

Berkeley, Diaphragms, Protests, Panthers and Patent Leather Boots

Q&A with Journalist and UC Santa Cruz Lecturer Kate Coleman

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State/National Desk

The useless tape recorder's broken down for the third time in as many minutes, and now it's lying worryingly close to a hyperactive and techno-curious cat. Altogether, it hasn't been the most auspicious way for *City on a Hill Press* (CHP) to begin its interview with Kate Coleman, UC Berkeley grad, writer, and current teacher of the Personal Journalism course at UC Santa Cruz.

In the past 30 years Coleman has, among many other things, been involved with Berkeley's legendary Free Speech Movement, appeared as an on-camera reporter for KQED's nightly news program, and written for publications as diverse as *Newsweek*, *Village Voice*, *Ms.*, and *Playgirl*, tackling everything from sex columns to sports to an investigative expose on the Black Panthers. She was also involved in one of the United States' largest mass arrests, at Sproul Hall in Berkeley in 1964.

CHP found Coleman in the garden of her South Berkeley home, happy for once to be in the company of her cats Philip and Maud ("so I can say 'Come into the garden, Maud,' like the Tennyson poem"), all three of them hoping, perhaps, that this ill-prepared interloper and his shop-worn dictaphone would leave as quickly as he came.

City on a Hill Press: How did you first become involved with political groups at UC Berkeley?

Kate Coleman: Well, I was born in New Jersey, a Joisey Gail, and I came to UC Berkeley from high school in February 1960, the semester of the House of Un-American Activities (HUAC) riots. They were my baptism into Berkeley: we were fighting to get into a closed hearing, and the police hosed everyone down the stairs of San Francisco City Hall. It set the tone of the student demonstrations to come.

The issues were just so interesting. I'd joined a group called Slate, a predecessor of the Free Speech Movement (FSM).



We opposed military recruiting from college campuses. There was "Ban the Bomb," and civil rights issues. We called for the dissemination of birth control at the student hospitals. Getting rid of the parent aspect. Dorms were *no parentis locus*.

CHP: You were only 17 at the time.

KC: Seventeen going on 30. I really went gaga to get out of high school in the fifties. My uncle threatened to send me to New Jersey College for Women. I told him I'd applied too late.

CHP: How radical a period was it?

KC: It was wild, very exciting, the first real liberalizing. There was a lot of debate. The thing about Slate that was so wonderful was that it covered a broad spectrum of ideological difference. There was real broad, formal debate, not what the movement became, which was very sectarian, very narrow, and you had to be the worst fuckin' Stalinist. But to begin with it was very Greek, a real market place of ideas.

There were also demonstrations at Jack London Square,

"Everyone was a propagandizer, the left and the right. Truth becomes the refuge."

and in the Oakland Tribune, over the Auto Row. We thought if manufacturers were selling Cadillacs to black people, they should have some black salespeople. We fought [Rep. Presidential candidate] Barry Goldwater, Mr. Core Republican, at the Cow Palace. We thought he was racist, a reactionary, and that he would compel us towards war. Nowadays, though, I think the Democrats do a good job of that too.

CHP: How was your life outside of student politics?

KC: I was boy crazy. All these cute grad student types. I remember when I first got birth control, I'd had a while of unprotected sex. I used to stick a diaphragm in just to go out to the store. You never knew when you were going to get raped. Getting pregnant was still this terrible thing. I was very religious about it.

CHP: Was it really that bad?

KC: (laughs) I mean, I'm being slightly amusing. But I was very scrupulous. It was a big deal.

CHP: What was your involvement with the Free Speech Movement (FSM)?

KC: The FSM was wonderful. The university were acting like complete assholes, they were really stupid. Philip, no! (Pause, as Philip scrupulously eyes a nearby bird. Several moments tensely pass. Then, relievedly, Philip

backs away, and jumps towards Kate.) Good boy! This is how you train 'em!

CHP: You were arrested at one sit-in at Sproul Hall on the Berkeley campus, given a year's probation and a \$150 fine. It was one of the United States' largest mass arrests — 825 people.

KC: Yeah. The FSM was pretty great, but God it sucked up a lot of the time. I was roughly handled. I remember — God, vanity, vanity — the police said we were delinquents, but we looked clean cut compared to what came later. I wanted to be presentable — I had these black imitation patent leather pants and a sweater, and I was just incredibly sweaty and hot. [The police had] roughed me up. They would arrest you in front of the cameras and then take you out of view and do a number on you. They had to carry a lot of bodies out. The matron had to frisk me in this little goddamn closet in the basement of the administration hall. I really stank.



My boots weren't porous at all. At first I was just mortified, but then I thought, oh good! I could inflict my smelly feet on her. After sitting in for so long I was really moist and damp (Pause). Ah, the memories.

CHP: Then you and two others appeared in a CBS documentary called "The Berkeley Rebel."

KC: I was selected out of a bunch of people for my charming personality. Plus, I was very photo-

genic at the time. The director shot the film like he was Michelangelo Antonioni. He had me wondering around, looking alienated with my long black hair, although I was the least alienated person on campus (laughs). It was there I saw the power of the media, although I had already seen it with the FSM. When I was arrested as a demonstration leader, my probation officer was really enamored with this movie and so I got nothing, while everyone else got jail time. It was really funny.

As part of the film, I rode on the back of a motorcycle through campus, which was illegal at the time. The [administration] were furious at that.

CHP: You can't even skateboard on campus at Santa Cruz.

KC: No, I've seen people do that. You know, the best part [about Santa Cruz campus] is no dogs. Dogs fuck up a place. They shit everywhere, they bark, they form packs. I went walking on your campus, it was so exquisite. To not

see a dog was heaven.

CHP: How did you come to work at *Newsweek*?

KC: The film producers wanted to give all three of us a gift. One guy, Mike Grossman, was given a beautiful recorder. He was a musician, and appeared throughout the movie bare-topped - Mr. Natural. They asked me what I wanted, so I said "a one-way ticket to New York and an interview with CBS news."

CHP: And they agreed?

KC: No, they got me a job as a CBS receptionist. They promised me promotion, but the idea that I had to smile at producers and flirt my way up irritated me. I'd been offered a job at *Newsweek* as well, so I took it, and that was how I began as a journalist.

"I used to stick a diaphragm in just to go out to the store."

CHP: You became a "Yippie" [member of the Youth International Party], which David Lance Goines's book, "The Free Speech Movement," describes as "the apotheosis of 1960s counterculture: an anarchistic blend of drugs, sex, politics and music."

KC: It was hijinx, like what you see the WTO demonstrators do now. Agit-prop theatre came out of the Yippies. The first bra-burning was by a Yippie person. They were very whimsical and fun, but serious. These were revolutionary times. We used to have riots every week on the Lower East Side, which was fun. There was a lot of street-fighting — there'd be demonstrations and you wouldn't have a permit, so you'd just get out and battle with the cops and run. I organized this "yip-in" in Grand Central Station, to "liberate space." This huge cavernous room, this beautiful space filled with demonstrators. Then the cops started coming down the aisles and there was no escape. God, a lot of people got bloodied there (*sighs*). I felt bad, but we "radicalized" a lot of people, as the left used to say.

CHP: What else did the group organize?

KC: We also called for a public "loot-in" of Macy's (*laughs*). We wanted to go to the food department and steal stuff, then donate it to the People's Campaign, a political march towards Washington run by Ralph Abernathy, an associate of Dr Martin Luther King. Then what happened was Bobbie Kennedy was shot, and his funeral cortege was due to pass by Macy's the day of our loot-in. So we called it off. Discretion was the better part of valor.

CHP: What did you work on at *Newsweek*?

KC: I had a clipping job, clipping stories for eight major dailys day.

Then I did a long stint in the press section. I used to come in my little *Newsweek* outfit, with my hair back, trying to look straight. I loved it. I was in a lot of riots when I went to work there, and I considered myself an infiltrator, but I was really good. I was coming up with lots of story ideas. It was right at the cultural happening of hippies, of pot, San Francisco

music, of music. The [other] staff were all really square.

Women were not reporters there. You got to maybe report for your little department once you were a good girl, and had been there for a while. I had to come in with story ideas and ask to report on them myself, and that's how I learned to be a reporter. I hustled my butt off and didn't get rewarded for it. I never got a merit raise, a bonus. I'm still the same way, poor as a churchman.

CHP: What stories did you work on?

KC: I actually got to interview the Rolling Stones, at this show called "Hullabaloo." I was backstage, talking to the guys in the band. I was reading a book with Mick Jagger. I thought I was cool, and could be around anyone. (*Suddenly breaks into impression of asthmatic panting dog, as if to say, "Yeah, right."*)

The other reporter didn't get much out of the Stones, but I was just shooting the shit with them, talking about Berkeley and politics. [The editors] told me to write it up, and they used all my stuff, but they didn't credit me.

CHP: When Vice-President Hubert Humphrey visited the *Newsweek*, you told him to his face he was a "war criminal and a murderer."

KC: Yeah. I got into a little trouble, but not that much trouble. I was getting increasingly militant and furious at the world. Eventually I quit *Newsweek*. The politics were changing, and I thought Nixon was going to get elected. I thought, I'm gonna leave now and go around the world, and when I come back it's time to make revolution. Where's Philip? Philip, no! (*shoos cat away from birdbath*)

CHP: Where did you go after-

wards?

KC: Eventually, what happened to me was what happened to a lot of activists. The stakes got too high, it was no longer mass movements, things became very sectarian. I felt the left was lying. Everyone was a propagandizer, the left and the right. Truth becomes the refuge. It's not that everyone is equally bad, I just couldn't stand when people lied about shit. Things emerged from me in Berkeley, particularly in writing about the Black Panthers. I withdrew a lot. I was struggling to make a living as a writer. Politics, when you're young, for a lot of people I know, it just sucked away one's ambitions.

CHP: You also worked for television.

KC: My career included stints at KQED's newsroom, and a lot of television and alternative television with Video Free America (VFA). We went to the World Monopoly Games in Bermuda, which was freezing. I was the talent on camera. Then we shot an orgy down in Twin Peaks [in San Francisco], with the Sexual Freedom League and the Venus Psychedelic Church, these astonishing, screaming gay guys, really beautiful and virile with long hair. The SFL were hideous, but the gay guys were gorgeous. They set up some guy's mansion with swings. People were given bags to put their clothes in and their bag number was painted on their ass.

We were a bunch of video nerds — I mean, my colleagues were video nerds — and we dropped mescaline or something to get in the mood. Of course, when we got home we found we had ten minutes of usable footage. We called it "VFA Blows an Orgy." We had tech problems — everybody was too fucked up! (*Laughs*) I remember I had quit smoking, and I saw a shot of me crawling across the floor to interview this couple with my butt showing, right in the camera. I started smoking the day after. I thought it looked enormous. Now of course I'd love to be that weight.

CHP: How did you begin to concentrate on journalism?

KC: I dabbled in TV, but a close friend said, "Kate, why do you want to be in television, when you're such a good writer?" I wrote in the eighties a lot of first person stuff, because that was all I could get a job for. I was like the wild writer: *Kate Goes To A Funky Circus*, *Kate Goes On An Outward Bound Trip*, *Kate Learns*

Kung-Fu And Breaks Her Nose. I couldn't get a lot of serious work.

CHP: And then you started to write about the Black Panthers.

KC: That was the big investigative story where I made my mark as a serious journalist. A magazine called *Politics*, started by Nelson Rockefeller's son-in-law, wanted me to do a profile on [Black Panthers leader] Elaine Brown. But I started hearing all these horrible stories about the group: there were beatings, racketeering, etcetera. My journalist friends who knew about this were too scared to do anything because they'd been threatened by Brown. It was like in South Africa, when white journalists were all liberals and wouldn't report on Winnie Mandela and the Soccer gangs, because it made you pro-apartheid. But when politics becomes that simplified, it's really bad. The Panthers had incredible press around here, and I told [*Politics*] I couldn't do the puff piece they wanted, this woman is terrible. So I went to the Center for Investigative Journalism, and they gave me advice and found me a publisher for the article.

CHP: What was the reception to the article like?

KC: It was extremely painful. I had always felt a kinship with the Panthers. I always thought I could live with capitalism, but not with racism. The piece didn't mean I was going to turn on that, but the cry for justice was a very important one. I mean, the white left was exonerating the kind of Draconian cult-like behavior they wouldn't have tolerated for five seconds.

It changed me a bit. I learned what it means when you're blowing the whistle on stuff, and people hate you, and do things to fuck you up. I tried to write a book, but the door got slammed on me. It was very hard. Oh no, you're up on the table! What's going on? Did you feel left out? (*Maud suddenly becomes worryingly amorous towards CHP and his tape recorder*). You see, she's enjoying the new company.

Anyway. I still see stuff laudatory about the Panthers, but some of the message got through.

(*Maud begins to rub amorously against CHP himself, purring and disturbingly content.*)

She's in love! So nice to get new attention! (*Laughs*) Little slut.

