley.

That friend, retired sociology professor Tony Platt, dedicates an entire shelf to the books Martinez edited: *Letters from Mississippi*, which chronicles protesters’ accounts during the Civil Rights Movement’s Freedom Summer, and *The Youngest Revolution: A Personal Report on*

Cuba. And of course, the books that raised Martínez to fame and are still circulated widely today: *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures* and *500 Years of Chicana Women's History*, each renowned and significant documents in the respective movements.

Her varying names on the covers also touch on her complicated journey to claim her Latina heritage. As a half-white, half-Mexican woman, she tried out several names over the years: Elizabeth Sutherland, Elizabeth Martínez, Elizabeth Sutherland Martínez. Realizing Latinxs needed a movement of their own, she eventually embraced her Chicana identity with open arms.

Martínez made a splash wherever she landed, whether at the helm of *El Grito del Norte* in Española, New Mexico, or during creative stints in New York and San Francisco, or in her political work that sent her far and wide.

And, while all loved ones here repeatedly emphasize there's no separating Martínez's professional activist life from her personal life, there's more to her than just her accomplishments documented in the obituaries that followed her death. There's Roommate Martínez, who was addicted to Post-it-tagging the Oakland apartment; Birthday Martínez, who was the center of lively parties, even in her old age. There was Martínez who smoked incessantly until she was around 60 years old, yet lived into her 90s.

We rounded up stories from her loved ones and closest friends.

Anecdotes are supplied by Martínez's daughter Tessa Koning-Martínez, longtime friends Tony Platt, Olga Talamante, Ed McCaughan, John Nichols and fellow "comrade" Clarissa Rojas. Excerpts are also taken from

the online Betita Fan Club Tribute and the now out-of-print journal Social Justice: Elizabeth 'Betita' Sutherland Martínez: A life in struggle*. which were obtained by Mission Local.*

The shelf dedicated to Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez's works in longtime friend Tony Platt's house. Photo taken by Annika Hom, July 10, 2021.

Betita the editor

Martínez was particular and a "super perfectionist," as McCaughan, a former professor of sociology at San Francisco State University, said. That's what happens when you're super successful, and groomed by Simon & Schuster and the Museum of Modern Art. Martínez could spot a crooked layout from 10 feet away. She didn't need measuring tools; she'd just glance at the page and say, "This is wrong." When McCaughan designed a page for a publication, she'd come into the room, look over his shoulder and say, "'Ed, that's not straight.'"

She could be difficult. Once McCaughan attempted to arrange an array of notebooks and photographs that Martínez had loaned him for an

exhibition at Galería de la Raza. He'd aimed to display them in a way he thought was "interesting" — off-center, to resemble a scattered box of memories. "I was very proud of it," McCaughan laughed. Then Martínez walked in, glanced at the exhibit, and laid into him. "She said, I'm not going to have my things displayed like this; it's so disrespectful." Five minutes later, she apologized. "When something wasn't done quite right, she'd get imperious in her scolding, but it didn't last long," McCaughan said, chuckling. "Well, that's Betita."

Close friends or colleagues weren't surprised in the slightest when a call came in at midnight, demanding revisions to an article. "A lot of people can relate to her precision, her relentless demand. You'd assume she'd call you, and that something was important to her; she'd assume you'd be awake for her to call," said Platt.

Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez on the march. Courtesy of Tony Platt.

Betita the roommate

Talamante, who lived with Martínez for a year in Oakland in the mid-’70s, caught glimpses of early drafts of *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures* and *500 Years of Chicana Women’s History.* Other times, Martínez cut out political articles that she thought Talamante would enjoy, and left them for her.

Yet, as with all co-living spaces, there were bound to be “charged roommate meetings.” Martínez ran a tight ship. She’d often chastise, “Okay, I had thought we had organized ourselves to clean the dishes,” Talamante recalled.

Those who forgot were inevitable recipients of a flurry of Post-it notes, which Martínez deposited everywhere.

“Now that I think about it. I think Post-its were one of her best friends,” Talamante said, laughing.

Betita the birthday girl

There was the party at City College of San Francisco’s Mission Campus, where jazz musicians played long into the night. Then the one where a bunch of friends organized a full-blown female mariachi band to perform at Buena Vista Manor House, an assisted living facility near Corona Heights, where Martínez lived late in life.

“It was just one of those things, “Oh it’s for Betita? Okay,’” Talamante said. Who could forget how she balanced each birthday on high heels, well into her 80s?

Betita the fashionista — “Fabulous,

The clothes. The lipstick. The jewelry. Silver, turquoise. One couldn’t forget it. High heels don’t exactly scream “super left-wing radical activist.”

That impeccable style preceded her. Before he met her, McCaughan was fed tales about her glamorous wardrobe. In 1972, an old college friend of McCaughan’s had just returned from a Chicano youth conference Martínez spoke at, and didn’t mention a word of her speech. However, her miniskirt and turquoise jewelry, he couldn’t shut up about. “I already

had an image of her in miniskirts … this hardcore militant," McCaughan said.

She'd break out the heels year after year. It was her 80th birthday, at Delancey Street Restaurant. Martínez strolled with silver high heels and a black miniskirt, Talamante recalled. "She looked great. She looked fabulous."

Martínez was simply a fan of beautiful things, Talamante explained. "Not expensive things," Talamante clarified. "But beautiful things that go together."

Betita the activist

The audience was horrified. It was 2001, and the organization Martínez co-founded, the Institute for MultiRacial Justice on Valencia Street, presented a showing of *Señorita Extraviada* at the Victoria Theatre on 16th Street. The Mexican femicide shown on the screen weighed heavily on the spectators, and Martínez knew she had to break the silence. So did Clarissa Rojas, another Mission activist who, after that night, would soon find herself under Martínez's wing for many years.

"We knew we couldn't let the audience go in that state," Rojas wrote in a Facebook post. "So we turned on the house lights and she and I, on the spot, decided it was time to organize and we co-facilitated *un diálogo* and call to action." A deep conversation about violence in the world ensued.

"She was someone who thought about social justice and framing, and wanted to make it really local," Rojas said.

Clarissa Rojas and Elizabeth "Betita" Martínez in 2003 at 24th and Mission streets. "She pinned that 'Pinche [George W.] Bush' pin on me, and laughed so loud minutes before this picture was taken." Courtesy of Clarissa Rojas.

"She was always busy," said John Nichols, the author of *The Milagro Beanfield War*, which is set in northern New Mexico, where he first met Martínez. Nichols said she and more than a dozen or so other activists he met during the same time, including his wife, inspired the character of Ruby Archuleta, a fiercely independent and somewhat mysterious owner of a body-shop business. In the novel, Nichols describes Ruby as someone who "worked bloody hard. She shouted orders, made split-second decisions … " Her nickname was "The Ant, because she was so busy all the time, and because it almost seemed that she could lift and manipulate objects ten times her weight and size."

While *El Grito* focused on local issues at the outset, Martínez soon included articles on Cuba and North Vietnam, Nichols said.

She was keen to the scent of change. In one of Koning-Martínez's final trips with her mother, they ventured to Mexico. They were milling

around a plaza in December, 1993, but Martínez sensed something amiss. “My mother said, ‘Something big is happening here.’” The following month, the Zapatista uprising occurred.

Betita the mentor

Martínez centered women and people of color long before intersectionality was a household word. She too, gravitated toward young people — Rojas was in her late 20s when she met Martínez, who was already in her 70s — and mentored them. “She recognized the gifts that each person brought. You felt seen.”

This influence inspired a hashtag from younger generations of activists, #WhatBetitaTaughtMe. In a Betita Fan Club Tribute, Kathryn Blackmer Reyes wrote, “I first met Betita as a college student … and then I became her friend. She was what a college-age Chicana needed — a fearless, fierce, and strong Chicana.”

When Rojas, a professor of Chicana Studies, introduced material to her college students, they enjoyed Martínez’s articles the most. “She brought you right into how she saw the world. It wasn’t like her politics or ideas were separate from her. She lived Chicana feminism. It was integrated into how she was.”

It happened over and over again. Martínez visited a high school in Oakland and presented a video made from the photographs within *500 of the Chicano Movement In Pictures* of Mexicans who had been lynched, bodies hung from trees. “Then this young [African American] woman said, ‘I didn’t know Mexicans were lynched like us. We have to be

working together more!'" Martínez recalled in a community leadership award video. "That was of course exactly what I wanted to hear."

Betita, lover of finer things

"Ask about how Betita loved martinis," Platt said.

She took them like James Bond: shaken, not stirred. Gin, not vodka. Two olives. Very cold. Very dry. Martínez was the one who introduced Talamante to martinis on a weekend away in Big Sur. Seated at Nepenthe with a resplendent view of the Pacific Ocean, Martínez batted her eyelashes at the waiter and firmly ordered it exactly how she would every time. Talamante followed, and has been doing so ever since.

"It was an important lesson of the finer things in life, and how you should have them. How to do justice to them," Talamante recalled.

It's a lesson not all have yet mastered. McCaughan toiled away at an appetizing dinner for Talamante and Martínez back at his old apartment near 16th and Guerrero streets. Knowing Martínez appreciated fine food, he whipped up scallops and pasta and served martinis beforehand. He had one too many, and passed out on the bathroom floor. "They continued to party without me," he laughed. "But later, she told me she loved the meal."

Betita the charmer

A friend, who traveled with Martínez to Los Angeles in 1982, when Martínez ran for Governor of California as the Peace and Freedom Party

candidate, remembered her as impressive. “Betita was charming and stunning. She knew how to take a room and make things happen,” the friend said, adding that it was her dynamic personality that most served her.

That charm endured.

Koning-Martínez remembered that, in the mid-2000s, her mother ventured out to a then-new cafe on 24th Street, Fiore Caffé, which was near her apartment. The coffee was probably around $3 a cup, but when Martínez asked the Italian and Argentinian employees for one, all she had was a $1 bill and a $20 bill. Not wanting to break up the $20, they let her buy a coffee for $1.

It became a Betita special. Coffees for her, and exclusively her, cost $1. If she arrived too close to closing time, one of the employees escorted her home. “Everywhere she went she’d just charm people, and be full of smart questions. They knew she was really cool,” Koning-Martínez said.

Betita the romantic

McCaughan and Martínez flew to Mexico City together for a political conference. Unpacking in their hotel, Martínez whipped out two candles.

“‘I said, ‘Do you think the power will go out?’” McCaughan said.

“She said, ‘No. I always travel with fine candles, because you never know when you may meet a fine man.”

Betita the friend

The envelope filled with crimson red rose petals arrived in December, 1977. Martínez sent it, along with a letter full of condolences, to Talamante, who was across the country, in Philadelphia. Talamante, a former political prisoner in Argentina in the early '70s, had learned her activist friend was *desaparecida* or "disappeared" — oftentimes, code for killed. "I'll never forget that [letter]. It was so supportive," Talamante said.

That show of friendship happened again during the funeral of Talamante's mother on Dec. 12, 2008, which was also Martínez's birthday. The mass and burial was down south in Gilroy. "She was there with Tessa, because we were a family," Talamante said.

Perhaps Martinez best summed up her life in a tribute talking about her political activism. "Gains are made through struggle," she said. "The heart just insists on it."