

Cancun Journal #17: Thursday, 9/11/03

Rain and Fire

I awaken on the grass near the fountain at kilometer zero, the intersection of Coba and Bonampak that leads into the hotel zone. The gray mist is still cool and the light is silvery on the fountain, where strange Mayan crocodile figures rise from the water. I've been sleeping next to the Koreans' tent, at the vigil they set up near the spot where their companero, Kyoung Hae Lee, stabbed himself to death yesterday in protest of the WTO.

The night of the tenth, we joined their vigil after our full moon ritual in the park next to the Convergence Center. About 40 of us gathered, made a circle, invoked the elements, and did a spiral under the full moon. Some of the punks joined us, and a few of the local people who have been at the cultural events in the Parque de Palapas nearby. The mood was somber, because of Lee's death--but as we circled, looking at the parade of faces, the different shapes and colors and ancestors looking through our eyes, the energy built to a beautiful peak. Then we scattered to join the wake at the auditorium at the Casa de la Cultura, where the campesinos have been camping.

The service was a truly syncretic mixture of cultures. The campesinos had set out an ofrenda, an altar, of flowers and candles and pictures of Lee, arranged in the shape of a giant cross. They were on the microphone, offering traditional prayers in Mayan and and songs and prayers to the father, son, and holy ghost. The Koreans moved forward, bowed to the altar in a Buddhist salute. For Koreans, yesterday was a day to honor the ancestors. Because they could not be home to perform the rites, they had brought a casket with them which they burned at the barricade so that the ancestors could open the way. Then Lee stabbed himself, becoming an offering.

When the Koreans marched out, Brush and I marched with them, along with about 100 other people. Some of our group followed in cars, or went back to the house to get stuff. The streets were dark and empty, the police hung back, and the

crowd grew as we reached the circle where two canopies have been set up on the grass circle surrounding the fountain.

There was a line of cops behind the barricade, and soon they were reinforced by Federal and judicial police and a group in white coveralls who goose-stepped, chanting in unison. A group of students ran forward, linked hands and stood in front of the police, a visual symbol of our intention to protect the Koreans, who are being threatened with deportation by the government. For a while, the situation seemed tense, but then it settled into calm. The students relaxed and pulled back, and we all strolled around greeting and talking to each other. We established little groupings on the grass. Some people fell asleep while a few strolled up to the police lines. I saw three young Mexican men, all with that tough, masculine body language, approach the police lines and talk with them. "We are students," they were saying. "We are human beings, just like you. The WTO is the enemy of all of us."

I finally lay down on the grass, and fell immediately asleep.

When I wake up, the fence is gone, moved an eighth of a mile into the hotel zone. Everyone is waking up together, a beautiful mix of campesinos, Koreans, students, internationals, as if all the separate groupings are now mixing up together.

I run home to shower and then to the Casa, to get some final pictures of the eco-village while the campesinos are still there.

Most are leaving today, and those that aren't are moving the camp down to kilometer zero to support the Korean vigil. We have a quick Green Bloc meeting, decide to move the information and a few of the washing basins down to where we are now, on September 11, beginning to call it Ground Zero.

But the overall installation is too big and complex to move without more planning and design time.

In any case, it has done this work. Erik tells us the story of the little five-year-old campesino girl who approached him as he was washing his hands. She explained the entire system to him, piece by piece, as he just nodded and smiled. Some piece of knowledge has been transferred through the example of this system, with its cheerful orange funnels for sinks and its pump and tubes and plastic casks, some understanding of how things can be integrated, can work together, support each other, and form the basis of a different world. In its own way, our little handwashing station is indeed a model of the world we are striving for. The reason we are pushing ourselves so hard and risking so much is so that little girl may be one of the builders.

I lie down on the grass at Ground Zero, and fall deeply asleep for an hour or so. Then I help rig tarps against sun and rain, and go off to buy rope with Andy and Sophie. While the young man in the hardware store is winding cord into loops and weighing them, the storm rolls in and a drenching rain begins.

As we head back, the streets are blocked by cops and floods, and we circle around and around before we succeed in finding our way back to the circle past the police. By then the rain has stopped, so we are relatively dry as we head back to the Parque de Palapas for the cacerolazo.

A cacerolazo (think "casserole-azo") is a Latin American tradition used by both the Left and the Right, of beating pots and pans throughout the streets of the city and marching to express opposition to a government or policy. We meet this cacerolazo coming down Tulum, led by the Infernal Noise Brigade. None of us visitors have pots and pans but some of the students have appropriated metal garbage cans or bucket drums and the noise is powerful. A few have lit torches and as we sweep through the streets at a fast pace, a wild, magic procession, purifying the city with fire and noise, driving out the evil spirits of greed.

As we come down the slight hill toward Ground Zero, I see the red flame of the torches like a river of fire, and below, a circle of cool, white lights, the flames of the candles the Koreans hold as they circle the fountain. The moon has come to earth in a circle of light, and we stop the drums and fall into a powerful silence in respect. We stand, silent, fists raised, torches burning, and the lights circle below. Everardo, in the front, cries out:

"Lee!"

"PRESENTE!" we thunder back in response.

"Allende!"

"PRESENTE!"

"Zapata!"

"PRESENTE!"

And the roll call of the dead goes on. Dead, but presente, present, still here. The chant becomes as well an affirmation of the living, of what survives:

"Chile!"

"PRESENTE!"

"Latinoamerica!"

"PRESENTE!"

"Mexico!"

"PRESENTE!"

"ZAPATA VIVE! LA LUCHA SIGUE!" Zapata lives, the struggle goes on.

The Koreans have been having a memorial for Lee, and duck up front as the march waits. They have set out an altar with flowers and banners on the spot where he died. Different groups and organizations have placed banners as at home they might have sent wreaths. The most touching, to me, is a small black and orange banner, inscribed with a circle A, that says "Respect." A tribute from the black bloc.

I am thinking about death rites. I was in Palestine when Rachel Corrie was killed by an Israeli soldier who crushed her with a bulldozer. I went down to Rafah to support the team that was with her. They were trying to design her poster, the color photo and tribute that are the due of every shaheed, every martyr. In the hospital, Alice said, the nurses wouldn't let them wash the body. A shaheed's blood is sacred, not to be touched. They have their own traditions, their own way to respond to death, as here the Koreans and the campesinos have their own ways, their rituals.

I honor Lee, and the sacrifice he made, but my heart right now is with the students, pulsing with life. I hope we don't make a cult of the dead. I remember one phase of my involvement with feminism when it seemed that all our heroines were suicides. Maybe we needed to know that oppression hurts, and Lee reminded us that the policies of the WTO are deadly. But honoring the dead should be to say that a life is worth something, that life is what we are fighting for.

The march resumes as soon as the service is done, and circles the fountain, then heads back to Palapas. I am following at the back, chatting with a friend I haven't seen in a long time. As the march turns back into the pedestrian street that leads into the park, a small group breaks away, runs upstairs into a Pizza Hut, breaks windows and then runs back into the march.

Those ahead are unaware of what has happened, those of us behind hear the burglar alarm shrieking. Inside the park, the students gather under the big tent in front of the stage. They are drumming and dancing, wild and ecstatic, the carnival unleashed at last. I stand for a moment, watching from above, a seething cauldron of youth jumping and shrieking in unison, the energy building as it reaches the center, a boiling blast furnace of power, the power of life itself raging and pulsing and demanding to be heard, a power that can bring down empires.

Creation and destruction, love and rage, no aspect of it singular but always light and dark, life and death, the juggler

and the sacrifice, a mix of dualities, like the Gods/Goddesses of this land. Part of me wants to jump into the center, but I'm in another phase of life right now, my life fires not burning with quite such heat. I prefer the edge, where I can bask in the warmth of the blaze.

A group of my friends has gathered at Tacos Arabe, sitting outside on the patio drinking beer and eating tacos while youth thunders beside us. On the TV behind the grill, scenes of 9-11 play--the people running in panic from the burning towers.

They take their place, too, in the roll call of the dead.

The night is full of false alarms. We hear the riot cops are moving in on the students--but they pull back. The students hear that the police are water-cannoning the Koreans, but all is peaceful.

I try to attend a meeting in the rain at the fountain, but my feet hurt and I can't concentrate on the Spanish and I don't really need to be there. I try to attend a midnight meeting at the Convergence Center, but fall asleep sitting up. I have surrendered to Mexico, stopped trying to organize and orchestrate and make things happen, started to trust that there is a deeper, self-organizing flow. Tomorrow is a big day of action, we hope. We don't know what will happen, but we will try to be in the right place at the right time, with the energy, courage and luck to do the work.

-- *Starhawk*

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