YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION?
An interview with Clifton Ross

 ‘This ain’t the garden of Eden
 There ain’t no angels above
 And things ain’t like what they used to be
 And this ain’t the summer of love.’
 – Blue Öyster Cult, ‘This Ain’t the Summer of Love’

Clifton Ross is a, writer, poet, translator and filmmaker based in Berkeley, California, whose work has been inspired and informed by the revolutionary and social movements of Latin America and the United States.

In 2005 Clif represented the United States in Venezuela's World Poetry Festival. His book of poetry, *Translations from Silence*, won Oakland PEN’s Josephine Miles Award in 2010; it was published in Spanish in 2011 as *Traducciones del Silencio* by the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture’s Editorial Perro y Rana.

*William Everson: The Light the Shadow Casts*, Clif’s collection of interviews with the poet, was published by UK-based Stride Publications in 1996, and reprinted in 2012 by Freedom Voices Publications to honor the centenary of the poet’s birth. Stride also included several of Clif’s poems in the collection *When Good Dogs have Bad Dreams: Four American Poets* (1996). Clif’s book *Fables for an Open Field* (Trombone Press, New Earth Publications, 1994), was released in Spanish by La Casa Tomada of Venezuela (2006).

Ross translated and co-edited *Voice of Fire: Interviews and Communiques from the Zapatista National Liberation Army* (1994, New Earth Publications), the first collection of EZLN material to appear in English. Other translations a *Light and Truth: Manifestos and interviews on Spirituality and Politics by General Augusto Cesar Sandino* (1984, CO-Press); *A Dream Made of Stars: A Bilingual Anthology of Nicaragua Poetry* (1986, CO-Press); *Quetzalcóatl*, by Ernesto Cardenal (1990 New Earth Press, 1994 Stride Publications), and numerous poems published in print and online publications such as *Americas Review, Sniper Logic,* and *The Underground Forest*.

His films include *Venezuela: Revolution from the Inside Out*, issued by PM Press (Oakland, California, 2008) and *In the Shadow of the Revolution* (co-directed with J. Arturo Albarrán) and other shorts, all archived at his [website](http://www.cliftonross.com/films).

His most recent books include *Until the Rulers Obey: Voices from Latin American Social Movements* (PM Press, 2014) co-edited with Marcy Rein and a political memoir, *Home from the Dark Side of Utopia*:*A Journey through American Revolutions*, released in 2016 by AK Press.

I got to know Clif through mutual friends in the Bay Area, and finally met him whilst I was attending an arts conference in Berkeley. We've kept in vague touch ever since, and I was delighted to hear from him recently, catch up on his news, and to find out about his political memoir, which gives an insightful overview of all the 'revolutions' he has been involved in. I decided to interview him and find out more about his remarkable life and book.

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Rupert Loydell: Your book, *Home from the Dark Side of Utopia: A Journey through American Revolutions* can hardly contain your life in its 300+ pages. What made you decide to write this memoir?

Clifton Ross: I’d proposed a book on an alternative perspective on the Bolivarian Revolution of Venezuela to AK Press – a rewrite of [*The Map or the Territory*](https://www.amazon.com/Map-Territory-Imperialism-Solidarity-Millennium-ebook/dp/B00NAJ9T8M/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1517163811&sr=8-1&keywords=Clifton+Ross+The+Map+or+the+Territory) that I’d self-published a year earlier – but they were more interested in a political memoir than a treatise on the self-destruction and unravelling of the Bolivarian movement under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. I suppose they thought a ‘personal tale’ would have more impact than a simple analysis of the ‘Revolution’ gone astray, which was what I did in *The Map or the Territory*, examining the so-called ‘Pink Tide’ of Latin America in the beginnings of its ebb and trying to understand what went wrong.

RL: The ‘revolutions’ of your subtitle is a kind of umbrella term, isn’t it? I mean it seems to include personal, religious revolutions affecting your beliefs and the way you choose to live, political revolutions in both the personal and worldwide sense, and a general sense of change in the American people within the USA. Presumably they feed on each other?

CR: Well, I didn’t choose the subtitle; that was the publisher’s suggestion. I’m not even sure how I feel about the word ‘revolution’ now, though I’m inclined to agree with Hannah Arendt that there are two major, but distinct, definitions. The first definition is the modern one, coming out of the French Revolution, in which a ‘revolution’ is defined as the overturning of an order and the imposition of a wholly new order. This definition is very common among Marxists, like Ernst Bloch, and because of the powerful impact of Marxism on all sectors of the Left, it’s the dominant definition. But there’s a second definition of ‘revolution’ which is more traditional, the noun version of the verb revolve, as in, ‘the planets are in ‘revolution’ around the sun.’ Here ‘revolution’ doesn’t mean overthrowing an order, but restoring it; not leaving behind an order but returning to it. It’s a recovery, a return to an earlier form of being.

In the wake of the collapse of the USSR (and we’re still in that ‘wake’ as the implications of that collapse continue ripple through the world) we’re starting to see a glimmer of that latter meaning of ‘revolution.’ Many on the Left and those in social movements (and we have to distinguish between social movements and ‘the Left’ as I do in articles I’ve written, particularly [here](https://dissidentvoice.org/2016/01/the-two-lefts-and-venezuela/) and [here](https://dissidentvoice.org/2017/10/reflections-on-the-counsel-of-italian-clowns-anarchists-and-social-movements/)) are coming to recognize that ‘capitalism’ is the most revolutionary force we’ve ever seen – ’revolutionary’, that is, in the first sense of the word, in the sense of imposing the wholly new. Every day a new product, a new version, a new process, a new way of life, even, is imposed on us by this system we live in. Is it a good thing? Sometimes. But not always, because it also means the death of the old ways, and we’re increasingly becoming conscious of what we’ve lost in this hunger for the New: community and a sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves; ancient communal ways of life, farmlands and entire ecosystems that are levelled for production of this ‘new and revolutionary’ but alienated way of life unfolding in increasingly disintegrated urban centres.

Some would argue that we’ve lost more than we’ve gained in the bargain – though I’m somewhat agnostic on that count. But I would argue that this system some call ‘capitalism’ and others, like Joel Mokyr, Deirdre McCloskey and others would call ‘innovationism’, is endangering the life of our planet to make us our toys and gadgets. So perhaps we need to consider a revolutionary restoration to end or detain revolutionary innovation, and this is certainly what many in the social movements are doing when they go out to block a dam or prevent a historic landmark from being destroyed in the name of ‘progress'. It’s what indigenous people all over the planet are doing as they attempt a revolutionary restoration of their old ways of life by confronting and attempting to detain a blind hunger for ‘progress’ at any cost in the form of mines, deforestation and so forth.

And yes, all this does have a personal dimension, at least for me. I’m involved in the process of recovery, which is personal restoration, from drug and alcohol addiction, and I mention this in my book. Our traditions don’t allow us to publicly identify what 12-step groups we’re involved in, but alcohol, marijuana and tobacco became problems in my life and I’ve spent years in this process of personal revolution or restoration, which I see as integral to my political work. I quote former Secretary General of the Industrial Workers of the World, Jess Grant, in my book, saying ‘el mundo cambia con tu ejemplo, no con tu opinión’ (The world changes with your example, not with your opinion). Jesus would say it differently, but with something the same meaning: what are you profited if you gain the whole world and lose your own soul?

RL: I hadn’t realised you weren’t in Berkeley until the main hippy events of the late 60s and early 70s were over. Tell us about the mid 70s. When you did move to the Bay Area. Was there any of the sense of change and possibility left, or was it seen as a failed movement by then?

CR: Well, it depends on who you ask. Since you’re asking me, I’ll give you my opinion, though as a younger participant in that time, I’m no authority. Some would say that the hippies were gone before most people had even heard of them. I seem to recall hearing that there was a parade down Haight Street in San Francisco in 1967 with a mock casket supposedly containing the ‘Last Hippy’ who was then symbolically interred. But fortunately, most of the world hadn’t yet gotten the news so for years thereafter new hippies were flocking to what they saw as liberated territory in the thousands by the day. When I arrived in Berkeley in 1976 there was still some hope of a revolutionary overthrow of the government, though I think that belief by then could only have been sustained by large and regular doses of marijuana and LSD.
I didn’t get a great sense of failure at the time: I think that sense only really came after Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980. That was the definitive end of the rebellion that began in the 1960s, but because there were still communes, radical households and lots of activity going on, Reagan’s election initially sparked an upsurge of radical activity. Still, as time wore on, say by the mid 1980s, it became apparent even to the most recalcitrant, that the ‘revolution’ had failed.

RL: Berkeley was, of course, the site of more political and theoretical events, rather than Haight Ashbury and other sites across the bay in San Francisco. I have fond memories of secondhand bookshops and coffee shops even in the late 80s. Has it still got an edge to it, or any sense of heritage or legacy from the past?

CR: There certainly is still an ‘edge’ in Berkeley. It continues to be a more liberal city than most in the US. You’re right that Berkeley had a more political orientation than San Francisco. The City, as we call San Francisco, was a birthplace of the hippies, while Berkeley was the home of the yippies. Berkeley still has that quality; it takes pride in its radicalism. But it’s very complicated these days. For one thing, revolution is like an erupting volcano, and eventually it’s bound to exhaust itself and the lava cools and hardens. Berkeley has cooled down, and settled into what often seems to me to be very hard and narrow ways. There’s an air of constricting orthodoxy to the radicalism, and I think a fear among many to question the old ideas (of the “New” Left) for fear of being considered a ‘right winger’.

This explodes from time to time, especially these days with threats from the far right such as happened last in August 2017 when fundamentalist Christians and a few right-wingnuts tried to have a gathering in Berkeley and their small group half a dozen or so were attacked by somewhere around a hundred Antifa anarchists, and beaten up. In other words, it seems that even civil gatherings and discussions on controversial topics are no longer welcome in Berkeley since many community leaders, and even the Mayor of Berkeley, opposed the gathering of the right wingers. I, too, opposed the fundamentalist Christians and right wingers, but don’t they also have a right to gather, protest and speak their minds in the home of the Free Speech Movement? Evidently not according to Berkeley’s radicals. Moreover, I think this sort of violence plays into the hands of reactionary media and is ultimately counter-productive. But for Leftists who have nothing to offer in terms of counter-proposals, or lack the ability to articulate alternatives, this seems to be all they can come up with.

‘Political correctness’ may be a term invented by the Right, but it describes a phenomenon that is nevertheless extremely disturbing: the fact that a movement, like that which emerged in the 1960s, a movement founded on the liberal valuation of conflict, diversity, tolerance, free speech and dissent has gradually developed its own orthodoxy, exclusiveness, intolerance and demands for conformity. Of course it’s understandable, given the pressures the Left has been under in the US from the 1960s on, that it would eventually hunker down and build the barricades against perceived enemies in defence of its territorial gains, but it’s tragic, nonetheless.

Then there are the problems that come with gentrification. The old community centres that once were effervescent intersections of diverse and conflicting ideas and interesting vanguard arts fell victim to the cooling of the lava flow, as it were. People in any revolution eventually have to buy food and do their laundry, and there’s increasingly less time, money or resources to give away, especially as the affluence of the 1960s turned into the lean, mean Reagan years and the austerity thereafter. Those community centres have to change with the times so they have become ‘Theatres’ where the winning ideas are artistically framed and passions are enacted with the greatest finesse, and the entrance fees are largely out of reach to those who gave birth to this elegant culture. And of course, all this relates to the fact that real estate prices in Berkeley and San Francisco, and thus the rents, have skyrocketed, so that many artists and radicals living in the margins have had to move on in a creative drain brain of lesser known or valued artists and intellectuals from the area. Or another way to put it is that we’ve seen the yuppies evict the yippies as gentrification proceeds…

RL: You and our friend David Fetcho introduced me to the work of William Everson, and we worked on a book project to celebrate his poetry and introduce it to a UK readership. How important was his mystical nature poetry at the time? It might be called eco-poetics nowadays, but it clearly wasn’t aligned with the mainstream Jesus Movement of the time or the more evangelical straight churches it spawned.

CR: Bill Everson remains, for me, one of the great poets of California and also a great, tragic figure. I was struck by that once when I took him to a reading and he laid his leather satchel with his books on the podium and I notice his initials were stamped on the front: “WOE,” William Oliver Everson. Well, he lived out those initials.

The turns his life took always went against the current of the time. He mentioned that in our book (*The Light the Shadow Casts*, 1996, Stride Publications). He was a pacifist during the most popular war, World War Two, and a hawk during Vietnam. He published his great love poem, River-Root, just as feminism was growing into prominence, and it was rejected as ‘chauvinist’ because of his Jungian characterization of the feminine energy as ‘passive’. He became a Christian poet just as Buddhism and Eastern religions were being favoured by the artistic and intellectual class of the Beats. Then there’s the fact that you point out, that even in Christianity, he was too Catholic for the Jesus Movement (which was predominantly Protestant), and his erotic mysticism wasn’t acceptable script in the uptight pre-Vatican Two Catholic Church – that is, until much later, by which time he was already on his way out of the Dominican Order. He missed nearly every opportunity to project himself into the public eye, and now, some twenty-five years after his death, he’s been largely forgotten, overshadowed often by lesser poets, as has happened with his ‘master’ Robinson Jeffers and his mentor Kenneth Rexroth.

But when I met Bill, he was… let me put it this way: when I left on a long trip to Europe in 1978 I carried with me only a copy of T.S. Eliot’s poems, a Bible and a collection of William Everson’s poems, *The Crooked Lines of God*. I agree with Robert Brophy who called Everson ‘the greatest religious poet in English of the second half of the twentieth century’, Eliot dominating the first half, of course.

RL: Plenty of people have bridged and combined Buddhism and Christianity, not to mention pagan belief systems. What about your own shift away from Christianity? It would be fair to say liberation theology and socialist interpretations of Jesus’ teaching had already changed your viewpoint?

CR: I was raised in the fundamentalist civil-military religion of Protestant Christianity, as I learned it on military bases growing up (my father was in the Air Force) and in the ‘Bible Belt’ of the US South. I say that because my adult life has largely been a struggle to break free of all that so I could come into my own and develop my own identity and worldview. In fundamentalism of whatever variety, ideas are seen as hard, rock-solid and inflexible things that come ready-made in airtight systems that reveal a ‘reality’ that is static, unyielding and intractable. Fundamentalism also tends to be militant and extreme by nature, and this is the case in all its varieties: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, socialist, atheist or whatever.

For a long time I found myself struggling through the straightjacket of one fundamentalism only to enter the straightjacket of another. Then, in recovery, I realized that it was the straightjacket I needed to escape, the fundamentalist view of the world. That was when I began pulling together my own ideas, drawn from each of my stages of life, lessons learned in the various straightjackets, none of which I any longer needed to contain me. I could build my own worldview and it could be dynamic, inclusive, flexible, yielding and therefore not breakable since it remained open to the future and any further information.

I’m certainly no longer a Christian as I’d defined Christianity in my fundamentalism, but I still hold those values and cherish that wisdom. And so my Christianity is now accompanied by Buddhism, paganism (Taoism, shamanism, etc), by all that you’ve mentioned – except socialism.

I no longer think socialism has anything of value to offer the world, even if I think it was a useful movement in the twentieth century to raise important issues of solidarity, social justice, class conflict and so on. But the very fact that it required a totalitarian state to destroy a market economy and centralize all power so as to guarantee the establishment and continuation of its utopian project entailed the elimination of *real* solidarity and *real* social justice. How can you have solidarity when you’re afraid the worker standing next to you might be undercover police who could arrest you for saying the wrong thing? Is the equal impoverishment of all what we mean by ‘social justice’? What sort of class conflict do we have when Capitalist-worker relations are replaced by Nomenklatura-worker relations, that is, when a class of bosses is replaced by a single boss, the state?

Some socialists argue that ‘Real Socialism’ wasn’t *real* socialism, and that’s fair enough. But then you have to ask, what then? What is real socialism, if it isn’t the destruction of a market economy and centralization of the means of production under the state? That was ‘socialism’ in the twentieth century, and the so-called ‘Socialism of the Twenty-First Century’ as that which the Bolivarian Revolution is building is an even worse disaster, just in case you haven’t noticed.

Of course we could come up with all sorts of what I consider utopian or mystical notions of socialism, you know, some variant or other of the workers spontaneously rising up all over the world to appropriate the means of production and put them at the disposal of a great non-governmental, horizontalist process, but personally, that looks even more remote to me than the Second Coming of Jesus, or the coming of Maitreya Buddha. And that’s a major point I make in my memoir, that political ideologies, whether socialist-communist with the idea of the Revolution and the messianic image of the working class, or the anarcho-syndicalist with the idea of the General Strike, or even the Neoliberal with his idea of the Self-Regulating Market, all enter into the realm of mysticism and ultimately are faith-based.

And these days, I’d like to keep my politics and my mysticism separate, which is why I advocate for social movements rather than for any Left, or for that matter, Right, ideology. Social movements as a rule aren’t interested in ‘seizing power’ or implementing some utopian project at a national level. They don’t generally concern themselves with some “correct line” but rather focus on specific concrete problems and processes with the aim of making gradual changes that improve the lot of certain sectors of the population that are ignored by politicians.

RL: In the UK, Nicaragua was the war that really brought attention to the way the USA interfered in Latin American politics for a new generation who weren’t old enough to remember Vietnam. It seemed pretty shocking that the USA chose to fight against an elected government simply because they were socialist rather than capitalist. You visited several times. Did the Sandinista government work? It had high ideals about education, the arts and a liberal agenda, which from Europe seemed admirable. Yet they were seen as ‘commies’, as ‘others’, opposed to democracy and Western values.

CR: There were so many beautiful facets of life under the Sandinista government. I visited the country in 1982, 1984 and lived there in 1987, and I still look back at that time as one of the most beautiful periods of my life: beautiful and painful and tragic. But because I was still caught in the fundamentalist mindframe, you might say, ‘in the Sandinista and liberation theology straightjacket’, I couldn’t see the contradictions. That’s one way of describing fundamentalism: the inability to see the contradictions inherent in human reality. I devote a chapter in my memoir to analysing the contradictions of the Sandinista Revolution, the contradictions I denied at the time.

One of those contradictions was exactly what you point out: they had ‘high ideals about education, the arts and a liberal agenda’ even as they were, in a sense, ‘opposed to democracy and Western values’, although that’s not exactly how I would put it. I would rather say that there was a contradiction between the liberal and democratic opening after the Somoza dictatorship, an opening promoted by one sector of Sandinismo represented by the Cardenal brothers, Ernesto and Fernando, both priests and ministers in the government (of Culture and Education, respectively), artists and writers like vice president Sergio Ramírez, Giaconda Belli and a huge portion of the population who were clamoring for democracy after nearly 50 years under the Somoza dictatorship. The intellectual elite of this sector, after the Sandinistas were voted out of power in February 1990, split and formed the Movement for Sandinista Renewal (MRS) because they believed in the liberal values of free speech, dissent, free thought, free art, democracy, and all the accompanying rights.

Then there was the other, the dominant sector under the party of the nine comandantes who were all, without exception, Marxist-Leninists of one stripe or another. They were anti-liberal vanguardists with a military guerrilla formation, specifically, a Fidelista communist formation. They disdained the will of the people just as Lenin did, and believed ‘the masses’ needed the guidance and direction of its self-styled ‘vanguard.’ Naturally, in the international communist movement, there was a whole hierarchy that was in place, so the Sandinista vanguard took its orders from Fidel Castro, and Fidel took his directives from the Soviet Union.

This was the internal dynamic that was largely hidden from many but the most committed solidarity activists. We, the internationalists, were viewed by Tomás Borge and the other Sandinista comandantes as ‘useful idiots’ (Lenin’s term for internationalistas during his phase of the Russian Revolution) and kept in the dark about all this. As for the details on how this played out, it’s too complicated to go into here so I’ll refer readers to chapter eleven of my memoir ‘Revolution in a Rear-View Mirror’. Suffice to say that the Sandinistas lent themselves to play the pawn in the Cold War between the US and USSR and they lost, but only temporarily. It was the Marxist-Leninist sector that makes up the core of the hybrid regime of Daniel Ortega, the Sandinista caudillo (strong man) who now controls Nicaragua, which resembles nothing so much as the plantation-style regime of Somoza they’d overthrown.

RL: I struggled then, as I often do, with wanting to support the Sandinistas, but hating the fact they chose to take up arms. Not being pacifist didn’t quite square with the idealism they espoused. How did you feel at the time? You were brought up in a military family, so on one level violence is the norm, but presumably at some point you must have thought about the ethics of war and violent revolution?

CR: I continue to struggle with these issues, and I don’t take political violence at all as simplistically as I once did. You’re right: I grew up in the military, but the Vietnam war brought me to pacifism, which was why I went to Berkeley in the first place, to join the pacifist Christian community of the House Church of Berkeley and work for the Berkeley Christian Coalition. But when I read liberation theology, and came to understand what Christians were suffering in Latin America under US-backed regimes, and how in some cases the only road to change was by armed insurrection, I parted ways with the pacifists and broke with the House Church, opting instead for solidarity with the Nicaraguan Christians.

In an age of total surveillance, total war and such, I think armed struggle is hard to defend, not even tactically. But we’re talking about strategy here, so what I’m really saying is that as a strategy I don’t think it’s viable. I don’t any longer believe we can talk in absolute moral terms about pacifism and war. Violence – and here the later William Everson was very clear – is part of natural life. There’s simply no avoiding it. Absolute pacifism under the Nazis is collaboration with them. Absolute pacifism in the midst of a revolution, a necessary struggle for liberation, is unethical, and ultimately becomes an alliance with the violence of the dominator. But neither should we enter into violence easily, especially in the context of a democracy, even one that is severely flawed. But when does a ‘flawed democracy’ change into a ‘non-democracy’? That’s the question Venezuelans are asking themselves today under the left-wing president, Nicolás Maduro, and the Hondurans are asking themselves under the right-wing president, Juan Orlando Hernández. They know that the struggle is still in the street, but they have to maintain the moral high ground to defeat the violence of the oppressor.

RL: There’s another poet that’s important to you around this time – maybe still – Ernesto Cardenal, whose work you translated, published and publicised. How does poetry fit within revolution?

CR: I was never personally close with Cardenal as I was with Bill Everson, who I considered a friend. I worked with Cardenal, and translated him, and had conversations, some important ones, even, but it was largely professional, poet to poet, as it were.

I recently did a couple of poetry readings in San Francisco with ‘revolutionary’ poets’ and only politeness kept me seated during their readings. It was what I would call ‘dogmarel’, a genre of poetry which is a combination of dogmatic assertions in the form of doggerel, and I find it unbearably painful to listen to. I hate feeling manipulated by poetry, and I resent it even more so when it’s *bad poetry*.

I find this question problematic first for the word ‘revolution’ which I’m not sure what you’re using it to mean, and how poetry ‘fits within’ it. But let me give it a go by making other contrasts or distinctions.

The socialist Left and traditional churches (and in my view, the socialist Left is nothing more or less than a modern secular church with its own faith-based set of doctrines, rituals and beliefs) talk about ‘political formation’ while social movements using Paulo Freyere’s critical pedagogy talk about ‘conscientization’ or ‘critical consciousness’. These represent two very different approaches to life and art.

Political or religious formation, in my mind, is a process of inculcating in the person being ‘formed’ a set of ideas and doctrines. The model for this is the way traditional churches do catechism. The ‘formed’ person ends the formation with the ability to recite the doctrines, or ‘correct line,’ as the objective. This is what Freyere called a ‘banking theory of education’ in which information is inserted in empty minds by the authority (the teacher, the vanguard party, the priest or minister or what have you) where it’s safely kept undisturbed and unchanged. Poetry, in this context, serves as just another tool of that ‘formation’ and it has no other validity outside of that objective. Its content is all-important, its form is irrelevant. From my perspective, this is an incredibly elitist, dehumanizing and demeaning approach to working with people.

In social movements, particularly those that use the Freyerian popular education model, the objective is to awaken critical consciousness, critical thinking, to incite the process of critical thought. Bill Everson would perhaps point out the parallels to shamanism, in which the shaman (poet, critical educator, etc) enters into the psychic depths to activate and unleash questions that will disturb and even cause a crisis that would urge the subject on to a deeper quest for understanding. There is no authority ‘over’ the learning subject; learning takes place in what Everson called ‘the blaze of mutuality.’ There is no corpus of doctrine on the agenda, but rather a relationship of complimentarity, an exchange of equals. In this, poetry is seen in its whole and that poem is successful insofar as it activates, irritates (as Gertrude Stein would put it), or sparks a response that leads the listener, and also the poet him or herself, to greater critical awareness.

RL: A good third of the book describes your time and involvement in Venezuela. Tell me how you got involved there.

CR: As I wrote in my memoir, I visited Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua in 2004 to see what was left of the Sandinista project. He suggested that I visit Venezuela, so I went down that December and was immediately sucked into the excitement around Hugo Chávez. I went back again in May of 2005 with the intention of working with others in a publishing cooperative, but was invited to participate in the Second World Poetry Festival of Venezuela, and got sent on a new trajectory. I began writing articles in support of the Bolivarian process for various left websites for the next eight years or so while I lived in Mérida, Venezuela (2005-2006) and on my regular trips there until 2013 when I ‘hit the wall’ and came to a quite different understanding of what I was supporting. I’d already begun to question many things about the Bolivarian process and government, but the crisis came to a head in April 2013 when I was visiting Venezuela, just after Chávez’s death and the days after Maduro’s election.

I began to deepen my investigations into the Bolivarians and it became evident to me that Chávez, and now Maduro and his cronies, were destroying the country through corruption, impunity, a pillaging of national industries through expropriations and neglect. It was clear to me then that I had been extremely ignorant of all this, in part, perhaps, wilfully so, since I wanted to believe *so much*, but also because until then I knew nothing of how a petrostate operates, and the endemic corruption associated with it. My sense of guilt and responsibility for having promoted the Bolivarians with my articles and a [movie](https://secure.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=8) I’d made, led me to spend the next several years trying to correct perceptions about the Bolivarians. This memoir is part of that process as is the filmI made last year with my friend, Arturo Albarrán, *In the Shadow of the Revolution*.

RL: You talk about a gradual understanding of the idea of revolution, and how we might work towards it, which is very different from the way America often thinks that utopia or heaven will suddenly arrive. Staughton Lynd’s Foreword details some of the problems in Venezuela which you have pointed out to him. What can you do, what can we do, to change this state of affairs?

CR: Here we return to where we began the interview: it depends on what you mean by ‘revolution’, or which of the two revolutions Hannah Arendt distinguishes that you aim toward. I would argue that the only ‘new’ thing we need is a restoration of ancient human values. Obviously, we can’t all go back to being animists, dancing naked around fires to drumbeats, although, as Robert Bly likes to point out, it might do us all a bit of good every once in a while. But those ancient values have to be brought in meaningful form into our context, and I do think that’s happening, especially in the social movements. People are waking up to the fact that a new gadget isn’t worth the price of the extinction of a species (not that there ordinarily are precisely those kinds of correlations). Or, to put forth a concrete example, many people in the indigenous social movements of Bolivia in 2011 came out to oppose the highway Leftist President Evo Morales wanted to build through the TIPNIS Reserve in the name of ‘progress’ because it was protected indigenous territory, and a fragile wildlife reserve. Or Venezuelans spent four months in the streets in 2017 fighting for a restoration of democracy.

The foco guerrilla was the model for change in the early to mid twentieth century. It took another guerrilla formation to change all that: the Zapatistas. From the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and on, the social movements have arisen from the ashes of the old socialist left and the revolutionary struggles of the twentieth century. I support them as they attempt to build critical consciousness, community, healthy relations between humans, and between humans and the natural world. I think this is the only way forward available to us at this point in history.

RL: Finally, this is in many ways a troubled and worrying book, with no easy answers. Are you still hopeful that we can learn to live together and effect change across the world? I’m a bit of a pessimist myself.

CR: I don’t think it’s helpful to project future scenarios on the future because we are too prone to mistake those scenarios for the future itself. And the future is entirely unknowable. It’s a form of arrogance to be pessimistic or optimistic about the future. Or even realistic. In other words, we need to concern ourselves less with the future, and more with where we are right now and finding a way to live ethically and harmoniously in the present. If I may quote myself as I ended my memoir:
‘It appears that John Gray (the English philosopher) may be right, that some sort of revolutionary utopianism seems to ‘migrate’ – or perhaps ‘careen’ is a better word – from Left to Right, and back again. Under governments of the Left and the Right, we on the bottom live increasingly insecure and marginal lives, while the elites, who have stepped into power on our backs, enrich themselves with no apparent limit or consequence. Who now, we ask, will save us from our saviours? They keep us mesmerized with promises of utopia that will come from ‘socialism,’ or from a ‘self-regulating market’, but while the spectacle of the imagined destination has frequently been spellbinding, we have to wake up to the dark side of this often beautiful lie. We have to come to our senses, enter our own lives and try to find our way home, back to earth. After all, as the story goes, that’s where the real treasure awaits us.

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In the Shadow of the Revolution, an independent U.S.-Venezuelan collaboration by writer-directors J. Arturo Albarrán and Clifton Ross, gives voice to much-needed alternative perspectives on the country’s Bolivarian Revolution. Heavily disseminated Bolivarian propaganda presents a narrative of a popular, left-wing government that has brought great benefits to the population in the face of attacks from a right-wing, 'fascist' opposition. Through interviews with social movement activists, journalists, and academics, the film provides a counternarrative that helps explain the current rebellion against a corrupt, inefficient authoritarian government that has created a catastrophe in Venezuela and has brought it to the brink of civil war. **This film can be watched online free of charge at**<https://secure.pmpress.org/index.php?l=product_detail&p=950>