

***Remembering Tom Hayden***  
***December 11, 1939 to October 23, 2016***

Thomas Emmet “Tom” Hayden was a national and global peace and justice author, activists, and advocate promoting human rights the greater part of his adult life. As a long-time anti-war and civil rights activist, Hayden was elected to the California State Senate and later worked as founding director of the Peace and Justice Resource Center in Los Angeles. Also, as a prolific author or editor of 19 books, Tom spent decades committed to working with activists of the community peace and violence prevention movement seeking to address and eradicate the root causes of gang and community violence including poverty, racism, discrimination, draconian justice and law enforcement policy, and the absence of effective culturally-based prevention and intervention social policy and practice.



***The following Book Excerpt is the entire commentary of Tom Hayden chronicled for *The History of Barrios Unidos, Cultura Es Cura, Healing Community Violence.****

***Tom Hayden***

In the early turmoil of the 1960s, I think I was just a young man looking for or trying to live up a set of American values that I thought were being betrayed. Over that decade, the identity of being an Irish American, of being white, of being male—all these identities were being challenged very effectively, which left me searching. I believe this process of people seeking identity both of self and in relation to everyone else in multi-racial, multicultural America remains very important. The civil rights movement was a powerful catalyst for getting people to grapple with democracy in terms of power and oppression in relation to race and injustice. For people of color, searching was a process of revolt, reconciliation, rediscovery, reaffirmation and reclaiming.

Sadly, what could have been an era of radical reform of everything that was wrong with this country turned out in some ways to be a failure. By the mid-1970s, the Chicano and black nationalist movements were blocked, their character morphed into the issue of crime and “law and order” by forces of conservative backlash. This spin was the foundation of Richard Nixon’s war on crime. I think everybody fell for this notion except for those with no choice but to survive—those people that came out of the war zones of poverty in the *barrios* and ghettos. For people like Nane Alejandrez it was not a case of criminality but of survival and redemption: these were individuals who found victory over oppression and injustice in ways that others didn’t.

In some respects, Barrios Unidos grew out of those the civil rights movement left behind or whose needs were too deep to address. I can remember important leaders like Magdaleno Rose Avila, later of Homies Unidos, who remains an important voice in the community peace movement to end gang violence today, cutting their political teeth as a hardcore Chicano nationalist under the tutelage of the late Corky Gonzales. On the African American side, you had the product of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X, who took on the symbol of X as an expression of self-determination. The taking of his name was a powerful metaphor for reclaiming his identity and rejecting what he had to become separated from his African heritage.

The issue of coming to terms with identity is important for white people in this country as well. I think it is essential for white people to abandon the idea of whiteness, but not think out of some sense of guilt or loss of self that they can become pseudo black or pseudo Latino, which you see a lot in the hip hop culture. If you break the search down to national origin, culture, ethnicity and even the class of one’s descendants for

the dominant white groups—English, Irish, Italian, Jewish and German—there are some significant traditions of heritage, settlement and organizing along lines of ethnicity that should not be lost. I think an honest recollection of groups like the Molly Maguire’s, who were immigrant Irish workers in the coal fields, is important in America. For ethnic whites, to assimilate came to mean accepting the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant package. This sometimes means being ashamed and reprogrammed to the point of absolutely forgetting that your ancestors got here on a boat, had their rebel sensibilities swallowed in racism and expansionism, or may have committed gangland crimes to stake their place on the social and economic ladder.

The bridge to the respectability, legitimacy and privilege of middle and upper-class status too often taken by white Americans is selective amnesia or innocence by disassociation. They don’t want to embrace their gangster past except while watching the movies. But the responsibility to own the history of ones’ people is something we all inherit. Looking back on the anxieties of my parents in gaining this class status, I understand this now to have been their shame of our poor Irish past. Assimilation of this kind is damaging. It’s a way of cleansing and absolving conscience, of wiping the slate of history clean.

The reclaiming of identity that Barrios Unidos is based on, to me, is a healthy application of culture. The cultural cure that Barrios Unidos speaks of could be extended to non-Chicanos. This reclaiming of culture by non-Chicano, non-indigenous people would be good medicine for everyone, white people and others. The focus on healing and reconciliation, regarding history with the present and future, would be good for the nation. It is amazing to me how threatened people are to this strain of multiculturalism, because demographically we are a multicultural nation. In principle, we are a pluralistic democracy (*E Pluribus Unum*). It was never realistic to force everyone to adopt one cultural standard and perspective. Commentators cited in this book and elsewhere have likened the requirement of conquest being the destruction of indigenous and Mexican identity, resulting in the creation of “*cholos*.” These ‘*cholos*’ or ‘lost boys’ were being educated by a colonizing force to adopt a new identity that they really could not. This in turn partially explains the formation of alternative life ways or subcultures, such as gangs, along with their structural economic exclusion.

### ***Lessons of the Civil Rights Movement***

The student movement of the 1960s really helped to end the legal segregation that controlled the destiny of over 25 million people in the south. Had Vietnam not come along, the combination of civil rights and the War on Poverty might have become a broader revolution. The anti-war effort split the focus of student activists. In this regard, I often question whether it was an accident that the country went to war. Some say war is the health of the state, the way it manages its domestic conflicts. I’ve heard it said that there’s nothing like a war to clean out those *barrios* and ghettos and get those folks into the army. In wartime periods, the powers that be can then claim they have no money for social programs to create jobs, affordable housing, education programs and healthcare. War creates a pretext to take the energy and focus away from domestic problems and conflicts.

It is moving to me that Nane Alejandre was drafted in 1968, the year of my own crisis—a very bad time to be sent to war. I deeply admire Nane’s own path to overcome the struggles of the *barrio*, compounded by the trauma of war, addiction and resettlement in a domestic war zone upon his return. There were thousands of poor young men from the *barrios* and ghettos of America who survived the ravages of war only to return home and be swallowed up in the dire circumstances of their chronically-neglected communities. This is really a microcosm for what happened to the movement because of the war. The movement was stalled because Vietnam sapped all the energy, idealism and public resources that would otherwise have gone to waging a domestic war on poverty. The stalling of the movement and the unchanged circumstances in America’s impoverished *barrios* and ghettos set the stage for gangs to flourish. Whatever glimmer of hope that was created in these communities for long-term advancement by the civil rights movement was dashed.

Civil Rights did have tangible benefits for a fortunate few—a finite strand of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and women. There was some growth of the middle class. It was

like the movement created a few slots for those that fit the traditional mold of American advancement. For the most part, though, young brothers and sisters of color in the poorest communities were left only with aspirations that were ultimately frustrated by the lack of structural change socially, economically and politically in this country.

I remember talking to a Black Panther by the name of Kumasi who was reflecting on the advancement of Julian Bond, someone he greatly respected and admired. Kumasi thought that in some ways the advancement of the Bonds of the world was in a way more frustrating because it shut the gate for people like him. Bond was educated at a top university, fair skinned, and an articulate orator. He comfortably fit the mold acceptable for advancement. Kumasi did not blame people like Julian Bond for this, but he knew that these were the prototype individuals who would be the success stories for civil rights, leaving nothing for the more representative prototype of the ghetto. This similar phenomenon played itself out in *barrios* and ghettos across America and was almost a perverse consequence of the civil rights movement.

The civil rights movement created consciousness and aspiration for the underclass in these communities but provided no real bridge to cross into the working class or middle class. Certainly, civil rights did not solve the class issues in this country. Some will say this is due to the ongoing presence of racism and discrimination. The equation of race cannot be ignored. Many ethnic whites were lifted into the middle class during the expansionist periods between 1890 and the 1930s, thus providing working class alternatives for a generation of white ethnic gang members. Many more whites ascended between the 1930s and the economic boom following the Second World War. The question is whether a similar set of circumstances will occur to lift poor blacks and Latinos.