

Pencils Like Daggers

tomás

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It starts with a story: My grandma, worried that her 3-year-old son had not spoken a word yet, had him chase down a grasshopper. Diligently, without complaint, the boy did and returned with a smile. Open she said; confused and scared, he did. She shoved it in and closed his mouth. Hablas, miijo, hablas. He spit it out crying. Crying and yelling. He has not stopped either since she says and smiles thinking of her now 50 year old son talking his time away in a New Mexican state penitentiary.

This is not make believe. This is how we find our voice. This defines our language.

Here is my story. Or the start of it. My name is Tomas Ignacio Aragon; everyone calls me Tom. This I know for sure. I come from families of lies, of stories to deceive you, to deflect discovery. As a bicultural child, I was not comfortable in nor completely accepted by either side of my families. In the white world of my working class mother, I was the visible mistake, the dark stain on the family name. White working class military folk, dealing with the daughter who runs away to find her place, to save the world in the late 60s, and comes home struggling to save herself and feed her two year old son. With her, I was raised to avoid declarations of race, of difference, trying not to discuss my brown skin and brown hair in a family of blondes and blue eyes, forgetting my Spanish, speaking English only. I hid my shame with my silence.

On the Chicano side, I was the product of typical male weakness, the sign of my father's co-option and ultimate demise by white women come to save the poor, the natives. He was seduced by her presence, her education, her future. And those things he loved about her, she used to leave him when he found his place in el pinto, the typical educational facility for, poor Chicanos in New Mexico. His anger at her transferred in to his abandonment of me. No letters. No contact. Silence. The escape in silence. My father running from the law, running, running, knowing the inside of a cell more than his son.

Wait. This is not a story. This explains nothing, so I create my own explanations.

I started writing to find my color, saying on paper in black indelible ink what I couldn't to my classmates, to my first few lovers, to my mother and members of my own family: I am Mexican. I am white. I am.

"Fight one bean you fight the whole burrito."

I remember this saying as a warning white kids said about fucking with Mexicans in Ventura, California. I remember the sound that they made on the school bus, slapping hands, laughing, all building a solidarity of whiteness or non-brown-ness when one kid calls out 'smells like beans' as a group of brown kids walk down the aisle to leave the bus. At 15 I couldn't stand it any more. I stood up and hit the kid in front of me with my backpack breaking my connection to them. I wanted to be the burrito. I am Mexican; I am not white. But in the end I wasn't welcomed. I am the one who had to find trouble rather than it finding me. It has been the same ever since. I walk the borders of cultures, the too white to be brown and too brown to be white. Sometimes hassled by both sides and sometimes passing into each. Sometimes seen as one of the boys, sometimes the affirmative action product. I entered college deciding to claim, to rename, to embrace and revel in my contradiction, my displacement, my ambiguity, my absence of certainty.

Mechistas in college scoffing about my lack of Spanish and my complaint that meetings were held only in Spanish. “Chale, man. What’s up with you?” Because I was raised by an English speaking white mother. Awkward silence.

My teacher asking why the absence of Mexican American writers in a California literature class bothered me. Because I am one. Awkward silence.

This is the only way I can speak to you. I am an academic and I am not afraid to talk that talk—the hybridity of myself causes these contradictions that I embrace like old lovers knowing how to soothe each one, how to excite and comfort. I was freed in theory and abstraction finding voice in books by Moraga, Anzaldúa. Finding fathers in Acosta, Reechy. Finding heart in the radical acts of violation and violence like Tijerina at the New Mexican courthouse, Murrieta’s refusal to bow his head. I began to make my connections to histories of difference. I became a bicultural, Chicano with no respect for authority, no time for lazy assumptions about race, culture, politics, class, sexuality. I found myself in the refusal to define myself.

Wait. This is a lie. These words. Stories.

How do I claim myself: how to separate what I feel as a Chicano, as a male, as a person of privilege. How do you claim anything when you can’t claim the authenticity of your own voice? Remember: speak clearly, be careful if your pronunciation is off, if your skin fades too pale in the winter, embody your color in your movements, your clothes, your lovers.

In a world that wants singularity, I choose both. In a culture that wants uniformed sexuality, I choose to embrace bisexuality. In a society that denies authentic autonomy, I found myself in anti-authoritarian histories, in the romance of clandestine organizations. I was seduced by the pen and the gun, by non-monogamist lifestyles, by radical, dissident Chicano nationalism, by the feminist rhetoric to reclaim our selves, our lives, our sex, our religion, our consciousness.

Which led me to anarchism. I’ve plundered my way through the classical texts, finding inspiration but needing to make practical connections. When I initially found other anarchists and tried to apply anarchy to issues of race, privilege, organizing, or even the dreaded, activism, I was scoffed at, challenged, or, worse, ignored. But I continued to speak. I became the problem, the one who asks too many questions, who is never comfortable with the way it is. With the way I am.

I refused to be silent or shameful or half or half-hearted.

Let me explain.

I have never been into the punk scene, I am chicano, I became a father at 20 and had to think about changing diapers, not just about changing social structures. I remember being chastised by someone trying to get us to go up one summer to the logging protests and when I reminded him of my responsibilities, he snapped back: ‘what was more important.’ I wanted to punch him, to make him see his ignorance, the elitism of privilege, the typical dismissal of people with children, with jobs to pay for food and rent. Yet, this has happened over and over. Meetings at 6pm or reading my child a bed time story? How to choose? It felt as if I could never fully commit, never be as dedicated as the people I met—mostly younger, white, students, who were mobile, who could survive on a fluctuating income. Now there is nothing wrong with this, but this was not me, not my experience, not my culture. I tried as much as I could to fit into that community. I brought my kids to meetings; I swapped childcare with other parents on my block (a nice way of realizing it truly does take a neighborhood to raise a child). I tried to figure out how to balance riding bikes with my kids around the block versus riding in critical mass, which is right at dinner time.

There had to be other ways. Other places. Others.

So I retreated for a while into my own experiences, creating and nurturing a lifestyle that embody the Values I couldn’t find elsewhere. I found connections with my imprisoned father and prison issues that introduced me to Attica, to my father’s penitentiary, to political prisoners. I reveled in becoming a father and was soon horrified as disciplined behavior became the primary learning objective in my son’s school. What could I do, where to turn? I refused to participate in the privilege of private schooling so that was out. And then I found The Teenage Liberation Handbook, and we created our autonomy, but struggled to connect with others who chose to homeschool for reasons of liberation rather than christian bullshit and racist, classist fears about public education. Where were the other parents? People fuck, so I know people reproduce.

Moving to the east bay from the city helped me meet more people with similar values. While attempting to create a relationship based on free choice rather than social coercion, my partner and I met another young parent

questioning the rigid social definitions of what relationships could be. With the inspiration from Emma Goldman and the practical advice from *The Ethical Slut*, we began to embrace non-monogamist freedom to explore our own sexuality, our growing identities, our interests. But even here we felt out of place: we weren't 50 year old hippies reminiscing about free love, nor were we new age converts trying to fuck while rubbing crystals and engaging in tantric poses. We were in our late twenties, we were looking for others more like us.

I realized that I could no longer compartmentalize the different aspects of my life. I needed a way to synthesize them all. After ten years of avoiding people who looked and lived so differently than me, I decided to toss aside my ego, my attitude, and my fears and both find and help create the community I wanted.

In the three years since I have made this commitment to be involved in the anarchist community, I have met some powerful and inspirational people; I have learned to see that resisting the oppressive and seemingly undefeatable social world we live in can be practiced in so many minute, marvelous and meaningful ways—in fucking, in gardening, in punk, in slumming it, in cooking. Perhaps even in crystals. I've been a part of RACE (revolutionary anarchists of color), been to and participated in an anarchist conference, started a 'zine, *Boxcutter*, with a few others to explore aspects of personal liberation. I even staff a shift now at the Long Haul. With each step, I try to bring my stories and my experiences with me. I want to be a part of something that combines theory and praxis, that can talk the talk and walk the walk, I want to work with people that I can learn from, that inspire me in my own efforts of teaching, parenting, living my daily life. I want to try and fail rather than remain safe in stasis.

I am writing to engage myself in this process that will force me to embrace more of it, to help shape it, to welcome other people like me—marginalized from the mainstream, yet not quite the typical anarchist—to join this discussion. I know many more people are out there, many more stories, and I hope we can start sharing them. Because I know now that anarchy is the radical approach to life not based simply on living a fair, equal, and free life for yourself, but making the connection and working for the liberation and equality of everyone. It is anti-authoritarian, non-coercive, based on the principles of active involvement, of direct action, of a radical faith in diversity. Now this doesn't imply that the struggles of all communities are equal. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize, within ourselves individually and within our individual communities, the points of privilege we may have access to and benefit from. It is crucial in anarchist thinking to understand the workings of white privilege, male privilege, heterosexual privilege, and so on—and work to destroy these forces. We need to radically imagine new ways to relate to each other within communities of our devising; until then, behavior will only be tolerated socially that works to reinforce the status quo.

I am tired of anarchist thinking that only serves intellectual exercises and academic notions of social discourse, and I fear white male punk angst against private property that serves only the transitory pleasure of the actor while serving to marginalize others and heighten the repression of difference. I also am tired of isolated individual anarchist practices that serve only the development and liberation of the individual who has access to and finances for these pursuits such as veganism or voluntary simplicity.

It is easy to demand we “smash the state” when the portion of your income that feeds your children or pays your daycare so you can work, doesn't come on the first of the month. In my neighborhood, it's pathetic that the churches do more than the anarchist collectives with big gates and tightly drawn blinds. Yet there are people, white and of color, that attempt to engage in genuine anarchist praxis by working and talking with their neighbors. They establish bike libraries, free boxes, hell, even put on haunted houses on Halloween. Throwing candy to kids at times is just as effective in making revolution as throwing rocks at cops.

For me I have learned more about my community that I live in, about the growing gentrification and how people feel about it, by walking the streets, introducing myself and my kids. When a mysterious “neighborhood association” formed to represent the community, many of us walked around asking people about it, going to the first meeting to ask how many renters were a part of it (two at that point), how many people of color (three in a community that's predominantly african american and Latino). “We sent around an email,” was their response as if everyone has access to that technology. Why were cops invited, as if they are a part of community? This is not much, but it's a start. This is authentic living, asking questions, making connections with your community and forming new ones.

Today, on our street we meet to talk, to plan summer block parties, to get to know each other, All of us—older black retirees, college students, hippies, even chicano anarchists like me. It's the revolution house by house, leaving no one behind, unless they choose to stay.

Let me tell you a story:

At 20, I hitchhiked from Las Vegas, New Mexico down the highway to see my father face to face. To try to find some answers. He tells me he fucked up. He should be out there with me, working with me, living life with me. Because, he says, I realized I'm a slave in here. And now I can only fight against other slaves. Out there, when I realized I was a slave, I coulda done something, I coulda fought back at least. Somehow. In here, it's just fucked up.

My father explained that in jail, pencils are like daggers, you can write and you can stab. Mira, he points to his arm, here are the pencil tips that I cannot get out.

This is not a metaphor.

This is a warning.

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