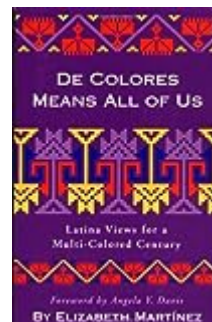


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Elizabeth Martinez.** *De Colores Means All of Us: Latina Views for a Multi-Colored Century.* Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 1998. xviii + 254 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89608-584-8; \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89608-583-1.



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## Remembering Something Ancient and Imagining Something New

*De Colores Means All of Us* is a collection of recent writings by long-time activist Elizabeth “Betita” Martinez. This thought-provoking collection of essays, previously published in various journals, is a significant contribution to our understanding of social movements and change. Equally important, the collection provides a useful framework and practical strategies for grassroots activists working around issues such as poverty, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality.

Betita Martinez, whose activism dates back half a century, is well known for her many achievements. She exemplifies Gramsci’s concept of an organic intellectual who grounds her work in theory as much as in lived experience. She writes from the perspective of an insider; the struggle is not “their” struggle, it is “ours.” Her work has influenced generations of academics and activists alike. Always accessible, Martinez writes passionately about injustice and the activists who work for social transformation.

*De Colores* is the most recent in a long line of important works by Martinez. In the 1960s, Martinez founded

and edited an important Chicano newspaper, *El Grito del Norte*. She later produced one of the classic works of the Chicano movement *500 Years of Chicano History* (originally published in 1976).[1] In her newest work, she examines Latina and Latino activism in the 1990s. She finds a vibrant activism whose roots are woven into the history of the Chicano movement and other social movements of the 1960s. She also encounters an activism that has emerged in response to the backlash against the gains made in earlier decades. *De Colores* explores recent attacks on multiculturalism, immigrants’ rights, women’s rights, environmental justice, and myriad other issues facing Americans at the end of this century. Calling for youth to lead the way, she urges communities of color and working class people to build alliances with each other in order to recover and expand the gains of the 1960s and 1970s.

*De Colores* is part of a growing body of literature written by Chicana and Latina activist scholars.[2] The literature reflects the longevity of one of the basic tenets of early Chicana/o activism –that the academy would

be transformed if Chicano scholars maintained strong ties to the community. Martinez never lets us forget where we came from. In reality, it is precisely “where we came from” that forms the basis of her analysis and her activism. Continually aware of the history that created the present, Martinez calls on each of us to learn about the past, its triumphs and its failures. Like other recent works by Chicanas, *De Colores* reflects the intellectual development of Chicana Studies as an interdisciplinary field which is cognizant of the many intricacies and contradictions contained within the struggle for social change and justice.

In her introduction to the collection, Martinez makes “two commitments with this book: to remember something ancient and to imagine something new . . . Something ancient includes the pre-Columbian roots of Raza and the best of our indigenous traditions, which honor balance and respect for all living creatures. Something new – now, there is the trick. It needs to include the promise of transformation” (p. xvii). She honors these commitments throughout the book, a work in which she consciously “attempt[s] to avoid both empty nostalgia and paralyzing cynicism” (p. xv). Throughout this collection of separate yet interrelated essays, Martinez looks to the past to recover both the failures and successes of Latino activism and to the present where she calls on young activists to “light up a new path today” (p. xv).

She does not hesitate to critique the Chicano movement of the 1960s for its sexism, heterosexism, and narrow cultural nationalism. In “Chingon Politics Die Hard,” Martinez observes that sexism among Chicano activists is alive and well. In describing a reunion of Chicano activists held in San Antonio, Texas in 1989, Martinez notes that while there were efforts to recognize women’s work, “old-style practices and attitudes reasserted themselves” as men dominated the stage, turning Chicanas into an invisible presence (p. 174). She is not afraid to challenge the icons of the Chicano movement. Nor does she slight the accomplishments of youth, as in the case of the student hunger strike at UCLA in 1993, an action that gained wide support for UCLA’s Chicano Studies program. Constantly aware of the contradictions inherent in social action, she analyzes more recent struggles with the same critical eye with which she views earlier events. In the example of the hunger strike, she notes that while it was the actions of the students that ensured the survival of the Chicano Studies program at UCLA, students were later “shoved aside” and “neutralized” every step of the way (p. 225). Martinez is fearless in her analysis of Chicano activism.

Martinez divides her book into six sections, each representing a particular overarching theme. Part I, “Seeing More than Black and White” explores an issue which Martinez has written about for decades – the invisibility of Latinos in a country which sees itself only in terms of Black and white. In the early 1960s, Martinez directed the New York office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. As a Chicana in a Black civil rights organization with white supporters, Martinez lived first-hand the “Black-white dualism” that she examines in the essay “Seeing More than Black and White.” Part I argues that social justice may be achieved only through alliance building. And alliance building will succeed only when people of color learn their shared history and their commonalities. She provides this counsel cautiously. “Talking race in these United States is an intellectual mine-field; for every observation one can find three contradictions and four necessary qualifications from five different racial groups” (p. 20). While urging activists to acknowledge our common history, she also challenges us to engage in discussions about race that highlight the contradictions and complexities found within that history.

Part II, “No Hay Fronteras: The Attack on Immigrant Rights,” examines popular culture (“For Whom the Taco Bell Tolls”), NAFTA, and anti-immigrant legislation. Martinez urges progressive people to build a “transnational movement for civil and human rights, a movement that will empower working-class people everywhere. Such a movement requires all of us to educate ourselves about our histories and commonalities, including our experiences of working together, so as to break the mythology of inevitable division and domination” (p. 80). This section sustains Martinez’s vision of the interconnectedness of all people. Mobilization is not just desirable, Martinez argues, it is necessary if all people are to be treated with respect.

The following three sections of *De Colores* (Part III, “Fighting for Economic and Environmental Justice”; Part IV, “Racism and the Attack on Multiculturalism,” and Part V, “Woman Talk: No Taco Belles Here”) continue the collection’s blend of historical analysis, humor, wit, and sharp political critique. Her message remains strong: transformation can only come about if we look beyond the divisions imposed upon us.

The final section of the book, Part VI, “La Lucha Continua: Youth in the Lead,” looks to the future, calling on youth to provide the vision and the leadership necessary in a movement for social change. It is perhaps in this section that Martinez most clearly outlines her strategies for

building alliances. In her essay, "Raza Si! Nationalism . . .?" Martinez provides the following advice to youth: "Building alliances calls for us to break down the walls of mutual prejudice that exist. To do so, we need to hammer out strong tools. One is simply education: learning about each other's history, current experience and culture, beginning very young. In this ahistorical nation, that is no small task" (p. 244). She urges activists to work together in a spirit of mutual respect, affirming each other's culture. Furthermore, she cautions that change requires "honest self-criticism and analysis" (p. 245).

*De Colores* is in many ways a modest book. The essays range in length from two pages to ten pages. Yet, the book is a profound and challenging work. No reader can open its pages and remain unaffected. It is the kind of book that produces laughter, tears, and anger. When I used the collection in an upper-division American Studies class recently, students responded with delight and horror at Martinez's use of language. For example, in her short essay on Taco Bell commercials, she writes, "Listen up, all you Chicanos and Chicanas out there! Call yourselves Hispanics if you like, but it will do no good when Taco Bell gets you. Time to catch on, fellow spics, this land is not our land – it belongs to the gringotes and their Border Lights" (p. 66). The class also responded with anger, both at Martinez's challenges ("Listen Up, Anglo Sisters") and at their own lack of historical knowledge. Why hadn't they heard of the events described in the book before?

*De Colores* is a challenging, thought-provoking collection of essays, firmly fixed within a broad understanding of history and an undying hope for the future.

#### Notes

[1]. *500 Years of Chicano History* continues to be an important work, more than twenty years after its first publication. It also continues to be a controversial work. Recently, two Vaughn, New Mexico schoolteachers, Nadine and Patsy Cordova, were fired from their long-held teaching positions for using the book in the classroom. The 1997 firings have since been overturned. Martinez is currently at work on a new project, *500 Years of Chicana History*.

[2]. Other recent works by Latina activist scholars include *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity* by Aurora Levins Morales (1998); *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History (Theories of Representation and Difference)* by Emma Perez (1999); the essays in *Living Chicana Theory* edited by Carla Trujillo (1997); Deena Gonzalez's *Refusing the Favor: Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe, 1820-1880* (1999); and numerous works by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, including *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House : Cultural Politics and the Cara Exhibition* (1998).

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