

POETIC JUSTICE IN A TIME OF WAR

Recently, a friend of ours, well-known poet Martin Espada, did something extraordinary at a reading at the University of Kansas, which was co-sponsored by Coca-Cola.

After explaining the atrocious labor record in Colombia, where thousands of trade unionists have been killed, tortured, disappeared or threatened with death, he said: "I am donating the entire amount of Coke's contribution to tonight's event to SINALTRAINAL (the National Food Workers Union that represents workers at the Coca-Cola bottling plants in Colombia). ... Giving up \$1,200 is not easy for a poet, but the union needs the money more than I do. Thank you."

Espada has raised the bar. He embodies the highest ideals of what it truly means to be a human being.

In times of war, we can either be oblivious, reactive or creative. He chose the path of creative resistance.

Through the years in our writings, we have not simply reported the news or interpreted the world around us. We have been part of a dynamic process that seeks to recover memory -- the memory of peoples and of a continent. On this path, we have met many other Espadas.

Some resist with the only thing they have: their bodies, to not simply remember, but to create history. Today, we see these kinds of sacrifices being made all over the country -- often from students and workers -- for the purpose of stopping sweatshop labor and other exploitative working conditions. On the eve of Cesar Chavez' birthday (March 31), the Taco Bell boycott is now over. Taco Bell has agreed to meet the labor demands of the Florida farmworkers.

At this time, we think of Teresa Cordova, a fearless Chicana activist scholar, who is now a county supervisor in New Mexico. Her husband, Miguel Acosta, who has dedicated his keen intellect to youth, now serves on the Albuquerque school board. Like many other friends, they went from outsiders to insiders, to create a history of social justice.

We also commemorate the Sokaogan Mole Lake Chippewa, who won a momentous victory in 2003 when they and the Forest County Powtawatomi bought the Crandon Mine, saving their waterways, Rice Lake and sacred burial grounds in Wisconsin. Over the decades, they fought off various corporations. That victory reminds us that justice is not limited to protecting the rights of human beings.

Last week, three elders passed on. The songster Lalo Guerrero, the abuelo of Chicano music, is no doubt now singing "Tacos for Two" in the spirit world and doing the Chicaspatas (zoot suit) boogie. Presente. Literature giant Octavio Romano also moved on this past week. He gave many writers their own start (including the acclaimed Rudy Anaya and Luis Rodriguez) with a publishing house he co-founded in 1969, Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol. Write on. Finally, a legend in Indian Country, David Risling Jr. has moved on to look for salmon upstream. He was the founder and co-founder of many American Indian organizations, including the Native American Fund, and was a pioneer in the field of Native American Studies.

Also, at this time, we think of the living, namely, Betita Martinez, Enriqueta Vasquez and Phil Duran. All are memory, narrative and the embodiment of the future of humanity.

At the age of 80, Martinez recently suffered a stroke. This woman warrior and author ("500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures" and the forthcoming "500 Years of Chicana History") is

perhaps the most uncelebrated giant in the history of both the black/brown civil rights movements. Suffice it to say that she is walking inspiration.

Vasquez, an elder and a historic figure out of San Cristobal, N.M., along with Martinez, is one of the few women columnists from the 1960s who continues to write. Both wrote for El Grito del Norte. Vasquez has a forthcoming book: "The Women of La Raza." It is a creation story that ends with the Chicana movement and Aztlan.

She wrote to us about her observations regarding her troubled interaction with university publishers: "First, one of the reasons that we do not know our history is that 'Mexican' history is foreign history, or so they brainwash us in the schools."

Or they suppress our narratives.

Duran, a Tigua elder, also has a forthcoming book, "Bringing Back the Spirit." It is a gem that perhaps will never see the light of day in a New York Times book review. Why? Because it is an indigenous elder's prescription for curing our ailing society during wartime. Though his words will see the light of day.

That's how we end this chapter with Universal. We continue our writings as columnists and storytellers ... with the inspiration of people whose spirits refuse to die.

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