

Cancun Journal #16: Wednesday, 9/10/03

Kyoung Hae Lee is dead. I don't yet know his story, only that he came with the Korean workers' contingent. I videoed them forming up in the march, carrying their proud banners, beating their drums and bells. They marched up at the front, with the campesinos and the other workers. When the march reached the police barricade, they split off, marched up to the fence, and Kyoung Hae Lee took his own life, stabbing himself in the heart in an act of ritual suicide.

But let me begin in the morning, as we wake and prepare for the campesino march. "I don't what to wear," Andy says. "I don't know if I'm dressing for a nine-kilometer march in the hot sun, or a police battle." "If the campesinos decide to play it low-key and nonconfrontational," I suggest, "they'll probably ask to send a delegation through and they may let them, in which case we'll be standing around in the sun for hours. If they decide to push through, we'll have the battle; but somehow in either case I doubt that we'll have the nine-kilometer march."

We head down to the Casa de la Cultura where the mood is festive. Thousands of campesinos are milling around the food tents, a giant drum circle is underway, and students are dancing ecstatically in the center while old grandmothers look on and smile. We meet up with the Pagan Cluster and Rodrigo appears, back from Mexico city just in time. Kukulcan, the amazing giant puppet feathered serpent God, with a head of carved styrofoam reproduction of a Mayan sculpture, covered in silver and copper foil, dances through the streets, snaking in giant meanders. Chac, the Mayan God of rain, a giant striding figure painted silver-gray, rolls with a more dignified pace. Contingents of campesinos form up behind their banners, many wearing their own identifying scarves, the women in their traditional dresses, white with beautiful embroidery on collars and hems. They are chanting their chants and songs and clapping along to the rhythms. The black bloc contingent forms up--punks in their ritual black with patches and masks. I see

the students I've trained, marching together in their contingent. Our affinity group joins together behind the Infernal Noise Brigade, under a blue spiral banner. We are toward the back, as the campesinos have asked of the internationals.

The march moves out, a beautiful sight. At last we have thousands of people marching together, filling the streets with a river of color.

When we get close, Lisa calls me. She tells me that the Koreans have moved up to the front, and there's a rumor that one of them impaled himself.

There are always so many rumors in actions. I put this one aside. The march has stopped in front of the police barricade at the entrance to the hotel zone, at Bonampak. There's a big sculpture in the center, giant Mayan carved pillars and platforms in a pool of water. We make our way over to the side of the crowd, where we can escape if necessary. The Infernal Noise Brigade is playing, and the Koreans and campesinos are up front, challenging the fence. We can see it shaking under their assault, but the barricade is reinforced by big flanges of steel in front and behind, and is hard to tip over or pull down.

The Infernal Noise Brigade really understand how to work the energy through music. They are playing an eerie, tonal tune that slowly builds energy. The fence rocks. We move in warily, but the police have barricaded themselves behind it and don't react. There is shouting and yelling and chanting around us. I'm happy. I can feel this mass of campesinos and students and all of us putting forth our power to challenge the barrier, and we are strong.

The agreement all the action groups have made is to respect the campesinos. The black bloc, the more militant anarchist contingent, have made themselves padded body armor and shields, but have agreed not to use them unless the campesinos want them to. Now some word is given and they move up and begin pulling on another section of fence. It is one of those perfect moments that sometimes happen in action: the campesinos on one side, the urban street warriors on the other, pulling in unison on the barriers. At that moment, clouds form in a clear sky, the air grows cool, and rain begins to fall, as if Chac himself were blessing us. Blood has been spilled, and the voluntary sacrifice has been accepted. The rain is cool and strong and we raise up our arms and glory in it as the battle goes on.

I see one of "our" punks from the permaculture village climb the fence. A police baton crashes down on his head from the other side, but he seems unhurt. Sticks are flying and then rocks are flying. Someone lights a fire and burns a giant banner of an American flag that says "Yankee Go Home!" The police put on their gas masks, and we fall back. Lisa has no goggles--I give her mine and rip out my contact lenses and put my glasses on. Contacts are unsafe with tear gas, but no goggles fit over my glasses, so if it's bad I won't be able to see. Rodrigo has no gas protection and I give him my paint filter, as I have a bandana. The battle in front of us is intensifying.

Skip comes up and tells us that the campesinos want the rock-throwers to fall back, that they have negotiated a passage through to the next barrier but can't go because of the battle in front of them. I say I will try to find our friends among the punks, and run forward into the crowd. I spot Loco and Chiwy, and run up and tell them. They already know. Abby is running around trying to get people to stop throwing rocks. Then the campesinos bring up a small sound truck. Rafael Alegria from Honduras, one of the leaders of the campesino organizations here, tries to calm the crowd, asking them to be tranquilo, pacifico. He tries to get people to sit down but no one wants to do it. I don't actually want to do it myself in that situation. He's asking for something too disparate from the wild energy that is raging. The crowd begins to yell at him to get back, and someone pushes him. The truck pulls back, and the crowd surges forward. Rocks are flying and we are eyeing the cops, knowing that if they come out from behind the barricade they will be angry and likely to break heads.

The Infernal Noise Brigade has gone, and suddenly I'm afraid. "I'm not sure I want to be here," I say to Andy who is next to me. "The energy seems...disorganized." I'm not sure how to say what I sense, just the sense of a lull with no clear direction, lots of scattered, unfocused power that could turn nasty or dangerous. "Unless we do something to organize it."

The only thing I can do, really, is drum, and hold the whole scene in my deep attention to make it more coherent. I begin drumming and softly chanting.

"What is our desired outcome?" Andy asks. In truth I don't know. I would like to see the fence come down, see us enter into that space and take it back and march to the Conference Center and tear down that fortress, too. My mythical mind wants to see the power of the people surge forward and reclaim this space, wants to believe that fences and steel bars cannot

keep us out. My tactical mind is saying that even if the fence comes down, we would be entering nine kilometers of a narrow road between the lagoon and the sea, with no escape if we're attacked--and even if we were allowed to march, it's nine kilometers in the blazing sun which came out again as soon as the rocks started flying.

"I just want to raise enough coherent energy to get a little clarity," I tell him. Another drummer is a few feet away, and we join up together, holding a beat that people respond to. I feel like I'm playing the energy of the crowd as it surges forward and subsides, and as we drum, many people are working the crowd. The tension is building and the rocks are flying when a juggler steps into the space between the crowd and the police. He stands there, rocks flying around him, tossing his clubs and catching them in hypnotic patterns, a magician holding back the attack.

Some of the students from the Coordinadora begin slowly edging the rock throwers back, forming a line and opening space, the juggler in their midst. A chant begins, "El pueblo, unido, jamas sera vencido!" and then another and another. The crowd pulls back, and the tension subsides.

The campesinos have moved back across the traffic circle into the shade, and begin making speeches. Our group sits on the edge of the fountain, a bit stunned, not sure what we've just experienced. The sound track changes again, as a campesino band marches up to the barricades and around the traffic circle, while the students begin a game of anarchist soccer in front of the police lines. A mis-aimed kick, and the ball rolls under the fence. A cop's boot nudges it back out to the field of play.

Hyoung Hae Lee is dead. Now in the evening we know he was a farmer, a leader in his community, a director of a magazine for farmers and fishermen, a married man. He came here planning to do this act. He made a casket which he set on fire in front of the police line. He killed himself, as farmers all over the world are killing themselves. Six hundred and fifty farmer suicides in one month alone, Vandana Shiva said. He killed himself not in despair, but as an act of power.

His death affects us all deeply. It reminds us that this is not just carnival and war games, but deeply serious work. It makes us question what we are called to give.

-- *Starhawk*

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