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Aragorn!—Elegy for an Antagonist

On Hostility and Its Limits

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2020-02-19

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Other Eulogies

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“He wasn’t running in a popularity contest, he was trying to flesh out what it means to be an anarchist at the end of the world.”

-Rotten, fellow former editor of *Green Anarchy*

me, I've always appreciated the ways he made me think. He could be gruff and seem callous on the outside, but he was truly a sensitive and creative person who cared more deeply than most people know is even possible.

His steadfast and lifelong dedication to the beautiful idea of anarchy and against a world of hierarchy and domination earned him numerous enemies throughout his life, both on the left and on the right. He didn't like to talk about it (understandably), but in the 1990s in Sacramento, he was stabbed during a brawl with Neo-Nazis and lived with the consequences for decades.

His commitment to the projects he took on and the contributions he made to Little Black Cart, the Brilliant podcast, Black Seed, Ardent Press, hosting dozens of rad websites, AJODA, his series of interviews with other indigenous anarchists, Green Anarchy Magazine, and the East Bay Anarchist Book Fair (to name just a few) helped shape the ideas of thousands of people around the world. He encouraged everyone to think critically about how they engage with ideas and with the world. He didn't hold back or mince words. He inspired and frustrated people to be better.

I don't think we will even begin to realize all the consequences of his death for years, and my sincerest hope is that we all can find something of value from what he offered the world.

Whether you loved him or hated him, his contributions are undeniable. He is gone at far too young an age, with so much left to do. I hope we can find it in ourselves to live life with even a fraction of the perseverance and ferocity that Aragorn! did and apply ourselves to our projects and ideas with a dedication even he would appreciate.

He definitely would have hated this attention and disagreed with most of what I've written here, but I've never let his disapproval stop me from doing anything before. Yet I know for sure I'll think about it more critically because of his influence.

Long live anarchy.

On Thursday, February 13, longtime anarchist Aragorn! passed away. A tireless polemicist, Aragorn! established and maintained a great deal of anarchist infrastructure, much of which he never sought credit for. Here, we'll explore the ways that his legacy challenges us and conclude with remembrances from comrades who shared some of his journey.

We recommend this in conjunction with the lengthy interview we have published with Aragorn!, "A Hell of a Mistress, the Beautiful Idea."



What He Did

Tracing Aragorn!'s work across the years, we can start with early zines such as *Oppression Song* and *ATR* ("After the Revolution"), the latter of which he collaborated on with sometime *Inside Front* contributor and Catharsis roadie Eric Boehme. Emerging from the vegan straightedge hardcore scene, he published reviews in *Maximum RocknRoll* and *HeartattaCk*; he contributed to *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* and *Green Anarchy*, the flagships of "post-left" theory and green anarchist agitation, respectively, and helped to edit the latter. He founded the anarchist news outlet anarchistnews.org, just one aspect of the larger platform anarchyplanet.org, which included online forums, an anarchist review project called The Anvil, and the introductory page Anarchy 101.

Aragorn! helped start Ardent Press, which expanded into the publishing and distribution project Little Black Cart. He helped launch a variety of journals, including *Attentat* and *Black Seed*. He was involved in a wide array of podcasts, from the early TCN Radio to the more recent Anews podcast, Anarchy Bang, and the Brilliant. He hosted countless websites for other anarchist projects from a broad range of perspectives.

As a young person, Aragorn! participated in the collective that maintained the Che Café, a decades-running autonomous space in San Diego. Later, he was involved in the Long Haul infoshop in Berkeley and the Berkeley Anarchist Study Group, likely the longest-running anarchist reading group in the United States. Alongside comrades from these circles, he helped organize the annual BASTARD conference and the East Bay Anarchist Book Fair.

Among the most important resources he leaves to us is theanarchistlibrary.org, a far-reaching collection of anarchist texts. You can find a selection of his work there. A good starting place is his essay "Anarchy without Road Maps or Adjectives," which still feels fresh today.

the chance to recognize that all possible freedom is inside you and it needs a lot of courage and a lot of determination to manifest it and defend it here, now and for ever.

Aragorn! was a great person and I had the feeling that he would stay with us much longer. Now I realize that I felt this because he was so dedicated to anarchism, like almost having a dialogue with the long, long future of Anarchy. There are very few comrades around this planet regarding whom you can feel that they will be part of the movement for all of the decades to come no matter what will happen. They will not have children—or if they do, it will not change anything. They will not work bullshit jobs—or if they do, it will not change anything. They will not miss the assembly because they are in a meeting, they don't look busy to be cool, they will be available in any moment, under all kinds of circumstances, they will be here, no matter what is going on, they will be here. Aragorn! is one of them.

If all of us and each one of us would dare to offer even 10% of the time that Aragorn! spent organizing and spreading revolutionary anarchism during his lifetime, we would destroy capitalist civilization forever in one summer.

All of us from Void Network and Exarchia express our deepest and sincere respect for this amazing revolutionary and great friend. Good night Aragorn!—we will meet soon in Nothingness.

Life is short—NOW we have to destroy all chains and run wild, FREE.

ARAGORN! IS DEAD! — LONG LIVE ANARCHY!

-Tasos Sagris, Void Network – Athens

Aragorn! was a challenging person in the best ways possible, and at times in very... challenging ways. A lot of criticism was leveled at him by a lot of people he rubbed the wrong way. In the 15 or so years I've known him, I've always felt like he cared about

I am sad. It has been so long since I lost a beloved friend in sudden death that I almost forgot how sad it is. Aragorn! was an amazing being, real dynamite in a Nietzschean kind of way. I wonder how it is possible for a fanatical Stirnerist to offer all his life for all of us, the global anarchist movement. In Aragorn!'s life, Max Stirner's vision about free human beings makes sense. Aragorn! and Paul Simons, the other amazing comrade we lost last year, were two persons from the same anarchist cell that manifested the core of the ideas of Stirner. You have to be a free individual to be a part of a revolution—and this freedom, you must take it for yourself—nobody will ever give it to you.

All of us hope to die having offered a lot of things to Anarchy. Although Aragorn! died so suddenly, he leaves having offered so much for the revolution—the revolution exactly as he had it in his own mind. In this way, he created amazing anarchist non-sectarian projects and at the same time he was a part of some amazing sects. He ended debates and started plenty of them, he helped anarchism to spread and also to change. Aragorn! was a real provocateur, sometimes intentionally positioning himself in the middle of dangerous and delicate debates. He was a peaceful person at war with the universe, a cyber-primitivist, a social individualist, an insurrectionist nihilist—a real friend.

Aragorn! always had one thing in mind: anarchists are here to fight for individual emancipation and also for social freedom and this is not easy at all. We are fighting against the state, against capital, but also against the obedient society that supports them. We have to find ways to walk at this thin line between freedom and misanthropy, chaos and death, hate and compassion. If you fight for a world without police and organized armies, you have to cultivate yourself to accept and respect people around you in a way that is not easy at all even to imagine now. We are living in a cannibalistic human era and we walk around year after year in fear and confusion. If you search for someone else to take you by the hand and lead you to anarchist paradise you will never have

None of the aforementioned projects were his alone, but all of them show the stamp of his approach to anarchism.



The Fight for Turtle Island and *Boom: Introductory Writings on Nihilism*, two books involving Aragorn!.

Aragorn! helped to foster a variety of contentious currents in the anarchist milieu while critiquing each of them in turn. These include “post-left” anarchism (though he came to believe that “post-left” was an insufficient framework); green anarchism (though he criticized anarcho-primitivism); queer anarchism (he helped publish the *Bash Back!* Anthology, while suggesting that the authors did not realize that they had failed to escape the tractor beam of identity politics); the French current exemplified by *Tiqqun*, *Appel*, and *The Coming Insurrection* (though he charged that their US adherents were trying to start a cult); and insurrectionist anarchism of the Italian variety (though once again, he believed that US anarchists reduced it to its most superficial aspects). He paid to print a free newspaper collecting all the communiqués from the student

occupation movement of 2009–2010 that set the stage for the Occupy movement, despite being critical of the new trend of “anti-state communism” exemplified therein.

Over the past few years, he turned his attention again to indigenous anarchism, publishing a series of interviews in *Black Seed*. His essays *Toward a non-European Anarchism* and *A Non-European Anarchism* remain valuable contributions on the subject, along with his recent book, *The Fight for Turtle Island*.

Aragorn! took the initiative to broaden and deepen the anarchist critique on a variety of fronts. As he said about LBC, “our project is primarily about delivering *other people’s* messages to the world.” There was very little he agreed with unreservedly, but he was driven by a personal ambition to create a thriving space of thought and conflict that could challenge the existing order. He saw a value in *conflict itself* that we owe it to ourselves to understand.

Above all, I remember the mischievous gleam he always had in his eye, as if we were sharing an inside joke, even if the joke was on me. I remember how his laughter would overpower him—laughter at others’ pretensions, at everything sanctimonious and foolhardy, at his own pettiness, laughter that stood above the world, affirming it, but not for grandiose reasons.

But I also remember that when we were eating, sometimes he would hold his hand demurely in front of his mouth as he chewed. For me, that furtive gesture encapsulated the other side of his personality—his small-town charm and vulnerability. However iconoclastic and bombastic he was, however confrontational, on a personal basis, he preserved a certain decorum.

and unforgiving anarchist ideology. Through the years, even as our politics diverged more sharply, it was always reassuring to know that someone dedicated and focused was facilitating the development of a completely parallel and uncompromising politics, a vast conversation involving young, inexperienced, jaded, burned out, and elderly people, involving brilliant loners and just plain lonely or difficult people. Aragorn! published works he disliked by people he loathed; he circulated texts and pamphlets he thought were stupid. He built platforms for anarchist ideas to be read, discussed, and embraced in their most furious, their most cruel, their most impossible formulations.

Anarchist conflicts do not sacrifice the enemy for the fatherland. They elevate all the participants in the contest, refining us, bringing us to higher, sharper, more dignified positions. Without Aragorn!, it falls to the rest of us to preserve the sufficient negativity, the requisite cynicism, the appropriate nihilism, to meet the problems we all face, separately and together, *side by side* and head to head.

ARAGORN! is dead! LONG LIVE ANARCHY!

I am so sad—it is very sudden. I am at Exarchia Square, just finished the national assembly of Anarchist Federation in K-Vox, eight hours non-stop talking about all possible ways to turn social apathy into social revolt with crazy motherfuckers from all over Greece. I walk to the square. Friends from London, Arizona, and Greece just started this new group Obsedian and they have a public gathering at the square against the police. It is winter in Athens, Athens is sad in winter. Suddenly, an American anarchist friend grabs me: “Man, I tell you this because I know he is a friend of yours—ARAGORN! IS DEAD.”

You cannot hate God—because God is dead. The void is around us, inside us, and between us. The void doesn’t keep us apart; it connects us.

Aragorn! loved mentoring young people. Not in that way where people who go to punk shows too long build cred by talking endlessly about how all their peers sold out. Rather, while he lived with people from the old days and worked on projects with them, he always brought those projects to spaces full of young people to discuss the ideas with them, to show them new things. He'd ride a motorcycle halfway across the country to a book fair in the middle of nowhere that amounted to little more than a garage show slumber party because he thought young people there might enjoy what he'd published.

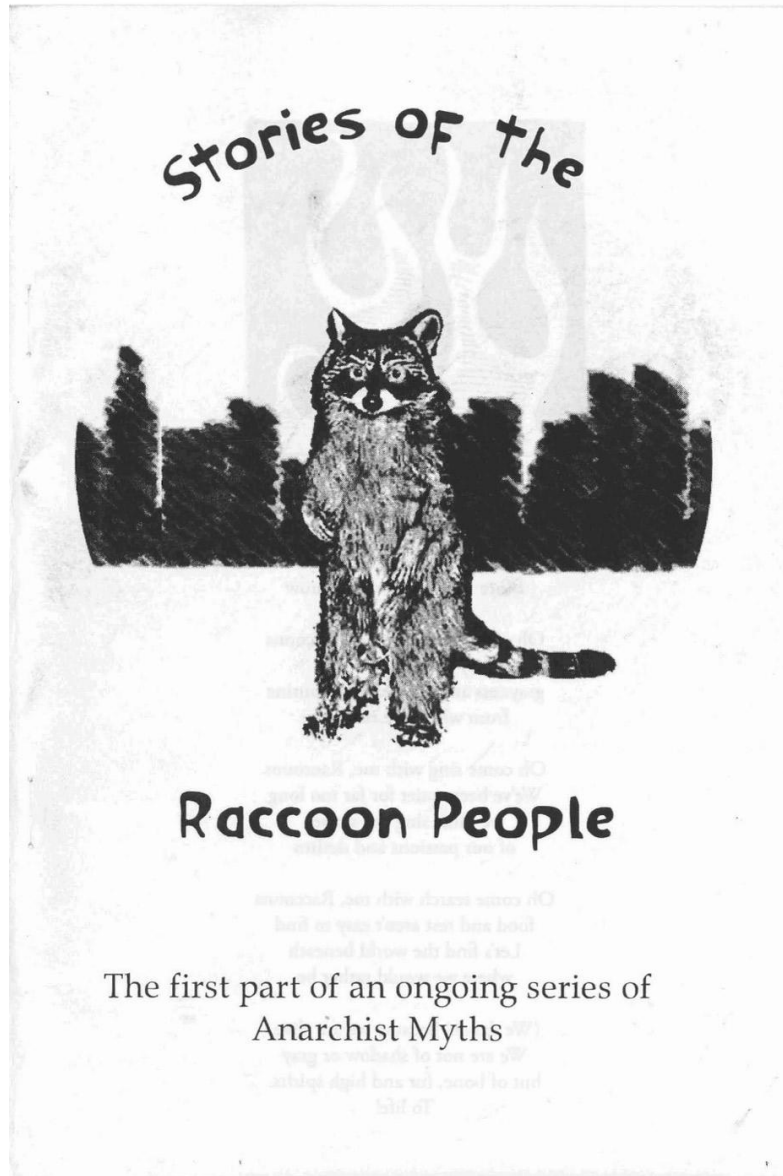
That's not to say he didn't talk about the past. He was a wealth of first-hand anarchist history. But he never made you feel like you had missed the hey-day and were now living in some sort of epilogue. He would just give you information that could help you understand yourself and your friends in a much longer context.

Aragorn! loved discussing, debating, questioning, and explaining ideas—and he structured his life in a way that provided him maximum time to do just that. When I worked at Little Black Cart, the compound was a modest book nerd's paradise. A diverse bunch of folks living in a couple houses with a big yard with happy dogs and a park-style picnic table with people nearly always sitting at it, right outside of a print shop with everything necessary to make a hundred copies of a book—or just one for yourself or a friend. When not traveling all over the country on a motorcycle, meeting people through his books, this is where he spent nearly all his time. If that's not killing it, I don't know what is.

Aragorn! is exactly the kind of foe I wanted to have. All differences aside, including the time he accused my friends and me of being a cult after we had spent a seemingly enjoyable few days together, nobody can say that Aragorn! didn't work tirelessly, year after year, to maintain, develop, and share a vicious, dangerous,



Aragorn! in Athens, Greece, demonstrating his proficiency with a yo-yo.



What I love the most about Aragorn! is the intangible, the un-explainable. The fiery trickster villain energy that's impossible to duplicate or capture. Maybe he is an actual spark now, existing in the unfolding of explosions forever. I bet he'd find this cheesy but semi-secretly like it. I love you my friend!



Aragorn! at the A Fire at the Mountain Book Fair in Flagstaff, Arizona in 2013.

also often disheartened and frustrated at the lack of kindness and the abundance of terrible communication that I was experiencing in these circles. So many well-read, super-deep-into-theory anarchists were so good at dismissing me, not caring what I had to say or what I thought. I was new to so much of it. Thankfully, it didn't scare me off completely—though if it hadn't been for experiences like the one I had with Aragorn!, it might have. He never made me feel stupid or talked down to me. Aragorn! had a way of being interested in people and what made them who they were that was unique and very encouraging. He often asked what I thought of things and would even send me writing he was working on from time to time to get my opinion. I am a person who's never been very good at theory-heavy stuff. It takes me months to read a book, if I even finish it. Despite these things, Aragorn! cared what I had to say and was interested in my ideas. He frustrated me with how much he disagreed with everything, but always challenged me in interesting ways. It's impossible to express how important this has been for me.

Aragorn! was so much more soft and sensitive than many people knew. He was truly such a kindhearted creature. I cried in front of him multiple times. One of those times was when my sweet pit bull died; another was during some dark personal shit I was going through. Both times, he was so fully present and supportive and kind. From those lows to some ridiculous highs like sharing piles of ice cream on top of a pile of brownies or feeling super cool when he gave me a ride to my welding class on his motorcycle... he always made me laugh and remember what was important.

His playfulness is highlighted in my memory of visiting his place during a book fair weekend in 2013. He suddenly and gleefully ran through the yard, sun blasting behind as he carried a black flag, darting around and dodging all the friends, furniture, and dogs around him. Every time we shared space, I was drawn to that spark that he had.

Who He Was

To chart how Aragorn!'s ideas developed across the course of his life, we can begin with the origin story Aragorn! provides in his own mythology, *Stories of the Raccoon People*:

The Raccoon people live by simple rules: live life to its fullest, no concession to a world of misery, and run to fight another day.

I first met one of the Raccoon people when I was only a child. He was visiting my parents, dressed in the fashion of the time, and he treated himself to our food and our company. I had never met a happier person. I alternated between bouncing on his knee, wrestling with him over the last piece of bread, and racing around the jungle of our backyard with him, an adult unlike any I had ever met before, or since.

He left behind a little buckskin figurine to remember him by. "Rub this between your palms and say my name. I will not promise that I will come back to you but I promise that my memory will, and often times that will be enough."

When he left our house my parents stopped speaking to each other. Something about his visit reminded them that they were not working out the way that they expected and each of them began to look for something else. Other people passed through, glass was broken, voices were raised not in song, and eventually feet walked in different directions.

Later in life I found more Raccoon people. They usually did not have time for me because I was looking and they had already found. They were a merry people,

running in groups, speaking in code, dressing like explosions and carousels, Bottles in hand, holes in shoes, scabs on joints; these were a people worth knowing.

(Picture me reading this to a lover on Saturday, February 15, 2020, tears running down our faces.)

All the elements we need to extrapolate a young person's development are present in this origin story: the first glimpse of possibility, the expulsion from paradise, the search for belonging in a secret society that was not particularly welcoming.

Following the trail of the raccoon people, Aragorn! came into his own through a series of gestures of courageous refusal that brought him into contact with other rebels. Looking back in 2015, he described one of these watershed moments, his Situationist-influenced departure from a collective house:

“I can't imagine having these ideas without the benefit of seeing what impact they had on relationships as they were tested out. One of my clearest experiments of this sort was when I moved out of a group house (the very next day as I recall) when they wrote my name to an objectionable task on the chore wheel because I was at work. I had Debordian fantasies and put my body on the line in their pursuit. But I did not do it in a vacuum. The day I left the house I drove across the state to a warm, waiting room with friends who were happy to see me. The situation would have been miserable if I didn't have those friends, that shared understanding about Debord, or the money to have a car to make that drive.”

An earlier version of this story appears in *Stories of the Bear People* as “The Bear Who Wouldn't Do the Dishes.” In this version, Aragorn! casts the protagonist as a bear—i.e., an individualistic and

banned, deemed “dangerous.” But what is anarchy without danger? What is it without disagreement and conflict? A homogenous mass of missionaries, replicating the values of the society that created us in the first place.

Of all of us, Aragorn! was maybe the least understood, the least comprehensible. He came off as contradictory and vague. This led to positions being attributed to him that he didn't actually hold. For a time, he was often accused of being against “positive” projects. But his life was as full of “positive projects” as one could imagine. He produced an enormous amount of anarchist material; his influence extends far beyond books. His whole life was one big positive project with a lining of negativity.

It pains me to recall how many of us kept quiet while he reaped the ire of internet drama from people who misunderstood and misrepresented his words and positions. It pains me that I probably didn't do enough to counter the homogenization of an anarchist milieu that has now lost a powerful anti-homogenizing force. Fear of social repercussions is the mindkiller. Our milieu moved several steps towards homogeneity this week, a homogeneity that can only weaken us.

When I met Aragorn!, he told me that he didn't really consider people to be his friends until they had been around for five years. I thought that was a bit extreme but I respected it, and I really looked forward to the five-year mark. I think he gave in with me a little before five years had passed, but it was definitely a few years before we got to know each other better.

Around the time I met him, I was hanging out with the first all-anarchist crew of friends I had ever had. It took me many years of coming in and out of contact with anarchists to figure out where I wanted to be in relation to them. I was full of excitement and energy about the new direction my life had taken at this time... but

anarchist thought that didn't presume that the Spanish Civil War was the end-all-be-all of anarchist praxis.

Not long after LBC was started, A! agreed to carry one of my projects, which I'm sure he hated. A! wasn't one to mince words or hold back, even if the words he held forth weren't necessarily clarifying or constructive. But the destructive urge is a creative urge as well. Even within A!'s negativity, positive threads could be teased out, possibly to his dismay. Years later, when we collaborated on a project, I was endlessly frustrated by our differences in work method. Only in hindsight can I see that he was telling me I was doing a good job by not telling me I was doing a bad job.

In a discussion about how difficult his thoughts and feelings are to pin down, he told me that his philosophy sat at the intersection that was his publishing project. I doubt that anyone who didn't share immediate space with him will ever know how many projects he facilitated, serving as a sort of midwife. But the casual observer can look at the Little Black Cart catalog and tease out a vague notion of how A! felt about the world. This vague notion was often maddening for me; I can't count how many times he told me that something I voiced was wrong, or just that he disagreed with it, only to refuse to explain further. This only made me crave his thoughts more, even though I knew that I might disagree with his analysis. But he forced me to think harder about what I was saying and doing with my time and energy.

In recent years, Aragorn!'s decisions and actions have made larger numbers of anarchists angry. The vague tendency people call Antifa(tm) has become a sacred cow. A! was critical of this, despite being an indigenous person who was stabbed by a Nazi before most of his detractors had even heard of Nazis or anarchists. A! arrived at this criticism through an experience that most of us will hopefully never have. Whether or not we agreed with his criticisms, we should have valued them more than we did—we should have recognized them as born of blood and fire, the same blood and fire that inspire us. Aragorn! and his projects have been “cancelled,”

headstrong survivor of an earlier generation of anarchists—who rejects the chore wheel itself on principle.

Which came first, the conflict or the principles?



Aragorn! and friends at a punk show in 1989.

Hardcore

Let's return to the hardcore scene Aragorn! grew up in, the crucible in which he and thousands of other rebellious young people of his generation discovered and asserted themselves.

The 1980s hardcore scene was premised on a starkly individualistic concept of the subject, not unlike the medieval Icelandic epic hero: a fiercely independent protagonist guided by a personal code of honor, maintaining intense yet fraught ties with a few close friends, boldly declaring war upon the entire world without hope of victory. If that sounds like an exaggeration, go back and read

the lyrics of Side by Side, one of Aragorn's favorite hardcore bands in his skinhead days. This lone warrior ethos set the stage for epic battles in which one could prove one's mettle against rivals, jocks, cops, bosses, Nazi skinheads, the necessity of selling one's labor on the market, and other monstrosities—not in order to bring about the end of their rule so much as to embody something *outside* them.

Some who grew up in this scene remained individualistic and were consequently isolated and defeated; *if it's you against the world, bet on the world*. Others, whose fortitude had been premised on an imagined "unity" with others in the scene, gave up and assimilated. Aragorn! joined the punks of the 1990s who sought a third option, attempting to rebuild their relations on entirely different premises—to fuse the best of independence and interdependence. He traveled the US in these networks, living from job to job and scam to scam, reading the Situationists and developing his analysis.

Decades later, Aragorn! was still entertained by everything joyous and ridiculous about hardcore. But he also regarded the hardcore scene with mixed emotions. Towards the later 1990s, Aragorn! stepped back from the scene after being called out for his conduct in sexual relationships.¹ He recounted later that this taught him the importance of being self-aware about the effects of his actions. But it also underscored the risks of what could happen when others controlled the narrative.

<https://twitter.com/AragornBang/status/565919351832731648>

This is hardly the only way to interpret Aragorn!'s youth. But it gets at some recurring themes: arriving as a poor Midwestern teenager in wealthy Marin County, participating in mostly white

¹ All we know about this period comes from Aragorn!'s own accounts, as he spoke openly about this. Our effort to honor Aragorn!'s life, accomplishments, and the deep loss felt by those who survive him is not intended to discredit anyone who experienced harm from him.

rocking chair you were sitting in. Then another kid goes, "Wait, why is that so funny?"

And remember when we talked late into the night around the wood stove at my house, you were probably in that same rocking chair, and pondered for hours how one might "create" indigeneity? Our conversation went deep and on and on and we found our way into another project collaboration. I will always appreciate the ways our brains spun dreams and unearthed fears and centered our words and hearts around the beautiful idea. I miss you, dear friend.

Chi-miigwech for everything you gave to us.

My experience with Aragorn! was not particularly unique. It started with observing his online presence in the Infoshop News comments sections, usually while he was arguing with the site's administrator, Chuck0. I came out of a similar punk subculture that valued conflict and sought humor in sarcasm and playful ribbing with friends (and maybe less playful versions of both with enemies). So the harsh edge that A! could bring to the table never bothered me the way it has others. I could find in conflict a form of friendship.

The first time we met in person, he told me that his whole nihilism/nothing matters thing was a joke, and that other people (friends of mine) had taken it too far in their willingness to steal from hypothetical neighbors in a hypothetical future post-collapse world. There were several other times when I heard him lament the outward effects of his words and actions, and often wondered where those reflections would lead him.

Through the early 2000s, my anarchist perspective was influenced by his essays and editing in *Green Anarchy* magazine and *Anarchy: Journal of Desire Armed*, which at the time was the most widespread anarchist publication in the US. The local magazine store carried A:JODA, making it an easy (yet difficult) gateway into

dangerous. You were overly protective of me. You scolded me for not getting my chimney cleaned right away one winter because you thought my house would go up in flames. It never did. But I also got it swept the following week. Thanks for the reminder.

You cared about shit towns and shit projects that were just trying to find a different and beautiful place in this wretched world. You truly gave those spaces and ideas and people the time of day. The diligence, patience, and endurance you surprisingly held for putting up with such frustrating things is beyond inspiring. Fuck, there is just so much more I could say about that.

You were vulnerable and open about so much to me. Dreams and hardships. I would defend you constantly when your name came up. Always prefacing my defense of you with a “Sure, Aragorn! can be a total asshole, but...” and go on to humanize you, most of the time.

We tromped through the snow. You introduced me to your parents’ graves and the creek not too far from there. You showed me the pines and maples that surrounded the house that was a home to you. We made really gross spaghetti there one time and you blamed me for it. I still have no idea how that was my fault. Your aunt told me I “seemed like a really sweet girl” and you laughed that really frustrating, high-pitched laugh where you’d talk through giggles and wave a hand and manage an “I’m sorry, but...” another giggle “if you actually knew her...” What a piece of shit.

And you also taught myself and others the endless possibilities we carry in our hearts while often laughing in our faces. Remember that one time I invited you over to meet some new folks from Occupy or something while you were in town? I was so embarrassed by your behavior that evening. You told them how they should be thankful for how cheap it was to live in the Midwest and said, “In the Bay, some people only make \$15 an hour and you just can’t survive on that!” Then one kid goes, “Hold up. You can make \$15 an hour out there? Drug dealers don’t even make that much here. Trust me, I’ve tried.” You laughed so hard you almost fell out of the

punk and anarchist circles as a descendant of an indigenous people subjected to genocide, Aragorn! repeatedly experienced the tensions between individual and collective rebellion—and the dynamics that divide even rebels into *included* and *excluded*.



Aragorn! in 1990.

We met for the first time early in 2008 at the last NCOR (National Conference on Organized Resistance) in Washington, DC. He experienced his first cerebral aneurysm the following year, in October 2009. The first time he and I interacted outside a conference or book fair, he had just experienced his second episode. I didn’t think much about it at the time. Although several friends of mine had passed away, somehow I still took it for granted that all who were still living would go on doing so forever, immortal.

The Gadfly

Fast forward into the 21st century. By 2012, anarchistnews.org had become the chief news and discussion venue in an anarchist resurgence driven by a burgeoning insurrectionist current. The collective around Little Black Cart was publishing a new book every month. Yet although the infrastructure Aragorn! and his comrades had established was central to what thousands of anarchists were doing in the United States, he remained a polarizing figure.

Part of this was for reasons that preceded his tenure. Murray Bookchin's hit piece *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* had declared "an unbridgeable chasm" in 1995, imputing a made-up identity to all anarchists who did not embrace Bookchin's specific brand of anarchism and seeking to excise them from the historical tradition. So-called "lifestyle anarchists" had responded in kind, triggering an escalating conflict that embittered many groups against each other, including AK Press and *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed*. Aragorn! inherited this conflict—and embraced it.

In this context, Aragorn! adopted a fundamentally combative approach to infrastructure. He would pick a target—nearly always what he perceived to be a tame, conservative anarchist project—and attempt to supplant it with his own version. As a venue for news and discussion, anarchistnews.org was designed to displace infoshop.org, which it succeeded in doing when online discourse became more antagonistic. Similarly, Little Black Cart emulated the model of PM Press. At its worst, this approach was reactive, limiting his efforts to imitating existing models rather than establishing new experiments alongside longstanding anarchist projects.

Whenever he was faced with a contest, Aragorn! was determined to win. As he declared in "Be Relentless,"

"This commitment to tension, competition, and conflict [...] makes me a generally not-pleasant person to be around but it makes me awesome. When I turn my

vantages for everyone to see, absolutely unique and irreplaceable. We can all aspire to do the same before our time comes.

"Perhaps we can begin a set of conversations about how each of us, how each type of personality and skillset can add to a complex social environment that shares a love of the Beautiful Idea and respects others who do the same. Perhaps that respect can mean something more than the Internet is capable of demonstrating. I know that for me, the projects of this large group of people, striving for the Beautiful Idea always interest me, even if I disagree with them."

-Aragorn!, "Cooperation," April 22, 2017

Some Remembrances

Fuck you Aragorn! for leaving us. You can't just up and leave.

But that was also totally the thing you would do in social settings. It was like your mic drop, some bullshit thing to flaunt your confidence to us humble Midwesterners. I remember telling you to not forget your roots—that you come from the land of polite behavior and it won't kill you to be nice once in a while. And then of course you'd tell me to get assertive and honest once in a while. Fair enough.

The projects we worked on, the hours spent fighting and laughing on the phone, I could never recall them all. We connected over our Western Michigan roots; the evolution of punk and hardcore and anarchy in Grand Rapids that strung our generations together; the people and culture here that both of us knew deeply; and the trees and the glow of autumn and the lakes. You told me not to buy a snowmobile one time because you were convinced they were too

eye, though afterwards he insisted that he was over hardcore and didn't really miss it. I didn't believe him for a second.

Ultimately, Aragorn!'s contest was not with us, but with death. It had been stalking him all along, more lethal than scene drama—just as it awaits us all.

When one of us passes away, we are reminded of how interconnected we all are, of how much we depend on each other and take each other for granted, even those we consider our enemies. We have the opportunity to reaffirm our appreciation and care for each other, to do right by each other—by both the living and the dead.



We cherish Aragorn's memory above all because of how intensely and passionately he lived—because he took his way of being to the maximum, demonstrating all its advantages and disad-

attention to a problem or an interest I feel like I am relentless in attacking, building, or nurturing it. I have taken my failures (especially interpersonal) seriously and continue to search for other **relentless** people to surround myself with. I think you should do the same."

It is easy to dismiss this as mere ambition for power. But the logic behind his combativeness bears further reflection.

First, as he never tired of emphasizing, Aragorn! was pursuing a different idea of anarchy than his rivals. He saw the value of revolt as immanent rather than prefigurative—in other words, he believed that to be meaningful, an act of rebellion should have intrinsic value without any certainty that the future will return interest on the investment. He was so suspicious of the idea of revolution as a grand cause to serve that he often accused comrades who were pursuing their own self-directed projects of engaging in what he derisively described as "activism" or "strugglismo." As he declared to an interviewer in summer 2018,

"For me, the idea, the beautiful idea, is about—how do you connect ideas to living? It's not about 'the struggle.'"

In some ways, this is precisely the attitude Bookchin decried as "lifestylist," refined and theorized as a critique of alienation. Aragorn!'s analysis could seem maddeningly incoherent; for example, while opposing the politics of sacrifice, he retained a soft spot for regicides.

But there is something more to this dispute than the question of what it means to be subversive. In Aragorn!'s writing, we see him problematize *agreement itself* while championing an agonistic vision of social relations based on generative conflict. In a society in which adherence to consensus reality is one of the chief obstacles to revolt, he aimed to foster discomfort and discord:

“It is the cops who implement, the middle managers who hammer out the terms, the teachers and parents who convince us there is no outside, and the shoppers, wage laborers, and protesters who consent to the terms of the agreement... My feeling is that the agreement is the problem and the process by which one figures out exactly what we agreed to is one I continue to be capable of being seduced by. I may hate you but in your stupid, ill-advised, immature, silly yearning I still love you. Both are true at once.

-Aragorn!, “As much as I hate you, work is worse,” July 4, 2015

The same ambivalence in this passage reappears elsewhere when Aragorn! describes his feelings about the anarchist milieu: “Obviously it is love and hate but if love is a decision about who you want to live and die with... I’m still here.”

If *agreement is the problem*, how does one conduct oneself towards those one loves? Near the end of his life, Aragorn! returned to the question of how to describe the basic principles of anarchism, settling on “attack” as an expression of love:

“I desire freedom and think that timing, attack, and my voluntary associations are necessary to achieve it. Before I am free I think the preconditions of freedom are worth methodically going through, I do this by way of publications but I recognize there may be better ways that require a different social organization than the one I have access to. But in this space of creating preconditions I attempt to be transparent, poetic, and open with who I work with and how we do it. I strive for an environment that is both/and rather than either/or. Indifference, exclusion, and isolation are forms of hate. Attack is a form of love.”

explicit to anyone involved. We would not hurry to exclude and isolate scapegoats, we would not hasten the time when we might find ourselves in their shoes. By keeping those who are different safe among us, we keep ourselves safe. That goes for the most frustrating, the most outré, the most controversial.

How can we be critical without excluding people? How do we maintain space for difference without inviting in toxicity? How can we respect older generations and continue to include them without exalting their errors? How can we transform even *attack* into an expression of love? These are the questions to which we must apply ourselves.

I will always remember the last time Aragorn! stayed at our house. The night before the book fair, my housemate decided that we needed to have some proper punk rock entertainment and taught herself all the songs by Minor Threat on her guitar in the course of a couple hours. She found someone in town who could play the drums and at midnight, a Minor Threat cover band performed in our living room for the benefit of the couple dozen anarchists quartered in our neighborhood.

All we had for a microphone was a bullhorn. We passed it around, moshing and stagediving and accidentally kicking out one of the front windows as we shouted the lyrics together. Aragorn! ended up with the bullhorn for one song—I remember it as “Small Man, Big Mouth,” but my friend says it was “Filler”—and he sang it in the style of the old Clevo hardcore bands, roaring “WOOOOOAAAH!” during the buildup before the chorus came in, a gesture that was only legible to me as the only other 40-something hardcore kid in the room.

Five and a half years later, that window remains broken, a monument to a time when we were all together. I still remember the expression of joy on his face, that same mischievous gleam in his

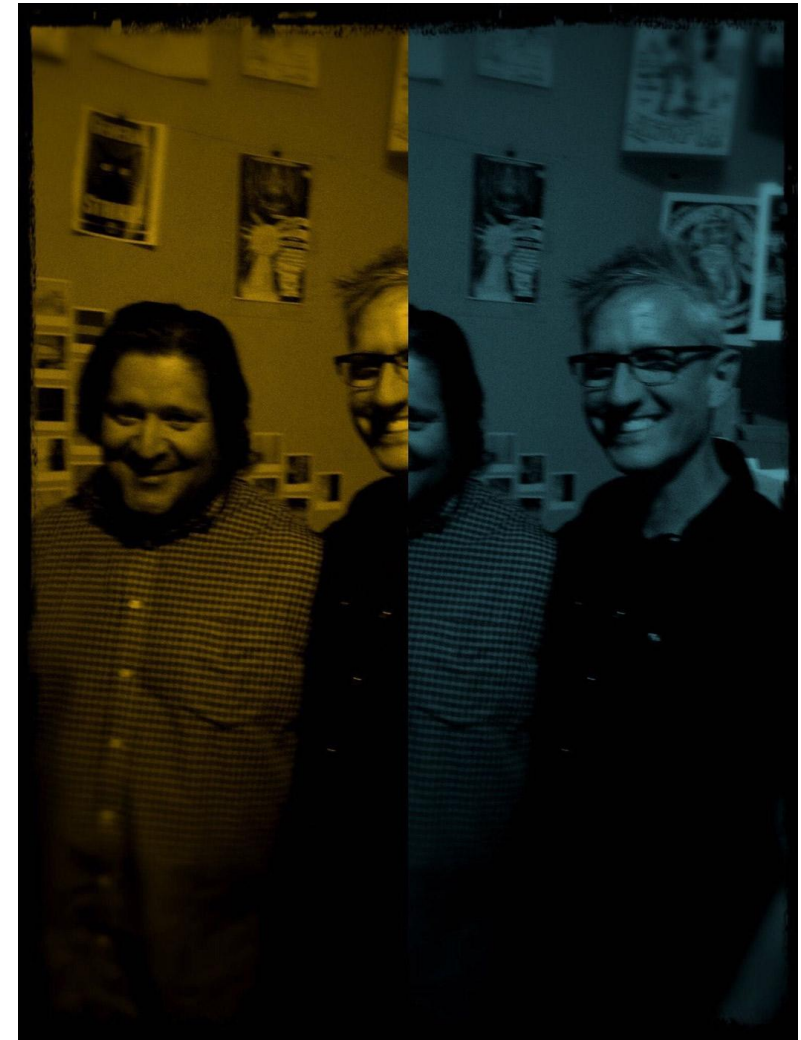
Aragorn! struggled with envy of others' success, having reason to fear on the basis of his experience that if others could control the narrative, he might find himself isolated and excluded. This became a self-fulfilling prophecy: what others perceived as his accumulation of power without concern for their well-being drove them to establish projects that left no space for him. Any totalizing model that fails to encompass the whole inevitably gives rise to its own opposition.

Aragorn!'s various conflicts with other anarchists are not as interesting as the fact that these conflicts played out according to a pattern so familiar that the details are practically immaterial. Stubbornness giveth and stubbornness taketh away. Likewise, in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the milieu, every younger generation hurries to repeat the Oedipal rites of patricide, guaranteeing that the cycle of bloodletting will repeat as soon as the next generation comes of age.

This sums up what kind of person Aragorn! was: he kept hosting the webpage for the Seattle Anarchist Book Fair even after Little Black Cart was banned from participating in it. Many different aspects of his story are interwoven in that single anecdote.

In every group, there is one person who is widely regarded as the worst of all, the most execrable. Scapegoats serve the function of enabling everyone else to come together and feel that they share something: if nothing else, they all have in common the fact that *they* are not the scapegoat. The others hurry to demonstrate how much they belong by heaping scorn upon the scapegoat—until one day the scapegoat is not there anymore and the role is transferred to the next in line.

If we were part of a community bound together by compassionate and sustainable ways of relating, we would recognize that the scapegoat plays an essential role, a sacred role. We would have customs by which to secretly honor and protect those in danger of occupying the role of scapegoat, without making the situation



Aragorn! with his friend scott crow.

-Aragorn!, “Anarchist Principles redux,” October 23, 2018

This should help to elucidate Aragorn!’s persistent contrarianism. Maintaining the combative ethos of the hardcore scene filtered through Nietzsche, he set out to attack and critique everything contrived and pietistic in his comrades as well as society at large. He was especially exasperated by performative virtue and Manichaeian notions of good and evil:

“One common hostility I have towards many anarchists is the general attitude I find that anarchists tend to be *for* good things and *against* bad things... We are against bad things, therefore we are also against ourselves.”

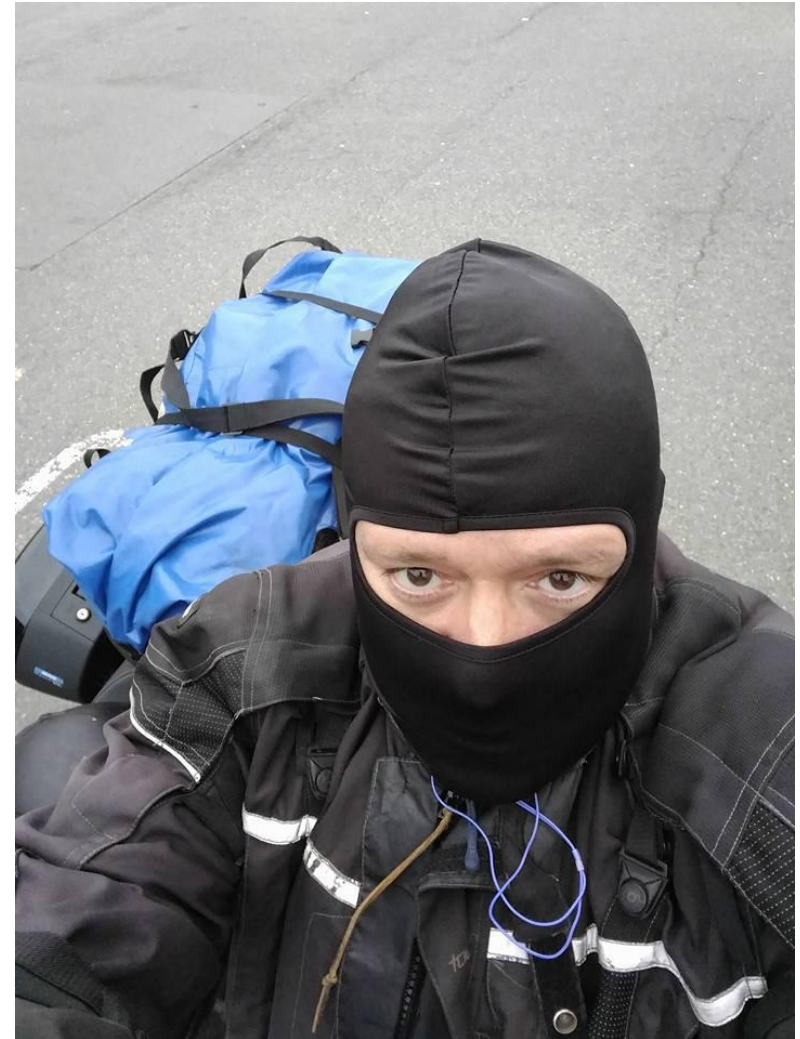
“Both/and” means acknowledging positive *and* negative, good *and* bad, all of which can be targets for critique.

Critique is the gadfly’s weapon of choice, a weapon with which he often performs a beneficial role. But in a milieu predicated on ideological agreement, the line between *gadfly* and *scapegoat* is narrow indeed.

The Scapegoat

The contrarian whose defiance enables him to break with the ruling order but ultimately costs him the company of other rebels: this is a story much older than the anarchist movement.

Aragorn! understood the risks of becoming ensnared in grudge matches. He summarized much of what he learned from the misfortunes of the previous generation of post-left anarchists in a kiss-off to Bob Black. Yet if you go through that essay replacing the name “Bob Black” with “Aragorn!” much of it still rings true. Patterns are very difficult to break—as Aragorn! often emphasized.



Aragorn!, ready for a cold motorcycle ride.