A Hell of a Mistress, the Beautiful Idea

An Interview with Aragorn!

Aragorn!

2018

The following interview took place in the summer of 2018 with Aragorn!, a longtime anarchist involved in a large number of writing, publishing, and infrastructural projects. In the course of several hours of discussion, he describes his childhood in Grand Rapids, his youth in the hardcore scene, his introduction to anarchism, the motivations that drove him, and what it means to commit oneself to a life against the grain. This is an invaluable historical document tracing the development of counterculture and anarchism across four decades—through the Reagan years, gang conflicts with Nazi skinheads, the first Gulf War, and the emergence of the Internet. We offer this transcript in response to Aragorn!'s tragic and untimely death, so that you can hear directly from him how he developed his ideas and what he sought to accomplish.

We recommend this in conjunction with our eulogy for Aragorn!, "Elegy for an Antagonist."

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Q: I'm speaking with Aragorn!. Can you spell your name for me?

Aragorn!: A-R-A-G-O-R-N.

Q: All right.

A: Exclamation mark.

Q: Excellent. So Aragorn!, to get started, can you tell me a little bit about when you were growing up, what your situation with your parents and your home was like, what the area was like where you grew up?

A: Because I was raised in the '70s, I had a very common story, which is that my parents met and relationshipped in the enthusiasm of the immediate post-Vietnam era. I believe I was consummated under a giant oak tree in the fall of '69. And they had expended their energy by the time I was three or four years old, mostly because my father was a horndog. But they were not suited to each other. I was raised by my mother, and then at a certain point I ran away and actually spent my pre-teen and teen years with my father. And then I was done with that. My next family was punk rock. And the town I grew up in had a really vibrant downtown punk scene that I definitely called home for whatever my teenage years. Then by the time I was seventeen, a family member who was concerned by me being raised by wolves brought me to California, and more or less, other than my traveling twenties, I've been in California ever since.

Q: So with your parents connecting in this sort of Woodstock euphoria, et cetera—

A: Yeah. I mean, in fact my name is, my legal first name is Aragorn! I was named after the *Lord of the Rings*.

Q: [chuckles] So when you were growing up, did your parents exhibit any other sort of countercultural or radical political features that shaped how you were raised?

A: Yeah. My father in particular was always countercultural. I mean, mostly I tell these stories to make fun of my father, but he was a big fan of Jethro Tull, to the extent of wearing knee-high pliable leather boots with fringe on them, to playing—he could never handle the flute, but he could do the recorder. But I definitely have seen him play that on one leg. And his countercultural life continued past the hippies. I mean, he and a group of friends bought land together in the early '70s and had a communalist sort of goal [that] never really fleshed itself out. And then, by the late '80s, he had joined AA, and that's the counterculture he's still part of.

Q: Right. So for the first years when you were growing up with your mother, did you live just with her or in a communal household? What was the situation like where you grew up?

A: I would call it, I lived in party houses.

Q: And what kinds of characteristics define those?

A: The morning smell of stale beer and cigarettes.

Q: Right.

A: That's what I got instead of the chirping of birds and the trilling of deer. [chuckles]

Q: And this was in Michigan?

A: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Q: Grand Rapids, Michigan. OK. And what do you remember from Grand Rapids from around that time of your childhood and adolescence in the '70s, and early '80s?

A: Grand Rapids is a pretty famously conservative city. It, it sometimes is referred to as the second Bible belt. It actually has a, a unique for the West characteristic of being Calvinist. There's a religious sect called the Dutch Reformed that are in fact a Calvinist religious sect. In the '70s and '80s it had more churches per square foot from any other city in the world, and they were mostly small Dutch Reformed churches. So it was a town that, you know, up until I left, which was around '87, was closed on Sunday. And most of the children that I met were victims, especially in the middle-class kids, they were victims of this Dutch Reformed cult.

Q: Were either of your parents religious?

A: No. I mean, I learned about the Great Spirit before I learned about Jesus. Because my mother is Native, and most of my young life was in the Native urban community of Grand Rapids.

Q: What was your sense of connection to your Native heritage as you were growing up in that environment?

A: Most of the people in my life were Native. But you know, of course I've written about this and this is sort of like a deep topic. I am part of a genocided people, so how does something exist and doesn't exist at the same time? That's what my Native upbringing was like.

Q: Did you get started going to public school or were you home schooled? What was your education like early on?

A: Public school, all the way. During that time, other options were very uncommon. Obviously today we hear more diverse stories along those lines. But yeah, I did public school. I never even contemplated any other option, yeah.

Q: How did you feel about it? Were there things that you were interested in, or did you chafe against it?

A: In fact, I was a decent student. I conformed fairly well to these worlds. But my life was elsewhere. So in other words I would do my time, then would be done. And I was an advanced student in high school. I took Latin for two years and chemistry for two years.

Q: Before you entered into the punk world, did you have hobbies or interests that were especially important to you?

A: I was a role player.

Q: A role player?

A: I was a significant—I both did D&D and a game called James Bond, and GURPS, and Chthulu. No, I was a full role player, and Grand Rapids was actually a kind of special place in that time. I got to meet and play games with this guy named Jeff D, who was one of the artists of *The Monster Manual.* And he was interesting. You know, I'm like 11 years old or something, and he's like 22 with a girlfriend in the corner and his clothes on the floor. I really remember that as being this significant moment like, "Oh wow, this person's with me, and I guess I'm going to grow up to be like this."

Q: Does that interest in role-playing games persist in your life, or has it influenced the way that you think about your life or your politics?

A: I was a serious role player for a long time. So it absolutely has influenced everything else. But when I fully committed to this other hobby that I have [chuckles], I didn't need role playing. That said, some of the people in my tightest circle are pretty serious board/role-playing gamers. But for me, I'm serious when I say the tools and the processes that I learned in role playing I now do in anarchism. I mean, I can cite chapter and verse of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* from the AD&D second edition. So I guess that immediately has carryover to anarchist stuff.

Q: Right. I'm really curious about that notion of your applying that sort of skills or tactics that you learned role-playing in anarchist settings. Can you give an example of that?

A: Well, really the best way to talk about role playing is sort of like, what kind of role player were you? There are some people—especially nowadays and since the rise of games like Vampire—who, they're cos-players. That really can be a thing, and it's deep, right? Just the costuming, it's actually complicated. It's—I don't insult it just because it's ridiculous. It's deep.

And then, being a player. If you're a real player, you have maybe two or three games going on with two or three sets of people. There's a real depth to that, too, and it can really be a full life, where you're just a player.

Well, I was neither of those things, of course. I was a dungeon master. Which meant that I've spent my times with graph paper and with imagining the games that we were going to play. That's absolutely similar to what I do in the anarchist space.

Q: [chuckles]. Uh huh. So I'm interested to kind of map that transition from the young role-playing Aragorn! to the punk hardcore kid and anarchist Aragorn!. What was your first entry into punk and hardcore?

A: Well, for me—and I think this is the nature of being a Midwestern kid who didn't have money—it was just one day, I literally went in the bathroom and did a crazy haircut. And didn't understand what it meant. There was no connection. And more importantly, I didn't have access to music. I knew about the Clash and the Sex Pistols because of the radio, but I didn't ever have records, even though I was really deeply involved in the hardcore scene. I mean, at some point within the context of the hardcore scene I sort of became more of a zine kid than a music kid. But as important as music ended up being, I got tapes and was more involved in the tape-trading scene than I was in going to record things. That's a middle-class kid thing; I wasn't middle-class.

So the transition was rough, because what happened inside me was something I did outside of me. In other words, the friends that I had that were my role-playing friends, I basically walked away from and had crazy haircuts, and you know, their parents didn't want me to come around anymore. And that was around age 13, 14. And by age 15 I found the punk kids and was involved. So the transition was rough and sort of confusing because I didn't exactly get it, but I got it because that was on some existential level, that's where it was.

Q: What do you think it was that attracted you to the punk aesthetic, punk music, the punk scene?

A: I don't know. I mean, I would basically say it was—I found myself expressing myself in a way that was similar, and dissimilar, to that look and feel. But in the micropolitics of punk rock, in fact I was a hardcore kid who didn't know it, who lived in a town where there really weren't hardcore kids. And it was also too early. I called myself straightedge in 1985. So I knew what Minor Threat was, I identified with that. But there wasn't enough there to, to identify with. Perhaps the fact that I was so stubborn around drugs and alcohol was why punk made sense. And I was stubbornly against what I saw available to me in my, in my high school. But whatever values and mores there were in punk, that all came so much later. Because, I mean, in the early to mid-'80s, who was articulating that? Maybe the DC scene. But even then, even they were only five years older than me.

Q: I'm curious about the straightedge piece. Did you drink alcohol or use drugs before that time at all?

A: No.

Q: What was it that led you to make that choice and stick to it so stubbornly?

A: Well, part of the stubbornness was about the deep mediocrity of all of the adults I saw around me—like, what simple turnkey solution can I come up with to not be mediocre in the way in which my family is mediocre? And as soon as I caught a whiff, it took two or three songs before I was like, I'm done. There it is.

Q: What was the immediate punk or hardcore scene like in Grand Rapids and in that part of Michigan?

A: Grand Rapids was amazing. We're talking '85 to '87, which was when I really was here. It was incredibly eclectic. And this is a thing I've never seen replicated. You go to a big town scene, and you get to hang out with the exact niche that you moved to that town's scene to be with. And frankly, you don't have to interact with anyone else, because the scenes are big enough to be self-sustaining. Grand Rapids wasn't like that. Grand Rapids around that time was about a half million people metro, and every rando kid in the entire county basically came to downtown Grand Rapids to hang out. So in our living, breathing daily punk scene, we had skinheads, rockabillies, goths, new wave kids, skateboard kids, all in the same pile. It's also worth mentioning in terms of straightedge: the first people who I met who were straightedgers smoked cigarettes. And actually in the mid-'80s, smoking cigarettes was still sort of, like, approved behavior. And it wasn't until the Youth of Today sort of generation came into being, where it really became this more disciplined jock sort of thing, all the other straightedgers in town wore leather jackets, they looked like punks. And, and I looked—I mean, it's funny to say this; you know, of course you can use it against me in social scenes. But in the '80s, I was a wacky punk, Like, I was in to the Descendants, and Doggy Style, and bands that in hindsight are just so goofy. Yeah, so I was like, fun. Like one of the things my punk jacket that I wore in that time period said on the back was "Yo-yo or die." Because I'm an accomplished yo-yo-er.

Q: I didn't know that about you.

A: Mm hmm. Yeah, it's an important piece of information.

Q: For the historical record.

A: [laughs] Yeah.

Q: Were you playing in any bands?

A: I only did one band, and that was after I moved to California. And that was a No For An Answer-influenced straightedge band. So that was in 1990.

Q: Do you remember the first time that you heard of anarchism?

A: Well, you know, it's funny. The terminology was bandied around for a long time before I connected it to anything that was relevant to me personally. I encountered Earth First! in about '88, actually on a tour of colleges. They came to my college and sang songs and encouraged us to do Redwood Summer, which was during that period. But their politics didn't come off as that radical. Really what flipped the switch for me around anarchism was by the time I moved to California and I had settled in Sacramento at Dakota College, and was immediately pretty involved. At the time I was a skinhead, and in my head I was part of this imaginary movement of straightedge skinheads sort of influenced by the New York sound, bands like Side by Side, Turning Point, Wide Awake. But most of my friends who were skinheads were what were called traditional skinheads. Mostly they were fashion people, superficial, and they were trying to evoke something from an ancient past even older than the imaginary New York City that I had in my head. And during that time, we were in a town that was filled with sort of famously nasty Nazi skinheads. And in 1990 I was stabbed and my good buddy and roommate was killed, and that was how I became an anarchist.

Q: Can you talk a little bit about the context of the racial politics of punk in the scenes that you were in, and if ARA played a role in that, or how these conflicts between racist and anti-racist skins came to a head?

A: Well, I'd frame it really differently.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: You're referring to sort of coherent politics. I think that happened in the '90s. In the '80s, it was punk to put a swastika on. It was punk to offend meta-context. So when I started to become political in the sense of wanting to like—so in the late '80s, some Nazi skinheads went on to Geraldo [*a TV talk show*]. But remember, the Nazi skinhead thing came out of England. So the US Nazi skinheads were emulating something that they only saw through very limited filters from the UK. So what happened in the US was that through some of the sort of shock television, American Nazi skinheads found their voice. In other words, they found themselves as being stars of a particular kind of show. Now obviously, we could put a more political veneer on that, and to the extent to which I did and I was involved in that in the time, you know, we were the opposition. Of course [I] wanted to fight, wanted to say that skinhead was so much more than this and it was really important, really interesting. But it wasn't. So that's a common problem that we have in the anarchist space too, right, is that sometimes people are much more engaged in the perception of what's happening and in participation in that perception than they are in the hard negotiating of these ideas. And in the American context, you have to choose to even live in a world where ideas matter. And most people do not make that choice.

Q: Speaking of ideas, it's interesting that in your discussion of how this path opened up for you, you haven't mentioned reading anything or any texts a being particularly noteworthy or

influential. Were there things you were reading at the time that stuck with you or made an impact, or was it mostly other kinds of interactions?

A: I was a voracious reader from a young age. Both my mother and my father very much had the wall of paperbacks. But that was mostly fiction. My non-fiction reading basically began around this time, around 1990. I started like a lot of people do; and actually, my friend who's around here wanted to make sure I 'fessed up to the fact that I was reading people like Noam Chomsky, Michael Albert, Michael Parenti, and sort of what we would call the intellectual left from the '60s. But my real education didn't begin for a couple more years. At this time I was just getting a taste for this kind of material, and I did to come to this stuff through reading. I came to it through this, through the social milieu, through punk, and obviously through the fight against Nazis.

Q: Yeah. So just to make sure I have the thread right, it's around '87 or '88 that you head out to California. And was that for college or before you moved to college?

A: I had a family member that was concerned about my life choices. So they brought me out to finish high school, which I perhaps would not have finished, and to get me off to college.

Q: Right. What was the basis of their concern?

A: I had left home six months earlier and basically was on the streets and unfindable and, yeah. One of the houses I stayed at, that family ended up calling up my family to sort of see what was going on. It was that sort of thing.

Q: So you landed in California, in Sacramento?

A: Actually, in Marin County.

Q: In Marin County, OK. What was that adjustment like?

A: Dramatic. I was basically a broke kid. At that time, the average price of a house in Grand Rapids, Michigan was 40,000 dollars. At that time the average price of a house in Marin County was 400,000 dollars. BMW stands for Basic Marin Wheels.

Q: Uh huh.

A: So I spent a year in that environment. Totally amazing, totally blows my mind. I got to meet and to associate with middle-class kids in a way that I never had before. And then went to a mediocre state college in Sacramento.

Q: And did you stay involved in punk stuff that whole time?

A: Oh, yeah. That was nonstop until another five years later.

Q: I'm curious with that class contrast between Grand Rapids and Marin County.

A: Oh, a lot more records. I could get Docs any time I wanted, right. There's actually like shoe stores there in the Bay. Marin is where I really first saw people who could dress in the uniform from head to toe. In Grand Rapids you were lucky to get a piece, right. You'd have a denim jacket with two patches on it, then over the years you'd collect more. So the real difference to start with was aesthetically. But obviously that leads to a sophistication, right. I had people younger than me, less experienced than me speak more fluently about the thing that I was into, because they had access to the album liners and to the zines and, basically, to money. All the things money provides, one of those is information. And that's of course where the internet changed things.

Q: Right. So you land at college and—oh, I was curious. Were you involved in anything that now or at the time you would have called activism?

A: Well, after the stabbing that year, we actually formed an ARA chapter, and sort of did what was necessary to start moving a town in that direction. There was actually a big march with

pictures of us basically saying, fuck Nazis. It was an anti-racist march through the middle of town. And part of the hook of it was the stabbing.

Q: Can you set the scene a little bit about what led up to the stabbing, the scene you were in, the conflicts, and how that came about?

A: You know, again, I think it's worthwhile to talk about this in two different lenses. I'm gonna use the one that you're less comfortable with first. As the gang of anti-racist skinheads became more and more powerful, it became more and more aggressive in terms of like throwing parties and being a social space. And we became more and more willing to go to places where we knew that Nazis were gonna be. There's the old gang in this who ruled Sacramento in the late '80s. They were called the Sacto Skins. They were not affiliated, they were not political, but they were Nazi skinheads, right. Which is a weird thing to say today, you know, when the definition of Nazis is political, of course. These people weren't like that. They were bigots who didn't give a fuck, and they were older tough guys, you know. We're late teens, early 20s; they're late 20s already. So these are people who became people that look like motorcycle guys or rockabilly sort of dudes. But at that time, they were still straight-up Nazi skinheads. So they didn't have a huge mythology behind them and they weren't necessarily looking to Europe for answers. They were just ignorant American dudes.

I mention that because they weren't necessarily that aggressive. In other words, we would go to a place to make them uncomfortable, and they weren't necessarily calling their buddies to come and brawl it out. But many of them were really gnarly people: there were ex-prisoners, you know, and hard men. Around the same time when anti-racist skinheads are starting to grow in numbers, and obviously because we have the political line we understand the kind of people that are starting to surround us. In that same time period the American Front—who had a basically centerfold spread in Rolling Stone magazine around 1988, '89, so very recently for the time period I'm talking about—an American Front chapter started in the Sacramento area, actually in the far-out suburbs. And they became very aggressive. In hindsight, it's clear that they were our main opposition, much more than the Sacto Skins. And you know, we just found an acceleration of opportunities to be in the same place as each other, and to have different levels of face-offs. That was actually—they had come to a dance night that we held, and I got jumped by like 15 people in an alleyway about a year before I got stabbed. They took my jacket and bloodied me, and that was the context. You know, there's a lot of things to say about this, one of which is that this kind of a gang situation that also has ideas in the mix is exciting.

I think that answers your question.

Q: Hmm. I'm curious in all of this—

A: Yes, I'm sure you are.

Q: In all of these social conflicts over terrain and aesthetics and all of these other things, where does anarchism come in, in your own life or collectively?

A: Well, again, really anarchism came in after the stabbing. Because for me the stabbing was a crossroads. In the political climate in most of America, anarchism was not being discussed; but neither were Democrats and Republicans, right? Punk rock was still at the level of denouncing Reagan. Now, obviously, we all agree that Reagan sucks, and Reagan Youth is one of my favorite bands. But saying "Fuck Reagan" isn't anarchism. It's not a long ways from it, but it is a long way. So during that time, to the extent to which we were sitting around on couches and talking about ideas, we were chewing our way from being against Reagan to being something. Very few people were taking it as far as to talk about anarchism, at that time.

Q: Had you encountered *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed,* or any of the publications that were circulating at that time?

A: No. But my story, just to jump ahead a little. In '90 I get stabbed, so the whole next year I was in the mix of some nasty shit that I would call gang life. So I needed to leave and start over. And I did, and in '91 I moved to San Diego and immediately got involved in this place called the Che Café. And the Che Café gave me access to graduate students at UC San Diego. You may not realize this, but the shadow still loomed large at UC San Diego of Herbert Marcuse. He taught there for 20 years, and he created an entire layer of graduate students and professors who were interested in the same sets of ideas that he was. But what it gave me access to, as a person who was now calling themselves an anarchist but was very new to these ideas, was the first three books that I received when I was there, the first three objects: Bakunin's anthology from Black Rose Press; *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed,* and the *SI Anthology.* And that for me was how I began my anarchist education: one, two, three.

Q: So it was '91, '92 that you moved down?

A: Mm hmm.

Q: And after coming out of the experience of the stabbing and wanting to get out of the gang life, as you put it, were you still involved in punk and going to shows and stuff?

A: Absolutely. The Che Café was the punk venue in town, and I quickly became one of the people that put on shows at the Che. So for the next couple of years, I mean—and those were great years. That was around the time that Green Day signed to a major label, so the last show before they signed was at the Che. I saw Chumbawumba there, Sleep, Crash Worship… the list goes on and on and on. And that doesn't even count all the San Diego bands that were starting around that same time: Heroin, Antioch Arrow, probably many, many bands that you liked.

Q: Around that time there's, you know, the first Gulf War and the AIDS epidemic and all these other issues in Latin America and stuff. On a topical level, were their things from current events or broader movements that struck you or that you got involved in?

A: I'd been involved as a participant in anti-war activity. As it turns out, people who were punk were also participants in anti-war activity in Sacramento ended up being good friends of mine. Later on, there was a publication that came out of Sacramento—I came back to Sacramento a couple of years later. But there was a publication called *Alphabet Threat* that actually came together because of some people who were against the Gulf War together and did more performance—I wasn't involved in that group, but they ended up being good people, people that I spent a lot of time with, and who I got a lot out of a couple years later. But in San Diego then I was just a participant in anti-war stuff in particular. Most of these other issues were a little too rarified for my tastes. I didn't know about them until much later.

Q: Go ahead.

A: Well, just to tell my own story for a moment, by the time I was leaving San Diego I then went and was more or less a traveling punk for a couple years, you know, mostly using resources out of the punk scene more than the anarchist scene, which there really still wasn't much of in the US. So then I spent the next couple of years kind of becoming what it was I was going to become, meaning that I lived in a van, I would drive the van to the next town, and I basically would raid their libraries. This was the time period where I really got an education in things like post-structuralism and the ideas *behind* the ideas that were what anarchists were talking about, you know, in my limited understanding. That took a number of years. But that really shaped my anarchist practice and how I became who I am today.

Q: As you were traveling, were you doing it solo or with friends or lovers or others?

A: I was always solo. Yeah, and that is an interesting sort of way to reflect on how someone comes to their thing. Obviously I was, I had people in the towns I would go to or whatever. But yeah, I was alone.

Q: Were those people that you had connected with through punk or anarchism or correspondence?

A: Yeah, at that point it was starting to become everything; everything was becoming everything. But by the mid-'90s I was pretty much not involved in the hardcore scene. And it's worth reflecting on this, and you'll probably want to ask a lot of questions, but I was outed as inappropriately sexual in the mid-90s. And it was in the context of the hardcore scene. While I didn't leave the hardcore scene as a result of this outing, it absolutely changed by life and changed my perspective on how I should be engaging interpersonally with people, and definitely led to a lot of decisions I've made since then.

Q: I did want to back up and ask, since I know that polyamory is an important part of your life now: when you first started dating and forming relationships, what your ideas were about monogamy and polyamory, and if family played into that?

A: Yeah, of course it played into that, although I'm sort of against psychotherapy and talking therapy as a way to resolve these issues, so I happily sort of stopped thinking about some of this a long time ago. But I've always been polyamorous. As a teenager, that looked like sleeping around. Especially in Grand Rapids, actually, the hobby of most people was to sleep around. You know, very cold winters. And yeah, so essentially I didn't really come up with a language around it until my 20s, until I was within the anarchist space for a couple years. By the time I had been outed, or when I was called out, I had a pretty good language around it. And I would respond to the situation similarly now than I did then in the sense of, like, I would use these similar words. In other words, like any other person we talk about polyamory as a structure, but we believe in free love. Or as an anarchist, we believe in free love, and we believe that love isn't constrained by legalistic documentation and by these horrific cultures that we've been raised in. But that said, most people that we're sleeping with are still touched by these same things. I understood that then.

Q: I have a lot of context for the last 10 or 15 years of how these conversations about consent, "accountability" in quotation marks, all that sort of stuff has played out, but I don't know as much about how that was going on in the '90s in punk circles or anarchist circles. I'm curious if there's anything you want to share about that, either discourse around it, what your models or messages were for how you learned how to be sexual with other people, or what appropriate gender roles were in those contexts, that sort of thing.

A: Well, the reason that things are what they are today is because of the way in which they were not formed in earlier times. I mean, obviously we came out of the '70s, where, you know, sex was entirely irresponsible and where the pill was basically the dominant force that impacted this conversation. I would say that my era was on the one hand entirely irresponsible, but on the other hand, the AIDS crisis did loom large in most people's imaginations. So if we're going to talk about social change as being progressive, you can imagine how the '90s filled in the gap from the '70s to today. But from the other perspective, or from a different perspective, I would say that it was incredibly undertheorized, as it is today.

You know, one of the things about being older and thinking about these topics: we as anarchists believe that everything that we do is rational and can be explained. And as I age, I realize

how crazy that is. As a young person, I was a chemical stew, and part of that chemical stew desired humping. And now I'm older, and that stew has stopped boiling, and it's changing a lot of things. And I say that even though right now I'm in active relationship with three people, which ostensibly was more than I mostly was involved with as a young person. But the relationships aren't about sex. And for me by and large, they never were; but there was an inflection that seemed very sexual. In other words, yeah.

Q: So it's the mid-'90s, and you're doing these solo self-directed travels to different places in the country, or studying and learning and immersing yourself more deeply in anarchism, political theory, social theory, et cetera—

A: I spent a full year here in Ann Arbor. That's why I know this place so well.

Q: Hanging out at the Labadie [*Collection, an archive of anarchist and other radical history materials*], or?

A: Yeah. And the public library, because obviously I didn't necessarily know what I was going to be researching, but I knew that it was here, and I got to touch things and make them real in a way that they weren't before.

Q: How were you sustaining yourself?

A: Financially?

Q: Yeah. Did you work jobs?

A: Yeah, I did. Most of my life I have worked shit jobs for discrete periods of time, then quit, and then had time to myself. So for twenty-plus years I've pretty much been: work a year, take a year off, work a year, take a year off. During that time, by the way, I worked in hotels. I would work in a hotel graveyard shift, and then I would crawl into bed in my van, wake up noonish.

Q: Did worker-based or workerist politics ever hold any appeal for you?

A: No. My father was a union pipefitter. I was around union politics as a child. But by the end of the '80s, that world seemed so empty that I was never compelled by anarchist argumentation around workers. That said, I strongly differentiate anarchism where there was a worker's movement and anarchism where there has not been. I call this first wave and second wave anarchism, following John Moore's formulation. I just happened to sort of be in the early part of the second wave of anarchism. So I think that the first wave and the idea of there being a worker's movement is incredibly important. But that's not our problem. Our problems are different. Our problems are worse.

Q: You mentioned the three books that you were first exposed to in San Diego that set the template for your interests. As you broadened and deepened your reading and your engagement with political ideas, what was it that stuck out to you?

A: Oh, no. Those three books, arguably are still—it took me ten years to understand the *SI Anthology.* I have a North American education. To understand what the SI were talking about—no, I'm not kidding. People who just blast through it and think that they get it, they're morons. That shit is hard! That shit assumes that you know things that we don't—I mean, I had never met a person who's graduated from high school that understands what's going on in that book. How many Americans do you know that understand from Dada to the Surrealists? I mean, that shit took me a long time. The *SI Anthology,* just that book and then *Society of the Spectacle*: that was a full decade of my life, to really understand all the threads and the connections and why that shit mattered. No, absolutely.

Q: As you're struggling through these difficult texts and wrapping your head around them, did you have sense of how those connected to your daily life and your immediate sense of engagement with the world?

A: That's perhaps one of the reasons why these things have taken me longer to understand than the brilliant people around me. I have always—the idea that I'm an armchair theorist is so laughable, if you know me. For me the, the immediate question I ask any time I receive a new text is, is, how does this matter to my life? That's always basically been my central project. The reason I became a publisher was because I wanted these things not just to be relevant to my life, but to share that enthusiasm with other people. For me, the idea, the beautiful idea, is about—how do you connect ideas to living? It's not about "the struggle."

Q: Back to the chronology. It's the mid '90s, you're traveling around. And then how long were you mobile in that way before you settled back down in California?

A: Just a couple years. But, you know, basically I was in that space of working jobs like hotel jobs where I could read all night, for about five years.

Q: Did you come back to Sacramento?

A: Actually, I moved to San Francisco.

Q: To San Francisco. What was it that drew you there?

A: Well, the particular friends that I had there. I was really good friends with a person who passed away just a couple of years ago named Sarah Kirsch. And that milieu, which we could basically call the *HeartattaCk* scene [*HeartattaCk was a zine from Goleta, California covering political hardcore from the do-it-yourself underground punk scene*], that very much like felt like a way where I could put this stuff into practice. But then when I was outed it was actually at a Goleta Fest that they put on.

Q: What is that, Goleta Fest?

A: Goleta is a town near Santa Barbara. Ebullition Records did the magazine *HeartattaCk,* so that was all connected. So by the time I actually landed in San Francisco, a lot of group houses sort of didn't want me around. So I had to figure out, like, I had to restart a lot of things. I spent the next couple of years figuring out how to restart.

Q: That process you're describing as being outed: what did that look like? Was it like a face-to-face confrontation, or something in text?

A: At the fest, someone put on a performance before a band played. And the way that they portrayed that performance was as if it were as a survivor of a particular situation that, at the end of their performance they pointed at me as the oppressor to their oppressed. So it was a spoken word performance on stage. 700 people.

Q: And how did that change your life?

A: Yeah, it was a restart to my social life. Meaning that I really had to reexamine who my friends were, what the terrain of our friendship was. Obviously I had to really reassess sexual relationships. And you know, I had a partner at the time, yadda yadda yadda. But future partners absolutely had to be under a new regime. And you know, it changed and perhaps ended my enthusiasm for the hardcore scene. Today, it makes sense for some people to be in their 30s and 40s and still involved in the hardcore scene, but at that point, at 24 or 25 years of age, I was already pretty old. And a lot of why the situation happened was because of age disparities. So I obviously just had to reexamine that and perhaps start hanging out with people my own age. Which is funny—I say that as an anarchist, because of course today, a lot of the people who are around me are 15 years younger than me.

Q: So I guess it's like '95, '96 when you're in San Francisco? And you're partly in this *HeartatTaCk* milieu. I meant to ask, because you mentioned that zine culture, even more so than the music aspect of punk, was really important to you. Do you remember what your first zine was, what your first writings were that you circulated?

A: Sure. It was a zine called *Kill your Parents.* It was a post-Situationist zine about killing your parents. [laughs]

Q: Say more?

A: I mean, it was short. It was lovely. I did the artwork for it, which was hysterical, because I basically can do line drawings, and that's what I did. But it was literally like, you know, Johnny with a butcher knife and, yeah. So short, but funny. It was reprinted in one of the first queer zines of that era, called *Strange Fruit.*

Q: Do you remember what year you put that out?

A: I think *Kill Your Parents* was '93. And then *ATR,* which was the zine that I did that had a bigger notoriety and actually had some crossover with early CrimethInc., was '94.

Q: What was the physical infrastructure of zine-making like?

A: Oh, it was all about going to Kinkos, stealing copies, everyone owning blue keys [*a means of misreporting the number of copies one made at a common photocopying franchise at the time, in order to avoid paying*]. This was the early formation of all of this. Yeah, I absolutely was part of that world. I had a blue box, which was how you would make free phone calls. That was very much part of the van living, you know, was having the mechanisms to communicate and then also to do zines.

Q: Were you exchanging zines on that circuit as well?

A: Yeah, for sure.

Q: Which ones do you remember being particularly interesting or inspiring to you?

A: Hmm, gosh. It's funny because, you know, at that time, by and large, the zines that were being passed around were music zines. And so intelligent. I guess I really liked the Riot Grrl zines. I think that those were probably the best thing that came out of that early '90s period. A lover of mine did this really wonderful zine, but I can't remember the name now, which is probably for the better. But yeah, I was really good friends with these two zine makers that came out of Washington, DC. Their names were Mary and Erica, and they did this series of very complicated zines where they were lovers and not lovers and fighting. But what really struck me at the time was that they were innovating riot grrl, riot grrl theory, and partially they were doing it in real time while reading bell hooks's books. If you don't know about those two and you have any interest in that stuff, you should really check them out. Erica changed their name to Billy Rain, and Mary became Mary Margaret.

So the first innovation that they added to the riot grrl thing—so riot grrl comes out basically as: "Boys, get out the way." Then it was, "White girls get out of the way." Mary and Erica's first innovation was: "Middle-class girls, get out of the way." Then they made real innovations around mental health. Erica was schizophrenic and had multiple voices who were fighting themselves inside of her, and she expressed all of this in a creative format. Mary really doubled down on working-class, what it was to be a working-class white Polish person. And both of them were very articulate, very interesting and sophisticated for their times.

So I would say that actually the riot grrl thing impacted me the most in terms of my politics and all the rest. And the anarchism, I either got through magazines and books, or then later on

through things more like zines. But probably the per-zine revolution impacted me the most. And I did a personal zine too, called *Oppression Song*.

Q: *Oppression Song*.

A: Mm hmm. I did two issues. But most of this isn't about anarchism.

Q: When you were settling in San Francisco and figuring out your scene there in mid to late '90s, did you have sense of what you wanted to do, what you wanted the focus to be of your life and activity?

A: I was getting to the point of knowing that I wanted to be a writer/reviewer sort of person. During that period, I did a book review a month for *Maximum Rock'n Roll,* and did the same for *HeartattaCk* for a brief period of time. So by the end of the 20th century, I sort of wanted to be a writer/theory anarchist person. And it essentially took a decade of being an anarchist before I sort of had something to say. And it was in the early 2000s, around 2002, that Jason McQuinn was giving up *Anarchy* magazine and then I was one of the receivers of it.

Q: So during that time as you're transitioning increasingly towards being a writer/editor/reviewer, what was the landscape of anarchist publications that you found yourself in?

A: Right. So the end the '90s, early 2000s, you know: *Fifth Estate.* My world, it was *Fifth Estate, AJODA,* [laughs] who else? Then *Green Anarchy,* and then everyone else, basically, right? Because the difference between us and them is that we went on the newsstand, which meant that you could actually be introduced to anarchism through us. And that was when Tower Records was still around, and the newsstand still existed. So I definitely followed all those magazines, you know, whatever was in the newsstand of that caliber through the end of the '90s. And I'll include *The Match* in there, and any of the local magazines that were frequent, like *Black*—the one from New York—ahh, I can't remember. But basically, many of the towns in the country had some sort of viable publication for a couple of issues, for a period of time. *Alphabet Threat* in the mid-'90s was really important for me, because I was sort of embroiled with them. I tried to pay attention to everything. I mean, I was that into it at that point in my life, like, this was clearly the idea space that I was going to work in.

I will say this: I spent many, many years trying to understand what was happening on the East Coast. I've never had close ties with anyone on the East Coast, and their anarchism just didn't seem—it seemed impossible, and it didn't seem interesting.

Q: What were the differences between the coasts?

A: Well, you can still say this. The East Coast is still red. Yeah. So, you know, the West Coast is stronger green; the Midwest by and large just wants anything, anything that lives and breathes. You know, I have joked about this in a couple different contexts, about meeting the kid with the *Slingshot* patch and the Earth First! shirt and the IWW hat and that's still realistic. I get why that's the case.

Q: You mentioned that when you were a teenager you saw the Earth First! tour come through and that you weren't super impressed on a political level, or it didn't strike you as so radical.

A: Especially aesthetically.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: They played acoustic guitar, you know, and sung songs about unity.

Q: Not quite your scene?

A: Not quite. But lovely once you understand that "no compromise" means x, y, and z. No, that part I was totally on board with.

Q: So I'm curious if green anarchist or later primitivist ideas, how you interacted with them when you first encountered them.

A: I've always been friendly to green anarchist perspectives. They make a lot of sense to someone who has an indigenous pedigree. I never was excited by primitivist ideas. They only, in my opinion, would be exciting to someone who has a sort of academic or a particular type of cerebral worldview. They start from a sort of preposterous premise that they have to defend with lots of citations.

Q: I don't remember when *Murder of Crows* or *Killing King Abacus* came on the scene, but I'm curious about the entry path of insurrectionary ideas.

A: It was all the early 2000s. I mean, really, with that stuff, there is an older pedigree that is Canadian and British, because of Jean Weir. And Elephant Editions was really the first of the English language anything. But unless you knew the right people, you'd never know about the material. So it was *Killing King Abacus* that was really the first. *Murder of Crows* was five years later. I dunno the exact years, but my guess was that *Murder of Crows* was 2006. And *Killing King Abacus* was 2002 or something. But at that point I was already pretty established as a post-left anarchist. And while obviously that material absolutely conforms to a post-left understanding, you know, it was transient; it wasn't as much of a scene thing then as it is today. People didn't immediately start calling themselves insurrectionary anarchists. Instead it was like, whoa, look at what's coming out of Italy.

Q: In terms of ideas and trends, or in terms of movements or struggles, were there international currents that you were aware of and were keeping an eye on or felt especially interested in?

A: I guess that's been more true recently. The last 20 years, perhaps connected to the rise of the internet, has meant us having a lot more information. You know, the kind of people who could travel internationally and, and share that information—I wasn't part of those sets of people. You know, again, especially as it expressed itself in the anti-globalization era, those were middle-class people with middle-class values and middle-class friends. And to the extent that any of those people still exist, and some of them do, they have a particular orientation that was never mine. While of course I agree with and adhere to internationalist values that are sort of anarchist values, my interest has always been in doing what you're going to do in the here and now. I've always distrusted people that proselytize across oceans.

Q: You've talked about the publications and the threads of ideas. In terms of the anarchist organizations and groups that were around at the time: you know, you talked about ARA back when that was immediate for you. But, Love and Rage [*the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, an organization active from 1989-98*] or any of those sorts of initiatives, did you have any connection to them? Or what was your perspective on them?

A: I always paid attention to them, but mostly hostilely. I mean, I hadn't exactly found my voice by the time NEFAC came around. Love and Rage is slightly before my time. I definitely didn't know those people until later, basically. I've always found them interesting and their project interesting on the level of, like, this is one way to practice anarchism. But I felt like all those groups, to put it in modern language, were firmly in the first wave of anarchism that basically, in my unfair judgmental perspective, died in the fields of Catalonia in 1937. And the idea of replicating those failures just was never interesting to me. My interests are always in what was born in the streets of Paris in 1968.

Q: A thread that I think is really interesting in this is the question of the relationship of anarchism and Marxism. Because it seems to me from talking with folks who were politicized either

during that time or through people who are from that time, even during the New Left era, almost all of the anarchists I've met were Marxists of some kind before they were anarchists.

A: Yeah, for sure.

Q: And while that's true for some people that I know who grew up in later generations, for sure, it seems much more common that whether coming out of punk—the majority, I would say—or out of ecological struggles or whatever it was, it's much more common for Marxism to just not really make that much sense or register with anarchists of your generation.

A: Correct.

Q: How or when did you encounter Marxism, and how did you relate to it?

A: Well, I encountered Marxism at the same time as anarchism. Again, Marcuse was not an anarchist, and his graduate students were not anarchists. Why that time period was so important to me was because it was the first time I got to have these discussions around—what's the difference, what's the pro and con, how was Marcuse in an idea space that overlapped with anarchism? Because he was. So I was very open to these ideas, and I always have been really curious. In other words, I didn't want to feel like because Marxists have a theoretical foundation and intellectual firmament that somehow they were way ahead of what we were doing as anarchists. So it was always very important to me to understand; like, I've been in several *Das Kapital* reading groups, just so that I get it. It's now been quite a number of years, but the point is, I've done that work, and I'm absolutely opposed to Marxism.

My anarchist project is hostile to a Marxist project. And as much as I'm willing to collaborate with what I'll call anti-state communists—which we can talk about what that means—as much as I'm willing to collaborate with those people, there's a place where we're never going to agree. Labor theory of value, historical materialism, and Marx's combative sociology; I disagree with all of that. [laughs]

Q: Yeah. So then in between that first and second wave, I'm curious where you see the polymorphous overlapping things that get called the anti-globalization movement in that context. Because it seems to me like there's strands of both of those generations that sort of come up in it.

A: Yeah.

Q: Looking back from the perspective of my anarchist generation, where there's so much mythology around Seattle '99 and blah blah blah, sort of retroactively seeing that as the high point of some movement that we don't necessarily know much about or where it came from or whatever. What was your perception as it was happening of that as a meta-phenomenon, and how did you relate to it?

A: Well, first it's worthwhile to say that it's hard to know where to start here. Because I'm hostile to that period. And I'm hostile to it for the same reasons that we could sort of speak less emotionally about from early on. I've never been a person who experienced myself or saw myself as a moneyed person. So even as my income grew over time, and perhaps I could have justified traveling from place to place, the kind of person that got paid to travel from place to place to these ministerials and whatnot, they were a really different kind of person than I wanted to be around, than I liked. There is a class difference that's relevant here. But we can also talk about it from other perspectives. I think an important distinction between any anarchist—or an important question you really have to answer is: what is the relationship an anarchist should have to politics? Should we devote our energy to changing the world as it is, and turning the little screws and helping fix things and making things more equitable and humane in this world?

Or should we be utterly hostile to this world and accept nothing other than the destruction of this world and have a conversation about how to do things better only after basically the end times have come?

Q: ATR [*After the revolution*]?

A: ATR. Right. It's been a central question to me since my first expression of anything. Obviously I fall in the in the second camp, right. Which isn't to say I believe in the second camp, but I am absolutely against anarchists that spend their time tweaking the little fucking knobs. That's basically how I would express what the project was of that era, and those people. Good people, good-hearted people, I have no problem with many of the tactics that they did at the time. If you like to hang banners off tall things, it's wonderful, that's fine. But not only do I not think it will be effective to do the thing that you're trying to do, but I think the thing that you're trying to do isn't worth the energy that you're putting in to it.

Q: So you said it was around 2002 that Jason McQuinn transferred the *AJODA* editorship over to you?

A: Right.

Q: What was it that made you interested in taking that on?

A: Well, first of all, it was the political—it was my absolutely most influential publication. In a word, the attitude of *Anarchy,* and its influences—mostly I was interested in the Vaneigem-ist SI influences, but clearly I had not totally disconnected from the egoist influences also—and the way in which it was trying to Americanize these European ideas. One of the problems that I have with a lot of the ways in which radicals take on European ideas is they take them on as a type of fetish, as a type of cos-play. You can also imagine a certain set of people carrying, you know, baguettes and wearing whatever those fucking things are—berets. That's embarrassing to me. It speaks a lot to American culture, the melting pot thing and the way in which we do and don't absorb foreign matter. *AJODA* Americanized, tried to Americanize these things in a sincere way, and I always appreciated that. I feel that that's more honest. And I feel like North America has yet really to figure out its relationship to *Liberty* magazine [*an individualist anarchist magazine published by Benjamin Tucker from 1881-1908*] and the utopians of the 19th century. And I feel like if anyone was doing that thinking it was, it was *AJODA*.

You know, it's also worth at least mentioning that I do share some, some personality characteristics with people like Bob Black. You know, I can look in the mirror.

Q: Mm hmm.

A: It was also a big project. And I was ready for that.

Q: Yeah. At the time, were you still working kind of on again off again hotel or service jobs, or—?

A: By the late '90s I had started working jobs in the tech world. And I've been doing that ever since, but very much in a one year on, one year off sort of way.

Q: This is a thread I'm curious about, because when I first heard of you I very much associated you as an internet personality or whatever.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Tech stuff hasn't really come up in the story so far. So I'm really curious how you got on board with that.

A: I am utterly unimpressed with technology. I do it for a living. I'm a plumber. My vocation is technology, but almost everyone else we know became a techie because they love it, because this is who they are, this is what they've been waiting for. That's absolutely not the case for me.

I have always been clear about this. It's one of the reasons why I'm not more known as a techie, because I just don't care. If I'm not getting paid to do it, I don't want to do it.

Q: Yet you ran Anarchist News, and The Anarchist Library, and et cetera.

A: If I were a plumber, I would fix your plumbing. To the extent to which I was discovering that I was a publisher, that I was a propagandist of anarchist ideas, someone had to step up. If my ideas were going to get treated fairly, it's always been a matter of: I have the skills, therefore I'm doing the thing. But fundamentally, the thing that I do that's my free offering to the anarchist space is plumbing. I'm not a particularly good graphic designer; I'm not a programmer. I'm a plumber.

Q: As the '90s bled into the 2000s, and the internet came to become increasingly central to how folks communicate and exchange political ideas, can you talk a little bit about that shift from the life in the van and the Kinko's and exchanging stamps for zine exchange to the world of Anarchist News comment threads and et cetera, technologically how that shift happened and what that was like?

A: I mean, it's kind of too big of a story to say in just a little vignette, but—by the end of the '90s, I had basically committed myself to working in that field. In other words, as a way to make better money than working at hotels, the first step that led to what happened was me running enough infrastructure to be able to have my own mail server. By the end of the '90s, I had a mail server running, and then web servers running, and then more. There's an argument that I haven't—really at the heart of any of these questions are important anarchist organizational questions. I would have loved to have collaborated with people on this kind of stuff. It turned out that for quite a few years I collaborated with one person, until we had a split. But already by the late '90s, post-left anarchism was important enough for me to want to fight for that rather than for Love and Rage or NEFAC or AK Press, and already by the end of the '90s I knew that I was in a hostile relationship with basically the red anarchist foundation of what anarchism was. I was barely ten years into being an anarchist but I knew that red anarchism was not for me. And I knew that to do something different required some things. Basically, working with other people was going to be hard, because most groups of people don't want to fight from day one. They don't want their existence to immediately from day one be threatened by bigger, badder people. So that's been an important part of my project, that everything I've done has started from zero in a hostile space. So already on the internet, there were lots of lefty anarchists who were trying to do things. And I chose to start from zero and to build my own rather than work with them. That meant that I learned slower, I went slower, and I never could build bigger, big and bad. But I got independence in return.

Q: When did anarchistnews.org go online?

A: I think 2005?

Q: OK. How did you see it fitting into the ecosystem of, you know, Infoshop and Spunk Archives and Indymedia and whatever else people were doing online at the time?

A: Well, Infoshop was the target, and most of my projects have started with a particular target in mind. That's why it makes sense why IGD took down A-News, because they did the same thing I did. But Infoshop didn't allow for interesting conversations. That was always the issue. Over time it became more and more liberal, and more and more weak, and wasn't willing to be in the firing line. So that was obviously the goal of A-News. But A-News didn't pop till the CrimethInc. Convergence, I think in 2009 in Pittsburgh, where the anarchist space wanted to talk about what was happening and Infoshop was suppressing it as fast as they could, and to the

extent to which CrimethInc. had any public comment section were also suppressing it. The only thing that's really changed about A-News over time is that the number of things that anarchists want to talk about with each other has sort of shrank, or it's only three or four things a year where people really want to go and have that conversation. I thought that Anarchist News was going to become more of a replacement of the *Anarchy* magazine letters section. Actually, we have a project coming up that's going to look more like that. But my interest has always been on interesting conversations with strangers, basically. The news service aspect of it was never all that inspiring for me because it's too hard of a job for one person to do. And frankly, A-News, as it became a bigger project with more people involved, didn't do a better job than one person did alone. I'm sure that that's something you've seen before. One motivated person can do a lot. Seven people who agree with something, they always have seven different reasons for agreeing. And it definitely doesn't improve it.

Q: You mentioned that thing about the letters section of *AJODA* and then Anarchist News discussions as kind of a way of picking it up and broadening it. How did you see what you were doing with *AJODA* as a print publication as connected to the internet-based stuff that you were doing?

A: Well, the whole point was that, you know, we're trying to create an anarchist constellation of stuff. In other words, to the extent to which I can be accused of creating a media empire, there are aspects to that empire, right. There's a research and archival aspect to that empire. There's a real time conversation aspect to that empire. There's a print publication aspect to that empire. And frankly, you know, if it's doing well there are multiple print publications, there are multiple archives, there are multiple places to have conversation.

Q: So would you describe yourself as the Rupert Murdoch of anarchy?

A: No.

Q: OK. Just a thought.

A: But you know, Rupert Murdoch, the Hearst corporation, Disney: all of these are ways in which you can talk about media, ways in which media organizes itself. And any group that does media, especially over time, can be compared to many of those different companies, in a friendly or unfriendly way, you know. CrimethInc. has much more in common with a coherent media message than my projects do. Because by and large my projects are not coherent. Anarchist News and *AJODA* don't have much in common, even though ostensibly they come from my energy. *Black Seed* is not like Anarchist News.

Q: So in the "media empire" in quotes, there's the print publication, there's the real time conversation, and then there's the archival and research aspect. Can you talk about how The Anarchist Library came about?

A: Yeah. So again, I'm basically opposed to what's called anarchist security culture. I believe that if anarchists want to build things together they have to meet each other. They can't meet each other by Dukie McGee and secret hideout names. I mean, they can, but by and large, those relationships end up being ephemeral, because those names are ephemeral. And so for me, it's always been important to be a person with a name and a history and, and to try to—I mean I've basically been desperately attempting to collaborate with people for two decades in the service of this media umbrella. So at one point I opened up a basically a chat server, inviting people to participate to talk about creating an archive that was going to replace Spunk, Anarchy Archives, and the scattered things that were around the world. My idea was really simple: just put 'em all in one place and make sure that place lasts for a long time. And another person came in and they

added a real incredible bonus feature, which was to do everything in this markup language called LaTeX. It's a techie thing that's really old, but what's amazing about it is that it's what allows you to submit a text and then the anarchist library to be able to output a PDF version of that text, a European PDF, an imposed PDF, an EPUB. That's all because of what this other person brought to the project, and they just recently left it. Which is sad, but it happens. And it was after ten years, so.

Q: When you find the people that you collaborate with on any one of these different projects, are you mostly finding folks that you know face to face in the Bay Area, or people in a far-flung network that you correspond with online or whatever?

A: Far flung. And mostly, most anarchist projects over time boil down to one person. It sucks, it's terrible, it's horrible, and I wish I had intelligence on how to do it. Even in our publishing project, too few people do too much. And it's why a ton of things slip through the cracks.

Q: As you are building this increasing role as a—

A: Anarchist publisher.

Q: An anarchist publisher.

A: That's the word I use.

Q: Sure. As an anarchist publisher, an anarchist media magnate—captain of industry—

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: What is your immediate local anarchist world like and your face-to-face relationships in the Bay Area?

A: Well, first of all, I'm incredibly lucky. My core project, you know, when asked, is the publishing project called Little Black Cart. But Little Black Cart has a dozen imprints, it has a bunch of different names that are all separate from the internet projects. They're all about making physical books. My partner happens to have a very stable living situation, and that living situation is my local anarchist space. So we basically have three homes and a huge yard and we're in Berkeley, California and it's where you can find me. We have a couple dozen people who are in and out of that property all the time. So that is my little world.

The Bay Area as an anarchist mecca, as a place where anarchism happens: for me especially, that's in the past. Now, obviously there are still anarchists who live in the Bay. But mostly they're worried about rent, and they're spending their day-ins and day-outs chasing rent. It's astronomical how much people pay to live in the Bay.

Q: And working intermittently and coming from a working-class background, how have you gotten around that? Because y'all own your house, right? You rent it?

A: No, no, no, we own it. But you know that's from my partner's family, not from her or me.

Q: I know that you've been in a really long-term reading group that has met together with some consistency for a whole lot of years. Can you talk about how that came together and the importance that's had for you?

A: In the '90s, the Long Haul Infoshop in Berkeley had a free school. And among the other classes—you know, cooking classes and whatever the fuck—was an anarchist history class. And the teacher of the anarchist history class, there were two: a guy named Gerald, who's sort of a working-class Marxist guy who's been friendly to anarchists for a long time, and Lawrence Jarach, who was one of the editors of *Anarchy* magazine. He's why and how I got involved in the *Anarchy* magazine, and he was the teacher. When I finally started coming to the reading group consistently, it was three or four years old. I've been there just about 18 years. I think I started in 2001. And it's every week. Whether it's Christmas or Fourth of July, it's every Tuesday night,

8 pm at the Long Haul. If we didn't have the Long Haul, the reading group wouldn't exist. So there's your argument for infoshops, full stop.

Q: Have you ever played a role in infoshops or physical infrastructural spaces outside of your home, as a volunteer or collective member?

A: Sure, a couple. But, you know, it's funny to even talk about those things from such a long time ago, because I've now been in the Bay Area for 25 years. But before the Che Café, I was a core collective member, I was involved in an infoshop in Sacramento in the mid-90s.

Q: What was that called?

A: The Second Floor? I can't remember, something like that. It was mostly a punk space, but it tried to have literature. And I was involved in some pre-formations, but I didn't stay in some towns long enough to really be involved. But yeah, yeah, absolutely. And LBC had an office at the Long Haul for a couple of years, but then left.

Q: How did LBC get launched?

A: Well, you know, Anarchist News was successful at what it was trying to do, which was basically change the conversation and take it away from Infoshop. I mean, truth be told, it was successful. There were other crappy projects that I wanted to make better versions of, which was always my goal. So the big one, the big dog, was AK Press. I'd wanted to do it for a long time. But it's a huge project, I mean, way bigger than a couple people could do. But that was the start of LBC. We started in 2007 as a distro project, and the reason we started then was because I saw the writing on the wall in terms of distribution for *AJODA*—we were still part of *AJODA* at that time—and we knew that we needed a way for people to get *AJODA* that didn't involve AK Press. And AK Press was consolidating; you know, the book industry was changing. But yeah, the writing was on the wall, and then the next year, Bob Black wrote a review of the AK Press catalogue, and then the next issue of the magazine wrote a really nasty letter that was really personal about Ramsey. And then that was it for the relationship between *AJODA* and AK Press.

This actually brings me to a sort of a bigger issue, which is: I've more or less been a free speech absolutist for the bulk of my time in the anarchist space. Partially that was a consequence of being part of *AJODA* that had a total free speech policy around its letters. For instance, in the case of the Bob Black letter which was wildly inappropriate, I didn't even see it until it was published, because we had an open free speech policy on our letters, so I knew it was going in, "I'll read it when it's out." The reason why free speech continues to sort of be an important issue isn't because I love free speech, but because the opponents of free speech are monsters. And the way in which people deal with free speech issues is extremely demonstrative. In the case of Ramsey, the fact that he didn't like this letter that was in the issue that, as we know, very few people would ever read, he put a personal—he put a fatwa on the issue. Meaning, he direct called many of the places that AK distributed to, or that we distributed it to, to get them to not carry it. He called us personally and threatened us, saying he knew where we lived, and, and was basically going to come and burn all the issues of the magazine. Finally he reached out personally to some of the elders that we cared about that actually overlapped with him, which was a very small number, and basically tried to sour them on us. And this to me said a lot about who he was, and it said a lot about why I still am interested in free speech fights even if I don't care that much about what's being said in the fight itself. Which is a useful fast forward to any conversation around *Atassa.*

Q: I'm curious in these various projects, from Little Black Cart to the online ones, about internal structure and decision-making. Because you've made the provocative claim that basically at core,

all anarchist projects are a one-person project. Maybe not all of them, but a surprising number of them.

A: A shocking, a terrifying—

Q: Right. So I'm curious then what role collective decision-making or consensus or collective structures plays in your projects in your experience; and then how that relates to both your individual desire for autonomy and to do your own thing, and on a political and intellectual level, questions of individualism and egoism and stuff like that.

A: Well, I still think these conversations are worth having, so that's the first thing. Like, in other words, I'm open. Almost every different project has a different logic to it. For instance, when *Black Seed* first started, I really wanted the editorial group to be female. So I invited specific people to be the editors of the paper based on their gender. Which I feel gross about on the one hand, but I felt like it was a counter-measure necessary after *Green Anarchy* magazine really had a bro energy, and it was like, how do you counter that? So I wanted to experiment with that, and I wanted to—me, myself, not necessarily be part of the editorial group. But, as it turned out, I have so much experience that everyone was turning to me all the time to be very involved, and with at least one issue if not more, it was my work that made it come out; if I wouldn't have done it, it wouldn't have come out. The reason why we totally changed editorial groups was basically because of this question—that I had the will for this paper to happen. Everyone else never came to their own power.

So I'm really happy and willing to experiment around these questions all the time, and try to. But you know, the one social phenomenon that is true in a lot of anarchist projects is that most people want to be nimble. They want to feel like they're not being bogged down by responsibility, by "the man," and so as a result it means that a lot of projects don't really have organization questions; they just have questions of whether people are inspired enough to do them in the first place, whether or not there's enough energy to do them in the first place. I mean, I would love to be a fly on the wall for CrimethInc. to understand how over a twenty-year period motivation has happened and not. Because the number of people that pass through is jaw-dropping. How do you maintain that? I mean, it's a very hard question. So nowadays, motivation is a much bigger issue than authority or, or like, who's the boss man or not. When I worked at the Che Café, I spent three years in pretty deep consensus land. The Che Café is actually part of a student group of cooperatives that all use the same manual to organize each of the student co-ops. The manual was written by the bookstore collective; the bookstore collective were basically not students and were mostly Maoists. The document in hindsight reads as a really intense Maoist document—one part Quaker, one part Maoist. And threading through what that meant and what the implications were in like doing it with full heart and full excitement, which is what I did; that's where my ground level understanding of this stuff comes from. I had clearings four times a year in two different collectives for that period of time. And I learned so much about myself and about other people. And all those lessons I've taken into, into other projects.

I will say, these conversations really make sense in talking about face-to-face meaningful projects. The internet fucks all of this up. And I've definitely never been part of an internet project that's felt consensual, or like, we could reach consensus. Because everyone is checking in at different times, and, I mean, I've had the equivalent of phone meetings that have felt consensus-like. But by and large, technology dictates this conversation nowadays. And most all of my projects for years have relied on high expectations of autonomy.

Q: I wanted to ask about gatherings and book fairs, and the face-to-face ways that anarchists have been meeting intermittently to exchange ideas and make plans. Because I have the sense of the book fair phenomenon as sort of increasing a lot in the last eight or so years, in a way that sort of came in the wake of some of the larger conferences that used to happen more regularly, at least on the East Coast where I'm from, kind of falling out. Can you give some backstory about how anarchist book fairs rose and fell, and what other kinds of meetings or conferences or mobilizations were the main places where people were coming together and exchanging ideas?

A: Yeah. You're referring to that conference from DC, what was that called?

Q: NCOR [*the National Conference on Organized Resistance, a yearly anti-authoritarian gathering that took place in Washington DC circa 1998-2008*].

A: NCOR. So I have been to very few anarchist conferences that felt worth the energy. Mostly because to get the university funding, they had to orient themselves in particular contorted ways that I didn't think were that useful. But what we haven't talked about until now, and it's worth mentioning in the context of NCOR, is: I'm essentially hostile to activism. And NCOR was an activist conference. I only went to one of them. It was actually the first time that LBC tabled, was I think the last NCOR.

Q: Ah, you killed it.

A: Well, it's funny you mentioned that. But that said, I'm pro-conference, right. We do an annual conference called the BASTARD conference that's an anarchist theory conference. And I'm still for that, though with some caveats. I wish there were more conferences, to be honest. I like to take the commerce out of things. But fundamentally the commerce pays the bills. In other words, the only way you can rent the hall in most contexts is if you have someone who's willing to pay to rent the hall, and [inviting and charging] tablers is a smart way to do that. I mean, it's funny, you know, given how LBC on some level is associated with like tabling and book fair culture. But in fact, we don't love it. And frankly, we don't make that much money doing it. Mostly book fairs are about introducing people to us as a project, as a concept, and as a website. You know, especially since we've become a more controversial project, which was not intended, about a year ago: it's our website that keeps us afloat. And we're doing better than ever. It's creepy.

I think that's what I have to say. I mean, we could talk about the—you know, we recently had some controversies at book fairs over the past couple of years. It was only a year ago at the Seattle book fair when someone came to the table to rip up one of our books. That turned into a fistfight. Why that fistfight is relevant for me is because we fought back, not because I actually think the content or the actual thing that was being fought over was that important. But for some time, there has been a type of no-platforming attitude in the anarchist space that has basically shut people down and pushed them away from the anarchist space. And I think that on some level, we provided a response to that, which was to punch back. I'm happy to say that's how that particular situation happened. A month later, in Los Angeles, a similar sort of situation happened, where we were told we couldn't come to the book fair because of the fight in Seattle. And we came anyways. And that whole situation ended up being an organizing clusterfuck. But again, the thing I'll say is like, these events have actually made book fairs feel relevant again in a way that having an annual event, a sort of habitual event, hasn't. I'm not going to say that that's great news for LBC, but I will say that—the positive thing that I often say about book fairs is, it's a place where you know you can go and meet anarchists and know that you're not going to get arrested. I think that's a positive, like, you know. But by and large, because of the rise of

the internet, and because of the way that isolation's happening and because of the cliquishness that's happening in the anarchist space, there's a sad part of that story, too.

Q: Just because I'm fascinated by it, do you want to talk about the Dreamtime Village?

A: Dreamtime Village is amazing because of how they got the place in the first place. So this is late '80s. This couple, but really like a group of friends, threw a party in Madison. It was an annual party, and it was a sort of celebration of permaculture and art. Most of the students were away from Madison when these things happened, and so the party went into the street and maybe blocked a street or two. So it was a good time. It was Midwestern, it was freaky, and it was basically libertarian ideas. And when I say libertarian in this context, I not only mean anarchism but I mean also sort of all the fellow travelers. And what's relevant in this particular context is that the Radical Faeries were part of our fellow travelers in this context. To the extent to which it was a freaky queer scene in the Midwest, it was at these parties, which I can't remember the name of right now, but obviously you can look up. So at one of these parties, this old farmer walked up to the main couple who were sort of central to the whole thing, and said, "I have a town. And I'm old and tired. It's a failed dairy town. Would you like it?"

Q: [laughs]

A: And two years later, Dreamtime Village existed, and the party moved there. It really became about permaculture, and they made a run at trying to like have permaculture classes, and it being like a thing. And you know, I don't know a ton of these now because I'm not part of that particular clique and they're a little older than me, quite a bit older than me. But Hakim Bey lived there… I think altogether they got like 400 acres of land, they got the post office, which ended up being the nicest building in town. That's where the main couple lived and that's where the dance parties were and what not. They had the high school that had a fire engine in it and a basketball court. And they had, got at least two other buildings but I think more. One of those buildings they called the barracks, and it was basically where the solitary men lived. So the barracks I think had a reputation for being a little on the uncomfortable to be around sort of side of things. The thing that's worth mentioning is that in 1993, 1994, they already had a website up and running, and were fully proselytizing the web as basically the place to go for libertarians. At that time, you know, mostly you had to dial in to access anything on the internet. Most people get in through, you know, services like Prodigy and AOL.

Q: When did you first go to the Dreamtime Village?

A: I only went there once. It was in '94. Basically at that time I was living at the Trumbullplex [*a longtime punk and anarchist collective house and community space in Detroit*], and there was an idea of creating a Midwestern sort of network. It was called NAC, and it ended up just turning into a publication called *Arsenal* out of Chicago. But yeah, this was all around the time period just before the Chicago DNC happened, and it was really one of the biggest anarchist events that launched the era that we're sort of at the tail end of now. But yeah, so there were some movers and shakers who were basically trying to create a network between Midwest intentional communities. And we had an event at a labor camp on the west side of Michigan. We went to Dreamtime Village as a huge pack.

Q: What were the sort of different strands in the milieu?

A: Yeah, it's funny you say that, because I think that while there were of course some red anarchists, it was clearly a network versus a federation. The debates were about that, much more than they were about anything else. Some of these people who were from the Midwest were really burned during the Love and Rage conflicts, because as you may or may not know, one of

the central Love and Rage conflicts, their first one, was: are we a network or are we a federation? That happened in '92 in San Diego. I wasn't old enough or ready enough to understand what was happening, but it happened at the Che Café, which is where I happened to be at the time, but I didn't exactly get what was happening. Well, that's when the federation happened. And basically these people in the Midwest were the best of the network people, and the core of them were from Chicago. The Chicago A-Zone was a great coherent strong anarchist body of people, but ultimately they fell apart, and most of them, many years later, reverted to the federation model. But the best place you can see that is in the group Four Star [*Anarchist Organization, founded in 2008 in Chicago*]. Yeah.

Q: Hmm.

A: They were some of the best graphic design until CrimethInc. became an up and running thing. That particular person from that Chicago scene was very, very good. All the posters and the collateral for the Chicago event: it's beautiful, top-notch stuff. Then everything they did up to and including the *Arsenal* magazine, all very slick, all very much prefiguring what CrimethInc. did with *Rolling Thunder.*

Q: Are there any other interesting gatherings or physical meeting places, anything else that sticks out from your history of engagement with anarchist scenes as particularly interesting or worthwhile?

A: I mean, there's tons of stuff. I think I would need a bit more sinew to build some tissue over. It is worth mentioning that we're thinking a lot about the end of the book fair right now, and the fact that without the book fairs a lot of our people aren't going to get the chance to see each other very frequently, and how to do that. So we're not, I think we're on our sixth event, every six months basically the hardcore post-left people are meeting on the West Coast… We're doing it twice a year as sort of a response of—like, a way in which we can be together and spend time together and build affinity without the book fair.

Q: And is that constituted by pre-existing relationships?

A: Yeah. Absolutely.

Q: Or is it announced publicly?

A: It's semi-public. At this point, we're not doing an internet-based announcement.

Q: I'm curious about this, because I have noticed—I don't know if this is more so the case in recent years than any other times. But you know, there's commie camp, there's the Tiqqunist get-together for the Francophiles, there's what you're talking about. There seems to be, as the book fair model seems—and I'm not exactly sure why this is—to be declining somewhat, but there's not really a culture of mass mobilizations—I guess maybe J20 was the closest thing to that. That maybe there's this turn towards doing less sort of publicly accessible or outward facing gatherings, but just trying to like get together with the sub-groups, whether that's ideologically or tactically or whatever that folks are most interested in. And I imagine that's happening in other scenes too and I just haven't heard about it.

A: Yeah, I mean, the three examples you mentioned, it's all ideologically based.

Q: Right. So partly I'm interested in asking questions about types of gatherings and convergences that you've experienced because I'm interested in thinking about what other formats are possible. Formats both in terms of ostensible reasons to come together, and also bases of affinity for coming together physically.

A: Yeah, I think it's way too early to start categorizing this stuff, but I do think it's worth mentioning that as urban environments become more and more expensive to do anything in,

who wants to play in that? Yeah, no one wants to play there anymore. The other thing that's in common with the three examples you're referring to is, they're all in the country, or some country-esque environment. And the way in which that answers that question tells you a lot about where people are at and where our resources are at. I mean, the only anarchist cities right now, where you'd say that there's any anarchist space at all, are basically college towns, they're not big cities.

Q: I do want to take a moment to let you talk about your use of the term "anarchist space." Since that's distinctive from how a lot of people talk about what gets variously talked about as a milieu or a scene or a community or a movement or whatever, and if you want to talk about why, why you use that terminology and what that terminology entails to you.

A: That terminology specifically comes out of the Greeks from the late 2000s period. They referred to the city of Athens as having an anarchist space, and there being lots and lots of different tendencies there that may or may not agree with each other on much. So that's where that particular term comes from, and the reason why I use it is it doesn't have a lot of the encumbrances that the other terms have, either in sounding gross or in sounding leftist. For me, anarchism is as hostile to the left as it is to Marxism, because by and large those two terms can be used synonymously. And a lot of the terminology that you just shared which is of course common is, it's just not *true.* There *isn't* an anarchist movement, there isn't an anarchist *community* especially; and milieu of course just sounds gross. I get why we use it, but you know, it just does. So that's why I use anarchist space; but there is a slight difference in how we use it than how the Greeks use it, because ostensibly we don't have it in the same way that they do. In other words, mostly what we're talking about in Greece are two cities that are fairly close to each other; more or less everyone can kind of know each other. When we talk about the anarchist space in North America, first of all, we're including Canada but we're not including Mexico, because frankly we don't know shit about what's happening in Mexico, even if we pay attention. And we're talking about fragments of people who may or may not call themselves anarchists in a variety of towns scattered throughout North America. So I like it because it feels as ephemeral as it is. [laughs]

Q: In your writing and in this interview and in this conversation you have staked out several really distinctive positions that orient you in relation to other anarchist tendencies in the anarchist space, in terms of being hostile to Marxism, hostile to "the red," broadly construed, as a worker, first-wave, worker-movement-based conception of anarchism, hostile to activism in the idea of tweaking particular screws as you put it, piecemeal reforms; hostile to—

A: The left.

Q: The left. And you define pretty clearly in terms of Marxism sort of what some of the specific philosophical disagreements are. Can you say a little bit more about what's entailed by "the left"? Not just ideologically but also tactically in terms of social practice, organizing habits, and stuff that you think is important to contrast anarchism to?

A: Yeah. This is a really big topic, and I'm sort of nervous about getting lost in the weeds without sort of having taken notes or really thinking coherently ahead of time. But I will say that probably what I mean by the left is two things: the remnants of Christianity that infect the way in which we live and breathe with each other, and the way in which we think progress is true and a phenomenon that is our life. Obviously they're very connected, because most people who believe in progress also believe in an eschatological view of the world that ends in us becoming one with godhead. You know, I would like to be a person who sounds much more like I'm positively inclined towards things that I am. But in fact, I end up living in this world where I don't get to

talk about those things very frequently. And in the anarchist space, you know, it's like—when I first found anarchism, I thought it was going to be so fucking awesome. And then all the ways in which it failed became the things that I spent the rest of my life, and am currently spending my life, sort of fighting. I would like anarchism to be vibrant and exciting and interesting, and instead it's a parody of most of those things. It perhaps desires it, but then it does J20.

Q: Can you say more about what about J20 you're signifying to mean this parody of the exciting and joyful anarchist life that you want?

A: Well, I mean, the problem is, is that most of us have learned who we want to be through Hollywood. To put it in blunt SI terms, a spectacular vision of what we would like to be, and what it is we see as our enemy. So this becomes a really tight problem, where what I want, or my expectations or hopes and dreams of the people around me, are sky-high. And they are also sky-high for myself. I see my projects as trying to achieve these impossible things, but it sometimes feels like many of the people around me are satisfied with much, much less, and are perhaps spending much more time patting themselves on the back than they are realizing how far they have to go to reach anything like the things that they're expressing. So it's like, how do you articulate this stuff without being personally nasty? That's of course the lesson of Bob Black, that he perhaps shares a lot of my impossible aspirations, but he turned it all into pointing at individual people as being the ones to blame. I don't think it's individuals who are to blame, right. I believe that it's a culture that we're raised in, and people not being comfortable being in this conflictual space all the time. This is one of the funny things about the way in which insurrectionary anarchism has changed in North America. Obviously, when that word started to be bandied around, I was excited. And especially when I learned about the Italian expression of it, this seemed like a really interesting approach. I wasn't so young that I was just going to sign up, but this seemed really exciting. And the way in which Americans converted it from being this really interesting twist on how to be active in a social space, to being the same old performative thing: that American twist just breaks my heart. That happens again and again and again. And yes, there are individuals who are part of these theoretical moves. But by and large, there's a whole bunch pf people who just go along for the ride. So J20 is an egregious situation because a lot of my friends just spent 18 months of their life in bullshit, and there were perhaps individuals who helped make the situation the kind of disaster that it was, but I also recognize why, if you believe that anarchy equals struggle, that the rise of Trump in America feels like a struggle that's worth doing. He is [*gestures to indicate scare quotes*] "worse than Obama." But of course I don't believe any of that; all that's nonsense, and I would never frame anything in those terms.

Q: You mentioned this word struggle, and that's also something that you refer to a lot: your critique of "strugglismo," or struggle-oriented anarchism. Can you say a little more about what that means to you?

A: Yeah. So early on, I said that all of the anarchist texts that I've read, perhaps some of the reason why it took me a long time to read them was because I really found every page to be a challenge: how do I put this into practice in my life? And I'm not an individualist anarchist; I'm not an egoist. But I do think that I'm the one that has to articulate how to live these challenging ideas. I don't think that it's possible to be fair to yourself in this world and not read and digest and cohere on your own. We don't have the sort of, the "people's school" any more.

Q: So then how does that relate to how anarchists interact with "struggles," as it were?

A: Well, struggles would be an example of the other approach. From an anarchist perspective, the inauguration of Donald Trump is nothing but a spectacular event that the only reason you

would participate in is to participate in that spectacular event. If we were going to refer to a struggle, obviously you're echoing things like "the worker's struggle," or "worker's emancipation." In other words, the difference between equitable wages and burning a limousine in the context of Donald Trump's inauguration, to me that's a fundamental difference in terms of impact on your life, in terms of how you want to be in the world, in terms of what you think politics means.

Q: Speaking of what politics means, another aspect of your politics or the perspectives that I've heard you articulate or be aligned with in different mediums is the strong critique of identity politics. And given the salience of that in contemporary political discourses, can you say a little bit about how that critique developed for you, what its roots were and how you see its importance for the way you think today?

A: Well, this is a hard topic, because I think that, something that I would call identity is an incredibly important thing that each of us individually has to reconcile ourselves with and has to use to navigate this world that we live in. I'm associated of course with the people that are against identity politics because I'm associated with individualist tendencies and etcetera. But I in fact I am quite interested in thinking about how specifically Native voices in the 21st century are going to survive, how specifically gender non-dominant forces navigate life in this world. And these topics have been just bastardized by the way in which the discourse has been treating them.

My real clumsy attempt to have this discussion was in the '90s. I wrote some really short essays on some of this stuff, and then I wrote a piece that was sort of an APOC [*Anarchist People of Color*] piece called "A Movement is the Last Thing that People of Color Need." Where I basically mapped movement politics to politics in general, and to a type of massification that I would comfortably call a white massification. In other words, being polite with each other, you know, basically all of the things people hate about me, like the fact that I'm rude and say what's on my mind and say rude things to people. I had a lot of energy about this many, many years ago, and I was involved in quite a few early APOC formations. There was a group called RACE that was out of the Bay Area that was pre-2001, and then I was involved in some APOC formations after 2001 but backed away pretty quickly. So I think that these issues are really important. But I guess, to answer your question in a nutshell, I think that no-platforming is, is basically the enemy's position that many anarchists have taken on their own. That's what I would refer to as the identity politics of this, of the initial question. That basically if you're a no-platformer, we're probably at odds with each other.

Q: I'd be interested to hear you say a little bit more about that, that group RACE and the emergence of APOC and how that played out in the late '90s and early 2000s.

A: Yeah, it's funny, I was actually very involved. It's hard to tell that story, because on the long level, I would say it's not my story to tell. I wasn't like—I'm not Ernesto Aguilar, who is the person you should talk about, and also the start of Bring the Ruckus was also really tied in to the story of RACE, and that would really be the place to go to learn more about that. Because ultimately it was an email list, and that's it. Then it became the organization that basically existed as long as a group of friends called themselves APOC, and that was for a long time, probably 10 years. In other words, there would be an APOC in the Bay Area, an APOC in New York; but mostly it was a social clique. Mostly, you know, the politics, like—I'll say here in the Bay, RACE wasn't as much as it could have been, because every single person involved in RACE had another project that they were also doing that was more important to them. You know, there are some histories that I'm going to fight for, and some that I'm not. And APOC is actually a history I

won't fight for, because ultimately even its fundamental precepts I don't basically accept, which is that people of color is a useful category. Yes, it makes sense to sort of talk around it, and one of the great things about RACE in particular is that almost all the people in RACE were biracial, which is very interesting. But there's already a book that sort of refers to RACE, by an author named Roger White, and he exemplified a person who could not stand that aspect of RACE. You would basically call him a person who's around the thinkers around anti-blackness today. Anti-blackness is fascinating but basically a way later story, almost twenty years later. So really the conversation around POC is around the conversation of like, do we want to create movements, groups, whatever, whatever singularities—do we want to create them around affirmations? Or do we want to create them around defensible categories? Or do we want to create them around fighting categories? And RACE ended up being a group that threw good parties much more than it became any of those three options.

Q: OK. So having triangulated your perspectives on anarchism through a lot of negations, through a lot of oppositions or hostilities, I'm curious if you have a concise way that you would describe what your anarchism is, what you see anarchism as being to you.

A: I think that anarchism is one of the only non-spectacularized ways to interface ideas with ways of life. I think that daily life is far more interesting than the revolution. And that means that I am trying to explore the limits of where anarchist ideas and living connect.

Q: It's interesting, because I haven't really heard you talk about capitalism, or even about hierarchy and domination, as categories of analysis that have been central historically to how I have thought about anarchism or how I hear other people articulate it.

A: Yeah.

Q: Are these categories or units of analysis that you find useful, or ways of framing things that you find useful?

A: Mostly they were useful. They were definitely useful to get here to where I am now. But anarchism has a real big problem, which is that it's been raided by monsters almost since day one. Right? The fight against capitalism, the state, hierarchy, et cetera, is a really rich and fertile fucking fight. So we're always going to be, we're always going to have leeches and yeah, we've been raided. And what that means is that most of this language, most of these terminologies are being used more effectively by other groups who are our enemies.

Q: Given that, then what is to be done?

A: Yeah, so this is a place where I'm pretty well known as an anarcho-nihilist. Which I wouldn't call myself; I would just call myself an anarchist, and I think that anarchism has a whole bunch of things bleeding in to it. We haven't talked about green anarchism very often, which also I'm a green anarchist. So mostly what that means is that I'm interested in the fight for anarchism in my life in the here and now, and in doing this work in the here and now, much more than I'm compelled by arguments about sacrificing myself for a political revolution that will make this world the way that I would like it to be. I find most of those people who want that are busybodies and they're just as comfortable in a lot of other political tendencies as they are in anarchism.

Q: Since you mentioned that green anarchist piece that also reflects your thinking; we talked a little about it, but what is specifically green about your anarchism?

A: Well, again, I'm happy to rebuild or to build from zero. So to me a green anarchism is an anarchism that's indigenous in its orientation, and that has a spiritual and complex relationship with the earth and with all the things that are on top of it that are not necessarily earth-friendly.

What this looks like is really trying to increase indigenous voices in the publication that I do, which is called *Black Seed.* But it also looks like the fact, like, how do we navigate a world where things are happening that we're barely even participants in and definitely not empowered participants in? How do we navigate that world? How do we navigate its complexity? You know, I actually think that there's a lot to be said right now about the fact that finally, which I think we've known for decades, people are realizing that recycling isn't working out like they think it is. Now, 20 years ago peak green conversations and activity were like: do it! Today it's like, wait a second, what the fuck? China doesn't want it. And if China doesn't want it, then it's something totally different than what we were told. The front section of the current issue of *Black Seed*, which is number six, has a dam on it, but it's actually a destroyed dam. For the last ten years in the environmental movement, the idea of what dams mean, what's the implication of them, has been a really core topic. We attempt in the front piece to problematize that conversation because in fact, a river, two dams were removed from a river in Washington state, greatly improving the health and the vitality of the salmon population; and yet that happened through mainstream politicking, through compromise, and through creating a situation that of course is not ideal in the very rivers that these dams were removed from. What does that mean? What does that look like? And what would that look like both from an indigenous perspective and from a green perspective? That's what I mean when I refer to a green anarchism.

Q: When you look back over your career of writing and editing, reviewing, media stuff, what do you feel most proud of or most aligned with in the stuff that you've personally written or put out?

A: The stuff that's coming. I'm absolutely future thinking. I have another 20 to 30 years of doing this, and it will be better. Because ultimately we haven't succeeded at all yet. And by succeeded, I sort of mean in the way in which ideas are wrestling with each other. Like, we most of the time have to run away. Because most, you know, mainstream anarchist positions generally roll right over most of the positions that I've articulated in the past two hours.

Q: I'm interested in this future orientation that you have, given how much you have articulated your politics as a thing that's not about fighting or a revolution and sacrificing yourself for a future, but figuring out the immediate implications of your politics in everyday life today in the here and now. How does that sense of what you look for in the future connect to that immediate political organization?

A: Well, the first thing to say, you know, is a strong thread through everything else: I'm an incredibly stubborn person. I'm not sure I've met many people who are even close to as stubborn as I am. I've met a couple; and my closest collaborator is my rival in terms of being stubborn. But the second point would be—do you have a political vision or do you have a project-based vision? I refer to the future because I have basically done everything in my life to have anarchy be at the heart of what it is that I do with my energy. But I do it one project at a time, and most of those projects are right now projects. So while I'm trying to map out some things that will have future consequences or whatever, mostly what I'm doing is like, OK, are we going to have *Black Seed 7* ready this year? That requires one, two and three; and one and two seem possible, three maybe not. And that's actually, in fact—one of the most common criticisms we get is that because we do so many projects, the quality of those projects isn't as high as it would be if we just did a fraction. But I have a lot of energy, and I'm very stubborn, and I want to do it all. And there's the rub.

Q: If folks who are coming into the anarchist space today in a radically different environment—technologically, politically, et cetera—than the one that you came in to: are there things from our

experience and the arc of your anarchist life that you would want to convey to people that you think would be useful for people in finding their own anarchist path today?

A: Well, I think that all of the stubbornness is a really important thing. If you want to live outside of this world and outside of its logic, to maintain those borders, you have to be a powerful person on some definition, right? You know, my stubbornness isn't necessarily intelligent; I have not served myself well. So I think that that would probably be a really important thing that I would say to people, is that like, if this is what you want to do—actually, this was said to me when I first started at the Che Café. This hippie dude was part of the Che, but he was a part because he was in the garden all the time eating mangoes, I am not shitting you. I can't remember his name any more. But he was like, a down brother. He came in, he was like, "You know, you never going to be able to work a straight job now. This is it for you. Are you sure this is what you want?" And you know, I laughed at him at the time. But there's something true about that. If this really appeals to you, you can do it. For what it's worth, you can do it. But it requires making some really hard choices, really early on, and really being honest with yourself about the fact that, like—while I work "real jobs," I've never had a real career. I've never had the respect of strangers. And frankly, most anarchists hate me, too, today. And so that means that my motivation—you know, this is what I would say to a new person: your motivations have to come from a deep place on the inside. Do you have a fierce desire for freedom? If you don't, well, honestly, that makes more sense, because survival is a lot easier if you don't hold certain lines. I happen to hold those lines, but not necessarily to my own benefit.

Q: Great.

A: A hell of a mistress, the beautiful idea.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: [shakes head]

Q: Perfect. Thank you very much.

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Aragorn!
A Hell of a Mistress, the Beautiful Idea
An Interview with Aragorn!
2018

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a-hell-of-a-mistress-the-beautiful-idea-an-interview-with-aragorn
This interview was conducted as part of a forthcoming oral history project on anarchism in North America over the past 75 years. If you're interested in sharing your stories or interviewing others, send an email to anarchistoralhistoryproject@riseup.net.

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