

## Meeting June Nash (1927-2019)<sup>1</sup>

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“The past is a general state in which our ancestors lived. The future is, at most, a recapitulation of the past” (June Nash, 1970)

June Nash, one of the most recognized contemporary Marxist anthropologists, passed away in December 9<sup>th</sup> 2019. June was one of the pioneers of feminist anthropology and was deeply concerned by exploitation, extractivism, capitalism and racism. She realised critical ethnographies with Mayan communities in Guatemala, Tzeltal communities in Mexico, Zapatista communities in Chiapas, tin miners Bolivia and with workers in the United States.

During the course of my research regarding the history of women in anthropology, I came to understand that the prolific work of June Nash was, in fact, relatively unfamiliar to newer generations who had not sufficiently considered the scale of the enormous contributions that June made to the field of anthropology and society. As a result, I became interested in recovering and sharing the knowledge of her life and work and set out to find her in the home where she was still living.

And so, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April 2019, I went to Leeds and I made my way to the home where June would spend her last days. We began our encounters which would last several days in April and May of 2019, in which we shared profound conversation and interviews. What I share here was what I learned from those preliminary meetings with one of anthropology’s great figures, whose work also took place in my own land of origin, Chiapas, Mexico, a person whose life and work deserve to be widely known and analyzed for immeasurably important contributions to the understanding of capitalism and social inequalities.

### **Daughter of the working class and the Great Depression.**

June Caprice Bousley was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1927, a fishing village. Her grandparents were poor migrants, recruited to work in factories, which would later suffer

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the fate of many during the Great Depression and permanently close their doors. During our conversations June recalled Josephine, her tireless mother, Joseph, her carpenter father, her two sisters, who often looked after her and the 3 hectares plot of land that her family occupied. She told me “I had a marvellous family, but times were difficult. I didn’t fully understand how difficult until much later” (J. Nash, personal communication, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

She remembered Ipswich, the village where she spent her childhood, the factories, and the working-class environment of her first years. When I asked June how her political consciousness had developed, she answered that as her parents had “faith in education” (J. Nash, personal communication, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019) and the opportunities it might provide, and this led her to university and later anthropology.

### **Anthropology in June’s life**

Anthropology captured June’s attention because it “dealt with people”, and was concerned with other issues, whereas so often “most of the social sciences sort of blocked out the personal issues”. And so, thereafter, she joined a field notably dominated by men and commented about the ethnographic practice “women...we don’t have the difficulties men do, retaining status when they go to another country. They expect to be honored. Makes it hard for them to be just one of the people”.

Nash completed her doctoral studies in 1960, at the University of Chicago. She faced her field neither seeking recognition nor thinking too much about what others thought of her because what truly mattered to her were the people, their lives and their struggles. She worked for many years with Sol Tax, her professor, though conducted her own work that was autonomous, original and transcendent for anthropological and ethnographical studies in Latin America and for that reason, she became Distinguished Professor Emerita at the City University of New York (CUNY).

### **June’s Legacy**

For June, anthropology signified “to make another life”. June had immense respect in the understanding of cultures, peoples, and Indigenous languages. When she worked in Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas, she learned Tzeltal because, in part due to control exercised by men in the communities, almost none of the women spoke Spanish. Subsequently, Nash published an ethnographic book, key amongst titles in anthropology: *In the Eyes of the Ancestors: Belief and Behavior in a Mayan Community* (1970). She reflected upon the exploitation of Indigenous communities in Latin America and the importance of respected and ethical labor, though never discounting these communities’ capacity to act independently in their own defence.

In 1976, she published with Helen Safa *Sex and Class in Latin America*, a work that reflects on the interrelation of violence due to economic class issues and the same time fact of "being a woman" in the exploitation system. She also analysed colonialism that had and has affected Indigenous communities, and the way in which that impact has metamorphosized into distinct periods of exploitation of workers, political and multinational interventions and control of territories and water though the introduction of alcohol and companies such as Coca-Cola.

In 1970, Nash traveled to Bolivia and worked on research that would later provide the impetus of the book *We Eat the Mines and the Mines Eat Us* (1979), as it did for the ethnographic documentary “I Spent My Life in the Mines” (1977). These works not only reflected upon the act of “speaking for others”, but also created new forms, which would aid in the writing of biographies and the recuperation of stories and histories such as that of Juan Rojas, a tin miner, Petrona Mamani, his wife and their child, narrating daily life, resistance and difficult conditions of their labor, a case similar to the situation of thousands of peasants and workers in Latin America.

Our paths crossing serendipitously in parallel, her journey as an anthropologist in Mexico, and my own in the United States, my meeting with June Nash was an unexpected gift for me not only as a long-time reference and role model, but also as a fundamental source of my own work. Her candid nature and our conversations have left a lasting mark upon both my professional projects and on me personally. June’s inherent generosity with her time, memories and resources are as invaluable to me as they have been to countless others. I can only hope that her life, work and passion continue to be known and multiplied.

