

Resistance Begins at Home

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While working as a human rights activist in Guatemala, I learned some of the most profound lessons of resistance. There, I experienced some of the greatest despair imaginable and some of the greatest hope.

In the 1950s, reformers and an indigenous majority—who wanted to end hunger and virtual enslavement on fruit and coffee plantations—challenged generations of neo-colonial rule. Their pleas for freedom were met by a CIA/US corporate directed coup, a series of military dictators and a scorched earth campaign against Mayan villages. Death squads committed a notorious crime against Guatemalans, the torture and murder of *desaparecidos* thought to be subversives—tens of thousands have been disappeared and never heard from again. The targets: union organizers, students, human rights supporters, and anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time. When people spoke out against these horrors they, too, would disappear, ensuring a frightened public would not organize effective resistance.

In the 1980s emerged the Mutual Support Group of the Relatives of the Disappeared (the group called GAM). This group persists to this day despite the brutal killings of many of their leaders and constant threats to members. I went to Guatemala working with Peace Brigades International, a group that offers support and non-violent direct action in areas affected by violence and war. Some of the GAM activists resented our presence in their lives, but also assured us it would be too dangerous to continue without us.

I went to Santiago Atitlan, a highland village where North American and European tourists arrived by the boatload to buy Mayan crafts and “experience” Indian culture during the day, oblivious to the reality that when they left on their ferries returning them to their hotels across Lake Atitlan, soldiers went door-to-door to terrorize the population. The government depended on tourist dollars and made efforts to hide their acts of genocide from gringo eyes. My role was to maintain a visible presence as a white person with a camera as part of an effort to deter violence to the brothers I was escorting. I was never quite sure what I would do if someone pointed a machine gun at my camera.

My first meeting there was at the Catholic church on the main square with nuns who still mourned the Oklahoma priest who had been murdered by a death squad years earlier. He had been accused of supporting land reform. They showed me the dried Blood on the walls of his chambers, that they had never washed off. I left the church feeling stunned and passed by a Funeral march for a slain Tzutujil Mayan. I sat on a wall of some ruins to witness the procession go by and when I looked through a window I saw police beating up someone. When they saw me they looked at me menacingly; I decided to leave before becoming their next victim.

As time passed I felt increasingly powerless: I knew I might be part of some social change, but it felt abstract and I longed to come home and try to effect US policy. I asked one Guatemalan woman—who had many family members killed by death squads—to explain how she managed to carry on against odds and if she had ideas of what I could do in the US to help her struggle. She recognized my despair and asked me not to let her loss stop me from going home and enjoying life in a way that she never could. It was a Guatemalan version of the (misquoted) saying attributed to Emma Goldman: “If you can’t dance, I won’t be a part of your revolution.”

Back in the United States, I took the advice of my Guatemalan friend and plunged into the radical faerie milieu, which appeals to me as an anti-authoritarian movement of activists, gardeners, ecologists, and artists who reject the gay mainstream tendency to assimilate into consumer-crazed American culture. I particularly enjoy when the faeries play the subversive role of clowns.

Discovering the faeries provided a pivotal experience in my awakening as a young, activist queer. Further, radical faerie activists have brought a sense of humor to the streets when we have joined protest movements. I first saw this in the Act Up heydays of the late 1980s when faeries in freaky drag served up irreverence during a tense time when public officials were tossing around the words “gay” and “quarantine” together. Friends and I have organized numerous acts of playful resistance, from a Miss Meltdown pageant at a nuclear power protest to the “Faeries for Pot, Choice and the Environment” at the Ann Arbor Hash Bash.

Nine years ago, I moved to the newly established radical faerie community of IDA in Tennessee (founded by men, the community has consciously changed to a gender-free-for-all which welcomes women and transnians as residents). We live eleven miles from Short Mountain Sanctuary, a hub of faerie activity that draws hundreds of people to their gatherings. I was initially attracted by the (somewhat) healthy back-to-the-land lifestyle.

Faerieland is one of the most nurturing environments I have ever experienced, including: assistance offered to people when they are ill; encouragement people receive to try things they have been told they are not good at; sharing of resources. Most of all I have maintained my home here because I love how easy it is to be whoever I am, knowing that my fellow communards will support me through whatever weirdness I delve into. Year after year I am grateful to have so many caring friends who amaze me with their kindness and creativity.

While living in this culture is easy for me, it is definitely not easy for everyone. The vast majority of the faerie community consists of white folks and issues prevalent in the larger society that we come from are reflected in our community. Most of us who moved to the local faerie neighborhood are outsiders who came here with little experience of the race and class dynamics prevalent in the South.

One of the first things I noticed at my first radical faerie gathering was how few people of color attended. In my city life, I was accustomed to a diverse population. I asked people why it was almost exclusively white. Faerie “founder” Harry Hay’s response was typical: “Oh, honey, we’ve tried to get people of color here”. After further inquiry, a group talked about how they are open and liberal and would welcome more people of color to “join in the magic”.

Over the years, some faeries have grappled with this subject. While some of the conversations have raised consciousness, others have been quite disturbing. Upon hearing that some people of color have talked about how uncomfortable they are at times in such a white environment, some faeries have responded with comments like “if Black people want more Blacks here, why don’t they bring them here.” There is also the objectification train of thought: “I wish more Blacks came here because I think Black guys are hot.” These are only a few of many examples to illustrate why I find faerie race politics so problematic.

Still, I sometimes find it difficult to call out racism. First and foremost, it forces me to examine my own white privilege and look at the benefits that have been afforded me by growing up in white-dominated suburban America. And then, I think about how that carries on in the assumptions that create my worldview today. Secondly, it is hard to challenge racism in a culture that does not acknowledge that racism even exists in our private little utopia. Finally, challenging racism often makes people defensive. Liberals often remain shockingly ignorant of race and class dynamics and how their (color) blinders prevent enduring efforts for justice.

For me, it was easy to land in faerieland. Some of my non-white friends have told me it could not be so easy for them. A lot of back-to-the-woods faeries own land in this beautiful area precisely because land is relatively cheap; a lot of African-Americans in Tennessee have lost their land since the 1930s due to foreclosure, tax sales, threats by racists or violence. This continues to this day. When I drive around here and see Confederate flags, they can appear as a relatively innocuous statement of Southern pride; however, people of color experience these as symbols of hatred and oppression (unfortunately, this symbol has been on a bumper sticker and t-shirts at a faerie gathering). As elsewhere, racial profiling is a harsh reality in Tennessee—Blacks and Latinos are especially targeted by the police for harassment.

At a faerie gathering, there are amazing, creative artists, cooks, activists, and gender freaks. There is also a good dose of white folks taking on what they think is genuine of another culture and merging it into their spiritual and/

or party world. For example, romanticizing the “other”—especially the noble savage of American Indian culture—prevails as benign, sacred, and completely devoid of political awareness (even to the point where white faeries argue about the “correct” way to lead a sweat lodge ceremony).

Furthermore, a lack of class consciousness does not bode well for a radical change in the social dynamics of faerieland. Many faeries from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds make fun of and put down “white trash” culture, which inherently perpetuates elitism by insulting the heritage of many of the white people who have lived in this area for a long time.

Faeries love to dance; but when someone starts spinning Eminem, it amazes me that people don’t object. “The impact of Eminem’s marketing and publicity...is actually allowing White youth to dismiss the historical and current existence of racism”, wrote David Mays, founder of The Source magazine.

Two years ago, some faeries pried open the race issue with the FACT (Faeries of All Colors Together) gathering. I was saddened that some white faeries questioned the need for an event like this. I was not so surprised that it was sparsely attended compared to other faerie gatherings. Similarly, when my friend Mat and I were deciding whether or not to attend a lecture in Nashville on White Privilege, a few white friends reacted negatively because they were tired of feeling blamed for being white. Mat explained that the topic is not about blame, but about exploring our position in the world and learning to use the privilege we have inherited toward making changes in society.

This country was stolen from people of color (and continues to be). This country was built on the backs of people of color (and continues to be). I dream of a different type of faerie community—one which recognizes the prevalence of racism and is eager to challenge it. I dream of faerie gatherings issuing calls for reparations. I dream of faeries challenging racial profiling. I dream of faeries shutting down (white) gay clubs which give people of color a harder time getting into. I dream of the faeries taking political action which will demonstrate an anti-racist commitment—knowing that this includes taking risks.

Recently, my boyfriend and I went to Gainesville, Georgia as part of his work for social justice throughout the South. We were going to witness the effects of environmental racism—the situating of multiple polluting factories in an African-American neighborhood. We heard horrific stories of the illnesses and deaths from lupus caused by toxic waste. While sitting there, I was reminded of the genocide in Guatemala—Gainesville is a place where Black people disappear, and as in Guatemala, those with the most power have deemed it so, while most people remain silent. This story repeats itself throughout the South.

When I returned home to faerieland I found it hard to jump back into the party mode that guides social affairs. At times I started to live by a new motto:

“If you can’t be a part of the revolution, I won’t be a part of your dance.”

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