

Walls have never worked

Anarchist People of Color & the immigrant rights movement; an interview with Rafael Mutis

MaxZine Weinstein
Rafael Mutis

2006

Rafael Mutis was part of the Brooklyn 7 arrested at an APOC (Anarchist People of Color) party raided by the police in 2003. They won and exposed the arrogant racist NYPD detectives. He currently works as an organizer against the Rockefeller drug laws, which are New York state's version of the war on drugs. He is also active with the Escuela Popular Nortena. Rafael was interviewed by MaxZine Weinstein in May.

Question: Can you say a little bit about yourself and your history as far as immigrant rights goes?

Rafael: I was born while my father was studying at UC-Berkeley, and my family was living in Berkeley. When I was two years old, we moved back to Colombia, and then, when I was 7 we moved to Texas. Although I have the privileges of a citizen I've lived an immigrant life because when I lived in Colombia, I forgot whatever English I had when I was 2 years old. I had to start all over, and Texas in the late 60's didn't have bilingual education.

Question: Did people give you a hard time because you weren't fluent in English?

Rafael: People talked to me in English, and I didn't understand, and I couldn't defend myself because they'd speak English. I remember being paddled once because one of my classmates and I had a fight. I was automatically the "guilty" party.

I was the only US citizen in the family, so it was on me in some way to protect my family. I had to behave; otherwise, I would put my family in jeopardy. It was not a fun thing.

Question: Was that something they made clear to you?

Rafael: It was pretty clear because we used to always have to go to get green cards renewed and all that stuff. It was a pretty big hassle. I know plenty of folks who are undocumented or don't have the privileges of citizenship. It's so much worse after September 11: Just criminalize everyone who is not a white, straight, middle class Republican.

Question: What do you think when you hear people say that people should only speak English?

Rafael: I think it is ridiculous because their sense of themselves is obviously pretty fragile if they have that level of xenophobia and the need to dominate linguistically, to promote linguistic fascism. For all the lip service that diversity gets in this country, I don't think people understand diversity.

The reality in all of this debate is that unfortunately a lot of the analysis has not been great around immigration issues and what it has meant to have thousands of people out in the streets marching and demanding that they be treated like human beings has been largely lost on this society. I haven't seen any of the analysis that says, look: California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Texas—that was all part of Mexico for hundreds of years until it was stolen by the US. There's this amnesia about history and about the fact that people have lived here for hundreds of years before it became the US.

Question: What do you mean when you say that the US pays lip service to diversity?

Rafael: Difference is good, but it is not valued and our society does not talk about difference—the dominant discourse is about variety, like variety is the spice of life.

Question: What did you think of the demonstrations this year on April 10 and May Day?

Rafael: It was pretty incredible. It wasn't perfect. Just like any civil rights movement, there are big problems. Some of the analysis isn't great, such as signs saying "we're not criminals" and "we want part of the American dream". So there are big problems. But it was electrifying. I marched in both marches in New York City and it was really incredible to see people of color, mostly Latino folks, but also other folks, being the majority of the participants, for it to be on such a massive scale. And to realize, a good part of the folks are undocumented, and they had just had it! They had been treated as subhuman for too long, so they were putting everything on the line. Those people, my people, just walked off their jobs, and these are folks who are the most vulnerable, so they had everything to lose in a sense.

Question: What is your sense of how this movement might sustain itself in the face of so much ongoing repressive legislation and the crackdowns that are happening?

Rafael: I think it is going to be difficult because already the Senate yesterday approved a huge fence on the border, and 84 Senators voted for it, and that is the kinder gentler version compared to what the U.S. House, "our" representatives passed. It's hard because there are so many different groups and so many contradictions within the pro-immigrant movement. I think that people have just had it with the racism, with the Minutemen, with the racial profiling, with what the lack of dignity, life, and work means for people who don't have the right piece of paper. It's gonna take a lot more work based on these incredible mobilizations to sustain this. I feel like right now the Senate, the House and the Bushies didn't even hear or see what's happening in the streets, or maybe they did, and they are going to do all they can to squash it.

Question: What are the major contradictions that concern you?

Rafael: I think like with any civil rights movement, there are limitations, and I think just wanting a piece of the putrid pie is not enough. Are you going to slather it on your body and claim to be an American and not change anything? I think that is a contradiction. I think that there is a contradiction of saying "we're not criminals" without addressing the very system that criminalizes so many people. I think that is clear from the legislation the U.S. Congress has approved and to see the level of white supremacy and racism that's going on around this whole debate. I think it is just really sad, and I think those contradictions get reproduced within the movement.

It's particularly been really sad to me to see a couple of articles written by African-Americans who have just gone along with the pitting of each other against each other by the dominant sectors of US society, talking about "yeah, those are illegals".

Question: The mainstream media is working very hard to divide the communities and the Minutemen even tried recruiting in African American communities (but were thankfully turned away). I was wondering if you wanted to comment on ways African Americans are being supportive of this movement too.

Rafael: I think that lots of African American folks have been supportive; they have seen what really is happening, but my concern has been how this movement hasn't reached out to African Americans (besides Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton and other black leaders) and how easily the debate pits us against each other. I think that is the reality of identity politics in the capitalist U.S.—everything is seen as zero sum; that is, there is not enough to go around, so we get parceled out a few crumbs of the pie to groups here and there, as the owning class gorges itself and they don't get called out that they are doing the hoarding, the parceling out, and the gorging. I think the right wing has been able to manipulate the anger and resentment that Black folks have because they have never been given their due since the "end" of slavery, but the racists have created undocumented immigrants as easy targets, instead of looking at the economics of the situation. Capital needs exploited workers, and if they are undocumented and don't speak the language, the better.

Question: Here in Tennessee, it was exciting that this spring's immigrant rights rallies are some of the largest, if not the largest radical political rallies in Tennessee history. It surprised me a little at the May Day rally in Knoxville that there were remarkably few white folks out there. I was sad how few of my white anarchist friends who traditionally celebrate May Day were at the largest political May Day in the US in many decades. What did you see in New York?

Rafael: Just to be really clear, these demonstrations in Tennessee and all over the country were awesome. I think New Yorkers took note, and we came to these mobilizations later than other folks in other parts of the country. I think one of the big contradictions too is that unfortunately the way the issue has been framed hasn't allowed for

a lot of alliances, and I think you have seen the contradictions amongst folks of color and also among progressive white folks as you said. I just think it is really sad and reflective of how identity politics sometimes works in US society. And that is seen in the whole issue of developing a more complex sense of solidarity. Solidarity is very different from a sense of unity. Unity historically has meant on the left that the traditional white straight guys are on top. So, I'm definitely not into that sense of unity, but I think that we have to develop an analysis in this country where we can back each other up in each other's struggles.

To realize that our liberation, whomever those communities are, everybody, all our liberations are dependent on each other's liberations. So, if so many of the groups get a piece of the pie, there is no piece for me, instead of redoing the whole pie, changing the flavors, and changing the size of the pie, and changing the process of making the pie.

Question: What do you think might be some effective ways for radical white folks who are not immigrants to express solidarity?

Rafael: It seems to me that the May 1st boycott was this awesome chance for people to be in solidarity, to say "look, I'm not an immigrant but I'm not going to work today; I'm not going to contribute financially to this capitalist economy that on the one hand exploits immigrant labor and also pretends that it doesn't exist. I'm going to be in solidarity with folks who are being targeted." It was an awesome opportunity, and I don't think people took advantage of it.

Question: What about mass civil disobedience as they start to build a new border fence, like people opposed to the wall in Israel/Palestine?

Rafael: It is a huge connection. When I think of the wall, I think of the wall in Berlin and the wall which is stealing land and water from the Palestinians. Walls have never really worked. They've built walls before on the US/Mexican border and they haven't ever really worked. The real issue is that the global economy is driving the mass exodus of working people from Mexico to the US. No wall is going to be able to stop that because it is like what the police do—they target people for the very conditions that the police create.

I don't believe in the traditional definition of civil disobedience for people of color and other targeted folks, however. We don't need to feed a voracious Prison Industrial Complex that only lives on our backs and feeds off our blood. I would rather do more creative things to show how this society depends on immigrants. I think the boycott was a good start.

Being jailed twice and seeing the huge streams of young folks of color (largely African American, Latino and increasing poor Asian, South Asian and Muslim folks) who go through the system proved to me that doing something against the law and waiting to be arrested is not useful. The prisons and jails are already full of us and traditional civil disobedience does nothing to deter the fascist racists from their murderous policies. Creative resistance has to happen, using art, culture and our dignity. White folks doing civil disobedience en masse would be interesting: to develop a complex sense of solidarity and become traitors to their race and class.

Question: Are there specific projects that you are involved in now that you want to talk about?

Rafael: The other thing that is exciting that I have been working on for a while with a lot of other folks is this project called Harm Free Zone with the Escuela Popular Nortena (EPN), a popular education school I am in. EPN and Critical Resistance have been doing this project for a few years, and it is the notion that we need to concentrate on ourselves and transform our relationships and how we treat each other. We need to stop reproducing within each other the hatred that the state, the prisons, and the police target us with; we need to focus on building with each other and not just on being consumed in reacting to the fascists.

In the work against the Rockefeller Drug Laws, I started a youth group last year, and we look at art and theater and how to use those and talk about how to educate and communicate with folks in my neighborhood in Spanish Harlem. In El Barrio we're also starting to do active counter recruitment work against the military. In January, the military opened an Army "career center" a couple of blocks from here. It's quite ironic that it's across the street from the funeral home. They know what they're doing, opening these centers in poor communities of color, because this is, as much as we might hate it, given the lack of jobs, given the lack of opportunities, this is seen as a viable opportunity for a lot of young folks of color. It's up to us to say "this is not a career; death is not a career; there are other things you can do." But we have to get busy creating those things.

FE staff note: This interview was originally planned for the Summer edition of this magazine, an issue that never materialized. As we go to press with the Fall issue, the topics raised by MaxZine and Rafael remain relevant.

Here in Tennessee, an organized and so-called “nativist” movement continues to harass immigrants. See the essay “White Heat” which appeared in a recent Nation for more information about what’s going on here in Tennessee.

fifth Estate

MaxZine Weinstein

Rafael Mutis

Walls have never worked

Anarchist People of Color & the immigrant rights movement; an interview with Rafael Mutis

2006

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/373-fall-2006/walls-have-never-worked>

Fifth Estate #373, Fall 2006

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net