

May Nordquist Diaz Professor of Anthropology University of California, Berkeley

[1962 – 1974]

Provost of Kresge College, University of California, Santa Cruz

Celebration and Memoir of a Fierce, Frank, Funny Feminist Marxist Anthropologist



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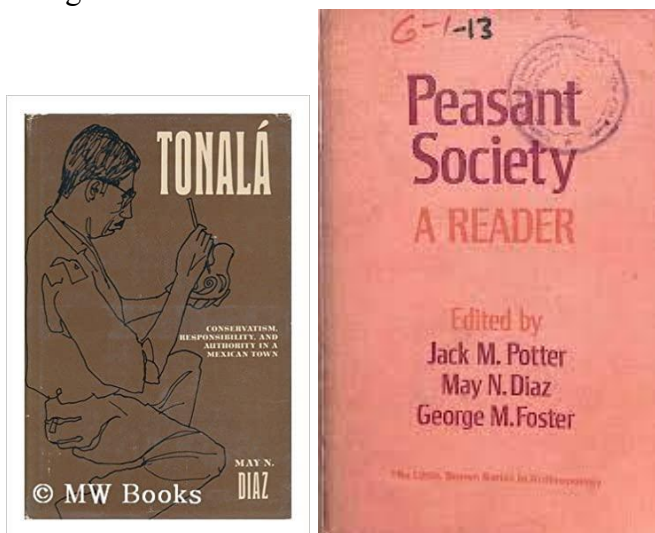
Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Chancellors Professor of Anthropology

Like so many other doctorates of Anthropology at UC Berkeley, I was so lucky and grateful to have May N. Diaz as my primary mentor in our department at UC Berkeley in the early 1970s. At that time there were very few women in the department including Professors Emerita Laura Nader and Phyllis Dolinow. May was a definitive Marxist anthropologist as well as a strong feminist before there was university recognition of the emerging field of Women's Studies along side politics as its mid-wife. As there were no courses in the May Diaz also taught an informal seminar on radical feminism some of which took place in my back yard on Benvenue Street. The seminar grew as anthropologists and graduate students from Stanford University joined up with May's seminar. It resulted in a Women's Studies curriculum that led to a UC Berkeley Center for the Continuing Education of Women that opened in October 1972 with May as the first Director of the project. The Women's Faculty Club provided space for the new Center, which May described as a "visible welcome sign to women who wished to enter or to return to higher education". Meanwhile, Prof. Diaz was mentoring a large cohort of anthropology graduate students, men and women but all supporting women's rights and studies. May taught all her protégés to be open to many changes in cultural anthropology including the new subfield of feminist anthropology.

It was an exciting time and during this period there were many demonstrations and Teach-Ins on campus. Bill Diaz, May's husband, and an organic radical thinker was invited to the Berkeley Department of Anthropology to give a lecture about the history of

labor rights. Together, May and Bill taught our generation about of the difference between labor rights and academic dissent. Could we find ways to work together?

Professor Diaz is the author of *Tonalá: Conservatism, Responsibility and Authority In A Mexican Town (1966)* an elegant and beautifully written ethnography that dealt with the plight of a small traditional community engulfed by a neighboring industrial metropolis. She had studied a community of peasants and potters located ten miles from the city of Guadalajara in west central Mexico. Based on her fieldwork that both she and her husband conducted in Tonalá, May wrote about the everyday lives of the community bringing them to life not only as individuals but also as participants in a complex social-economic situation. Her reflections were often laced with humor and wit. May was not a religious woman but she tried to be what anthropologists call participant-observers so she thought it best to go to Mass every Sunday and on special feast days. One afternoon a neighbor asked May if she enjoyed going to Mass. May politely affirmed that she very much enjoyed Holy Mass. The neighbor replied, “ Really? I much more enjoy going to the movies.” May had a good laugh about that incident and she used it to teach ethnographic methods in which she said that it was best to be honest about one’s beliefs and background. A better response would have been, she said, to explain that she was trying to understand Catholic rituals rather than pretending to be a Catholic. Professor Diaz co-authored a classic book on *Peasant Society* (1967) with George Foster and Jack Potter.



By the time I was preparing for my fieldwork in 1973 I could not get a Visa to Brazil as I had hoped because during my two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer (1964-66), during the military dictatorship, I was told not to return due to my politics of dissent. When I told might that I would be doing my fieldwork in the rural west of Ireland she did not at first accept my proposal to study celibacy and mental health among the bachelor farmers of the Dingle Peninsula. My second mentor was the late Professor George DeVos, a psychological anthropologist. What had happened to my radical and Marxist ideologies? What about the political IRA ‘troubles’ there? I thought it would be too difficult (and dangerous for my three small children) to deal overtly with the IRA during my year of fieldwork in a small Irish village of cow and sheep farmers, and

fishermen. May relented when I told her that would return to Brazil for my next ethnographic project.

While in Ireland I typed my daily fieldnotes on a small portable Olivetti 32 with additional carbon copies. Each week I would send my carbon copies of my fieldnotes to May to have her advice. The people in the village were initially standoffish though curious about what my family and I were doing in Cloghane. I tried my best to explain my work, which over the year moved from the decline of subsistence economies due to the Common Market to spending time in the county mental hospital where too many rural people were confined or warehoused. There was dissent among the community of barely 400 residents about what anthropology was. An outspoken farmer warned the villagers that I might bring out a measuring tape to put around their heads to see how smart or not each one was. He had heard about what was then called physical anthropology. It took a while to convince the community that I was studying the decline in population and the anomie it seemed to bring into the social life of the small village.

Weeks passed without getting any response from my mentor. I was sure that the lack of response meant that my research was useless. As the days grew windier and the rains never stopped and with our three children, ages 4, 2, and 5 months old not doing well with oatmeal every morning and ‘bangers’ (an Irish sausage) with mash for dinner. An elderly chap suggested that I add a little bit of Guinness stout on their plates.



I began to rebel against the taboo of breastfeeding, and resumed nursing my infant son always with a large draped blanket for privacy. The local economy was based on small herds of cows that produced milk and cream for the village Creamery. Breast-feeding was seen as primitive behavior; it was ‘animal-like’ I was told. Not only was it seen as degenerate, it was seen as a sin. Nursing ones infant seemed sexual to the stoic farmers and their wives and I was accused of seducing the single men of the village. I tried to wean my baby son Nathanael but he had a virulent allergy to cow milk. I thought that goats’ milk might be better but it was extremely precious and kept for the ‘oldest not the youngest ones’ in the village. On top of that how could I visit the dispersed cottages in the hills and crevices of the village, when the majority of the community was middle-aged bachelors? The locate curate was supportive and he suggested that I might be able to meet some of the men by visiting Peg’s pub a few nights a week while Mike could took care of the children. You might well imagine what being the only woman to share pints of porter and to sing “the Patriot’s Game” with a small

round of single men in an all male pub (except for Peg the owner), might what have been like. It just wasn't working out, I thought.

So, I sent a letter to May Diaz saying that I was giving up on my fieldwork in Cloghane and my family and I would be returning to Berkeley without the fieldwork data I needed for my dissertation. But just as we were packing up to leave our little rented house with a donkey in the back yard, a few of the local farmers began to ask if there was anything we needed, and over night there would be boxes of fresh poultry, carrots and new potatoes left on our doorstep. At the same time a letter arrived for me in the local post office in the home of a couple that also owned the only little grocery store. The envelope was stamped with the logo of the University of California. Soon enough the post office gathered a little crowd to see who had sent me the letter and what it was about. It took me a few minutes to rip it open and here is what it said:

'Dear Nancy, I just wanted to tell you that I can't wait each time your packet of fieldnotes arrive. It's the first thing I grab to read from my mailbox at Kroeber Hall. I loved the story about the bachelor next door who brought his cow from the barn into his house after his mother died and he was feeling lonely. I can see that you are already writing a book, not just a dissertation. Just keep on writing. Yours, May Diaz.'

Dear May, I would never be the anthropologist I am today were it not for your letter. Bless you for all you have done for anthropology, for women's education, and for your hundreds of student protégés. Viva Marxist Feminism!