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INTRODUCTION

In this publication, we are setting out to recover histories, struggles, and resistance in Latin America and place ourselves in moments of the history of *Nuestra América*¹ – ‘Our America’ – when women have been on the front lines of the battle to build a more just world. This history encompasses an enormous diversity of sectors, geographies, climates, flavours, and sounds, an entire universe of people, of dissidents, who, step by step, have walked the path of history. We are setting out on a path to recover the history of struggles, resistance, insurrections, and revolutionary dreams that have been led by women and LGBTQ+ people throughout the region at different times in order to find the seeds of the popular Latin American feminisms that exist today.

These feminisms emerge from popular, collective struggles that are born as vital means of self-defence on the fringes of the peripheries. To speak

Chrysalises #01

*Feminist
Memories from
Latin America and
the Caribbean*

Written by: Erika
Takeo (ATC-CLOC),
Tania Aruzamen
(Nativa), and ALBA
(Brazil)



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of popular feminisms in Latin America and the Caribbean means thinking about all that women and LGBTQ+ people do every day as they fight for the common good in places where precariousness prevails. It is to speak of that intersection where the communal becomes a fundamental space to guarantee life, always in tension with the pedagogy of cruelty that governs our societies. Popular feminism raises the banner of the collective over the individual; it transforms everything that must be transformed for the decent life that the 'nobodies' deserve.

In addition to being organisers and leaders of national processes in various social sectors, popular feminists have set to work vigorously alongside hundreds of comrades to create and sustain a continental platform of social movements as part of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, or ALBA (which translates as 'dawn'). Founded one dawn on Venezuela's Margarita Island by Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro, ALBA is a polysemic concept that is dear to our region.

The continent's platform of popular organisations, known as ALBA Movimientos, seeks to understand the continent's current context through the eyes of struggle and mobilisation. Of course, in order to do this, it is essential to have material that reclaims the history of the struggles

of the women and dissidents of *Nuestra América* who preceded what today is a struggle for the transformative power of history in every corner of our region.

Alba Movimientos
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TODAY I WANT TO SING TO
YOU, RURAL MARÍA...



ARLEN SIU

THE MOCKINGBIRD TELLS OF ARLEN²

Those who knew her say that, despite the times in which she lived, Arlen was a woman of revolutionary and advanced ideas whose intelligence was complemented by her musical talents playing the guitar, accordion, and piano. as well as the gifts of writing, drawing, and painting. She was a poet, artist, intellectual, and revolutionary.

Arlen Siu was born in Jinotepe, in the department of Carazo in Nicaragua on 15 July 1955. She grew up in an intercultural family, her father a migrant of Chinese origin and her mother Nicaraguan. Considering the financial means of Arlen's family and her intelligence, she could have achieved any of the goals that young women of her time and economic status set for themselves. However, she chose to be a guerrilla fighter, and, with that commitment, she decided to take

to the mountains, where the cruelty of the Somoza dictatorship was most relentless.³

Arlen was a gifted writer, and she used her words to express her indignation in the face of injustice. Among her most revealing pieces was the final letter she sent to her parents:

Mankind's⁴ determined struggle to achieve perfection is true love. We are more authentic insofar as we break down barriers and limitations, bravely and optimistically confronting the vicissitudes that appear along the way. One day, you come to discover that we are capable of more than what is asked of us, and that we can achieve what for some is forbidden or impossible.

With each of her revolutionary acts, Arlen became more authentic. Such was the case in December 1974, when after having accompanied over five hundred workers rebelling against the abuses committed by the textile company Sacos Centroamericanos, S.A. (SACSA) in Diriamba, Carazo, she organised study circles with worker leaders. In these circles, she made use of two communiqués issued by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) during their raid on Minister Chema Castillo's house and during the release of Somoza's captured henchmen in exchange for FSLN political prisoners.⁵ On 1 August 1975, Arlen was killed in action in El Sauce, León (in the west of Nicaragua)

while covering for her comrades as they retreated during an unequal battle against three hundred armed national guards. Mario Estrada, Gilberto Rostrán, Julia Herrera de Pomares, Mercedes Reyes, Hugo Arévalo, and Juan and Leónidas Espinoza were also killed.

Arlen Siu did not live to see the triumph of the Sandinista Popular Revolution in 1979, but she nonetheless played a key role in the struggle and in organising workers and the population. Even after her death, she inspired the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (Rural Workers' Association) in their work building a rural workers' social movement through her poem *María Rural* ('Rural María').

ARLEN SINGS TO
MARÍA AND TO THE
PEASANT WOMEN
WHO GUARD THE
SEEDS THAT SOW
AND FEED POOR
COMMUNITIES.
DIDN'T ARLEN,
THROUGH HER
SONG, NOURISH A
FEMINIST VIEW
OF THE PEASANT
WORLD? ISN'T
THERE A SEED
HERE, TOO, OF
TODAY'S PEASANT
FEMINISM?



Rural María

Along the country paths
You carry your sorrow with you
Your sorrow of love and tears
In your womb of clay and earth

Your earthenware jar
That you fill year after year
With the seed that is sown
By the peasant in his poverty

Today I want to sing to you, rural María
Oh, mother of the countryside
Mother without equal
Today I want to sing
Of your poor children
Your sad debris
Your maternal pain

Malnutrition and poverty
Are what surround you
A silent straw hut
Just the murmur of the jungle

Your hands are of cedar
Your eyes the sadness of dusk
Your tears the mud
That you shed in the mountains

Por los senderos del campo
Llevas cargando tu pena
Tú pena de amor y de llanto
En tu vientre de arcilla y tierra

Tu tinajita redonda
Que llenas año con año
De la semilla que siembra
El campesino en su pobreza

Hoy quiero cantarte maría rural
Oh madre del campo
Madre sin igual
Hoy quiero cantar
Tus vástagos pobres
Tu despojos triste
Dolor maternal

Desnutrición y pobreza
Es lo que a vos te rodea
Choza de paja en silencio
Solo el rumor de la selva

Tus manos son de cedro
Tus ojos crepúsculos tristes
Tus lágrimas son barro
Que derramas en las sierras

For this reason, on this occasion
I want to sing to your heart
Today I want to tell you how I feel
About so much poverty and desolation

Through meadows and rivers
The peasant mother roams
Feeling the winter cold
And her terrible fate

Along the country paths
You carry your sorrow with you
Your sorrow of love and tears
In your womb of clay and earth

Today I want to sing to you, rural María
Oh, mother of the countryside
Mother without equal
Today I want to sing
Of your poor children
Your sad debris
Your maternal pain

Por esa razón en esta ocasión
Hoy quiero cantar a tu corazón
Hoy quiero decirte lo que siento
Por tanta pobreza y desolación

Por la praderas y ríos
Va la madre campesina
Sintiendo frío el invierno
Y terrible su destino

Por los senderos del campo
Llevas cargando tu pena
Tú pena de amor y de llanto
En tu vientre de arcilla y tierra

Hoy quiero cantarte María rural
¡Oh! madre del campo
Madre sin igual
Hoy quiero cantar
Tus vástagos pobres
Tu despojos triste
Dolor maternal

'I BEGAN MY ACTIVISM VERY EARLY, WITHOUT REALISING I WAS AN ACTIVIST, YOU KNOW? AS A FEMINIST, FROM HOME, IN THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE'⁶

- DONA NINA



DONA NINA

Maria Madalena dos Santos, better known as Dona Nina, is seventy-three years old and has two daughters, three sons, three granddaughters, and two grandsons. She was born in the *quilombola*⁷ community of Cafundó dos Crioulos in the city of Santa Maria da Vitória, Bahia State, where she began and continues her activism. Dona Nina is a rural *quilombola* woman, a popular educator, trade unionist, and the president of her community association.

Dona Nina became involved in organising around the struggle of rural women in the early 1980s following the attacks on peasants in her home region, including through land evictions, displacement caused by the construction of dams, and the extreme exploitation of their labour, which mostly fell on peasant women who, at the time, received a quarter of what men received for a day's work. She later learned that the same phenomenon was taking place in several regions across the

DONA NINA WAS A COORDINATOR OF THE NATIONAL PLATFORM OF RURAL WOMEN WORKERS (ANMTR) AND CONTRIBUTED TO BUILDING A GLOBAL ORGANISATION OF PEASANTS.

country, and that rural women were also organising there.

In the 1980s, there was a resurgence of popular organisations in Brazil. In Bahía, Dona Nina, together with other rural women, realised that they needed autonomous and self-organised processes; without this, their demands would not be included as part of broader struggles. So, she became one of the coordinators of the National Platform of Rural Women Workers (ANMTR) and actively participated in the struggles to ensure that social security programmes and protections would be included in the 1988 Constitution. She was also the coordinator of the national campaign 'No undocumented rural workers'.

The fight for a better world led Dona Nina to travel all over Brazil and the world, where she participated in debates on the need for a global peasant organisation and in the first congresses of CLOC/ La Vía Campesina.⁸ Dona Nina was instrumental in the process to create the national Peasant Women's Movement (MMC) in 2004, which emerged together with the international peasants' movement. As the coordinator of peasant women in the northeast, she travelled to several states to discuss the importance of a national movement

so that the feminist and peasant struggle would become a reality. Dona Nina recalls: 'It was not easy; some people didn't want it [to happen], and they got in the way, but we knew it was important that women be fully included in the term "peasant". Today, we have achieved that.'

At the age of 73, Dona Nina continues to contribute to the political coordination of the MMC in Bahía. She is a guardian of indigenous seeds and of the Cerrado savanna, serving as inspiration for resistance and commitment to women's struggles in the fields, forests, and wetlands. She is part of the living history of popular peasant feminism.

WITH FEMINISM,
WE BUILD SOCIALISM!



'THE DOUBLE DISCRIMINATION WE SUFFER AS WOMEN AND AS INDIGENOUS PEASANTS IN OUR FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, ORGANISATIONS, AND SOCIETY AS A WHOLE HAS LED US TO FIGHT AGAINST THE VIOLATION OF OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AND TO DEFEND OUR FULL AND EQUAL PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING'.

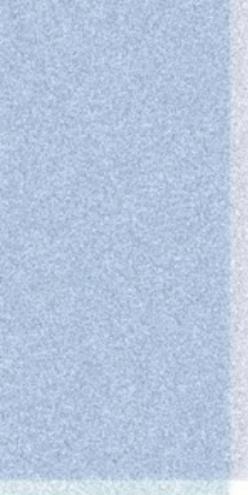
—BARTOLINA SISA NATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF PEASANT WOMEN OF BOLIVIA



LAS BARTOLINAS

The Bartolina Sisa National Confederation of Peasant Women of Bolivia (whose members are known as 'Las Bartolinas') is the most influential women's movement in Bolivia and is well-known far beyond the country's borders.

The confederation, named in homage to the Aymara hero Bartolina Sisa (one of the most emblematic women of Latin America's eighteenth century anti-colonial struggles), was founded on 10 January 1980 in a national congress, continuing the legacy of the decisive role that many women played through the peasant women's unions during the period of military dictatorships. This movement emerged and developed as Bolivia rebuilt its democracy and as popular organisations began to regroup. It was created with the vision that rural women would fully participate in this process through their own organisation and would be able to fully participate in roadblocks, hunger



strikes, marches, and other forms of collective action by peasants.

Through their actions, Las Bartolinas seek to reclaim land and food sovereignty as well as dignity among Bolivia's peasant and Indigenous women. The confederation seeks the equal participation of women in political, social, and economic spaces through the Aymara framework of *chacha warmi*⁹ as a concept of gender equality. They also promote the ongoing education and training of women as the only way to free their minds from oppression and ignorance and achieve true freedom.

LAS BARTOLINAS
FIGHT FOR THE
SOCIAL, ECONOMIC,
POLITICAL,
AND CULTURAL
ADVANCEMENT
OF PEASANT,
INDIGENOUS, AND
AFRO-BOLIVIAN
WOMEN.



Las Bartolinas fight for the social, economic, political, and cultural advancement of peasant, indigenous, and Afro-Bolivian women. They also strive to build a political platform for peasant, indigenous, and Afro-Bolivian women based on their nationality, political programme, unity, reciprocity, and solidarity with the country's labour and popular organisations.

Furthermore, they are part of the fight against illiteracy in the countryside, demanding public and free education for children in coordina-

tion with parents, teachers, and education authorities and promoting bonds of fraternity, solidarity, and reciprocity among the peasant and indigenous women and girls of Bolivia. This process must also defend fundamental rights, including women's rights to education and food sovereignty, and guarantee gender equality and the full participation of all women.

Las Bartolinas also fight for land and territorial rights and ownership, which are key to the sovereignty of indigenous and rural peoples. In doing so, they seek to disseminate and reaffirm the cultural and historical identity of the indigenous peoples and nationalities of Bolivia in order to build a unified, plurinational state.

Three Periods in the History of 'Bartolina' Women

The Bartolina Sisa National Confederation of Peasant Women of Bolivia was shaped by a progression of events, beginning with its incipient debate on its role within the peasant movement. This included the need to build an autonomous organisation rather than join the existing organisation formed by men, the Unified Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTB). So, Las Bartolinas built their own identity as an autonomous movement of peasant women, forming their own confederation with the same influence and importance in the Bolivian sociopolitical scene.

The Bartolina Sisa Confederation soon took on a leading role in the country. In 1994, the confederation was among the organisations that founded the Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (IPSP), later to be known as the MAS-IPSP, with the aim of securing a leading role and direct participation in the country's parliamentary politics. MAS-IPSP would later become the party through which the working, indigenous, and peasant classes came to power for over a decade beginning with the presidency of Evo Morales.

During this period, the organisation directly participated in the state and in forming public policy, such as seeking to guarantee the political participation of Bolivian women through a policy of gender parity. It has since become impossible to speak of Bolivian politics without recognising the pioneering role of Las Bartolinas. Today, women who are part of the organisation hold senior positions in the state and are leaders of regional politics.

Las Bartolinas' leading role among Bolivian social movements and their influence on Bolivian public policy represent a huge step forward in terms of women's political participation in the country. It is important for this successful example of women's advancement in such key spaces to spread, but it is also the duty of all organisations to guarantee women the full exercise of their political rights not only in Bolivia, but across the Global South.

Endnotes

- 1 **Translator's note:** *Nuestra América*, or 'Our America', is a construct linked to promoting the regional integration of Central and South America and forging a Latin American identity, as a project opposed to European and US cultural imperialism. The concept stems from Cuban national hero José Martí's 1881 essay of the same title.
- 2 **Translator's note:** This is a reference to the song 'El zenzontle pregunta por Arlen' ('The Mockingbird Asks About Arlen') by Nicaraguan singer-songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy.
- 3 **Translator's note:** Members of the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua from 1936 to 1979.
- 4 **Translator's note:** The writings of Arlen Siu, like many original texts from this period, have a historic and political value that should be interpreted contextually. For this reason, we have made the editorial decision not to modify the use of words such as 'mankind' in the translations cited in this text and, in so doing, conserve its original content. However, we believe that it is necessary to clarify that, in re-reading and re-publishing these passages, we are faced with the intellectual exercise of entering into dialogue with and updating these ideas. This is especially the case when discussing the role of men and women in the revolutionary process. To read this text in today's context – when we are faced with the historic challenge of building diverse feminist organisations – brings with it new political, social, and cultural coordinates that call on our militant creativity to rethink this notion, its significance, and its political and intellectual legacy.
- 5 **Translator's note:** On 27 December 1974, FSLN guerrillas stormed a party at José María 'Chema' Castillo's home, where top figures of the Anastasio Somoza Debayle dictatorship were gathered, taking hostages and demanding the release of political prisoners.

- 6 **Translator's note:** Here, *militancia* is translated as 'activism' rather than 'militancy', though the original term in Spanish, *militancia*, denotes a strong, active, and generally long-term commitment to a specific political or social movement or project.
- 7 **Translator's note:** Brazil's quilombola communities are settlements that were originally established by escaped African and Afro-Brazilian slaves and maintain a strong sense of their identity and roots.
- 8 **Translator's note:** The Latin American Coordination of Rural Organisations (CLOC) was established in February 1994 in Lima, Peru. La Vía Campesina International Peasants' Movement was founded in 1993 in Mons, Belgium.
- 9 **Translator's note:** *chacha* (man) and *warmi* (woman) is an Aymara concept whereby the two complement each other and as such, neither is subordinated to the other.
- 10 **Translator's note:** *Mística*, literally translated as mystique or mysticism, is a key concept of Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement that has extended to popular movements across the continent and world. As John Hammon, a friend of the MST who has written about the concept, explains: 'This untranslatable word refers to an expressive performance, mainly nonverbal, that incorporates themes central to the goals of the movement and affirms confidence in the achievability of those goals. It is a regular practice of the MST. It is intended to promote a sense of identity as a separate group and commitment to the group's purposes. The term *mística* refers not just to the performance, however, but to the whole world view that underlies it, drawing on traditions of Christian mysticism to affirm unity with a transcendent reality. ... Through participating in or observing *mística*, people express their ideals and believe that they come closer to attaining them.' For more, see the full article: mstbrazil.org/sites/default/files/2014_Interface-6-1-Hammond%2C%20mistica.pdf



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Seemingly inactive, chrysalises rest. Many choose to camouflage themselves and assume the shape and colour of their surroundings. They go unnoticed as they prepare for metamorphosis. With effort, they break open and awaken, spreading their wings and connecting with the world transformed.

These women are all chrysalises: Arlen Siu in her commitment to the peasant struggle and the Nicaraguan Revolution; Dona Nina with her tireless commitment to organising peasant women in Brazil; and Las Bartolinas, who have led the way as central actors in the resistance against dictatorships and neoliberalism and in building a plurinational political project in Bolivia.

May the chrysalises, memories of disobedience in the Global South, grow with the mystique¹⁰ of this fanzine, passed from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth.

