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WR323

3 February 2014

Essay 1: Identity

It was later in the evening maybe eight-ish. I was standing on the tarmac of the Guadalajara Airport. Military Jeeps were parked in a semi circle pattern all with their headlights on, pointing at the back of an Aero Mexico Airliner. The rear emergency door was open, and a lengthy ramp ran up to the back. My fellow classmates and I had just been hustled out of vans that had bulleted through the streets of Guadalajara in a sort of frantic high-speed motorcade. The Mexican Federales really had a flair for the dramatic. On the hood of one of the Jeeps was a make shift desk where each one of us was prompted to sign a document so poorly copied it was all but unreadable. I wouldn’t sign it. After frustrated attempts to force me to do so I was swiftly ushered up into the back of the plane. I think the grand scene that was constructed to scare us is what partially allowed me the courage to deny the autograph. I didn’t want to disappoint my friends back in Mexico City, or Distrito Federal as it is called, by any possible admission of guilt.

We had only met them a little more than a week before. They were from the town of San Salvador Atenco, just 25 miles from the center of Mexico City. They were farmers, parents, grandparents, sons, daughters, and students. We were a university class from the US studying the history of Mexico and had been in DF for about two weeks working with professors and students from UNAM, the national university there. Some of us, who were interested, had learned of and went to visit this small town just outside the city where they had expelled the police and government officials after being told that their town would be torn down and cropland paved over for an airport. It would be the largest in Latin America and a lynch pin for Vicente Fox’s “Plan Puebla Panama.” The PPP was a sort of NAFTA for the lower Northern Hemisphere. One that, as general consensus would have it among who we were working with, would further impoverish the peasant class of Mexico and down through Central America as well as make it easier to the strip the natural resources linked to them. This airport was not about moving people but rather freight. The government’s plan did not take in to account the ever-present history of the Mexican Revolution that for many in Mexico has never ended. The folks from Atenco were not about to leave their ancestors land so quickly to take up new careers carrying luggage for poverty wages. So they became a sovereign outpost in the center of Mexico, no public services, completely outside. Upon our unannounced visit we were impressed with the calm order and loving generosity that so contrasted DF. Everyone was buzzing, extremely happy with their accomplishments with only a tinge of fret over their dangerous new status. When some of them asked us to walk with them in May Day celebration we really could not say no. The rest of the class agreed even after the levity of the idea was explained to them. Although it was a harmless celebration attended by internationals from around the world (purple clad members of SEIU filled our hotel for the occasion), the company we would keep could draw a smidge of attention.

We were more than a little correct. As it turns out some of us made the front page of the national newspapers, and we were the cover story on the nightly news. So we were all put in the back of the plane. Only the front fifteen or so rows had paying passengers. An armed guard accompanied us and without any acknowledgment of our pleas as to where we were going we were going, the plane took off. They kept the plane dark. No refreshments. No nothing. The plane flew low to the dessert floor. This we assumed meant a quick hop back to the capital for a trial. But we stayed up and no grand sparkling sprawl came underneath us. The reason, I happened to discover, we were flying so low was that the plane was operating on only one engine. I only told this to my professor with whom I was close, and is now more or less family, so as not to distress my fellow classmates, who had already had a long day. My good friend, my professor, and I all sat together after some shuffling and conferenced as to what our tactics would be to make the best of our situation. Our circle went on so long that all of a sudden we were set to descend and low and behold the tower at LAX was outside our window. It was a strange relieving disappointment I felt seeing that iconic Star Trekked out terminal. Being spat out into your home country still leaves you being spat out.

We exited our private airliner the way we entered and were shuffled to customs after a contrastingly fanfare-less stroll on the LAX tarmac. There was literally no acknowledgement of what had just happened to us by the US authorities. From the time we were arrested on our bus in the hills of Jalisco we were told that everything we were experiencing was standard procedure nothing else. The ransacking of our luggage, the holding at gunpoint, the high-speed transport, the 10 or so hour detention in a vacant office building that when we entered photographers found so interesting. All of it was unremarkable evidently to everyone but us.

During our detention we urged our captors to contact our embassy to no avail. We never got an answer. Keeping us in the dark seemed to be the strategy from the outset. They separated us by sex for the duration to stir our imaginations. They took us away from the group at times. All good ways to keep us scared but at the same time always reassuring us it was all normal due to the simple fact was they had nothing to charge us with

Now back in the US we received the coldest shoulder I have ever experienced. It wasn’t even as if they were talking behind our back. They just stared through us. Who knows what they were told. This utter contempt by means of abandonment reaffirmed things I had felt from an early age.

At ten years of age my much older sister moved out, and before I could become a full-fledged latch key kid, I had a neighborhood teenager who looked after me for a few summers. She was amazing and really shaped me like few have in my life. The daughter of a sixties radical she started a group that somewhat mirrored her father’s work on stopping what was called the “White Train” when it came through the NW carrying its nuclear payload to the subs up in the Puget Sound. Her/our group was called “Teens for Peace,” so good. It was made up of a fair amount of SW Washington and Portland kids for whom I was their mascot. Though I was not technically a teenager, I was wholeheartedly involved and attended teach-ins, and out of town conferences. She treated me as a peer as we rolled around in her gold Volare listening to Melanie and talking about really everything. We even staged a fairly good-sized march through Vancouver that made the front page. During that marched we were received well at times and derided others. I mean really, a bunch of kids taking their Saturday to show how much they care about what’s gong on in the world, harassed? Even if we were miss guided, how cute, a bunch of kids playing hippie causing no harm.

Even earlier in my youth I took on the role of the outsider by way of the *Metal Dude* or *the Stoner.* I’m talking first grade, a little hesh, more common in 1982, but still. I remember vividly the distinction between Preppies and Stoners. From an early age and possibly spurred on by my older sister, I clung to the identity of the Stoner, long before I’d ever tried the stuff. I always felt like an outsider, a rebel. So I think I managed to find a way to magnify this stature by way of listening to metal and dressing down. I was of course amongst the multitude of this stereotype in the ‘80s. Preppies on the other hand were so high on the horse. They were the cool kids, the athletes, the kids with the grades (though I was, in reality, more so as I was also a nerd). Short hair, bright colors, Capezios, Guess Jeans. In truth this in some way really did play out though now it only seems like a totally fabricated construct. We were the rad dudes who fuck the system! Take that, sweet grade school teachers! All along, even though life was pretty even keel for me I needed to somehow present questions to the status quo. But back then, in the world of kid stuff, frivolity; I was just playing a part. But it set me up for a life feeling more at ease as the skeptic. But its one thing to play James Dean and another to be disenfranchised from you own government so abruptly.

When the plane landed in LA my outsider status was confirmed. The US government turned away from a class of public university students when they were held in a foreign country and laid no inroads for us to even tell our side of the story. Later we found the US Consulate in Mexico had been notified and they indeed let us waft in the wind. Just by walking hand in hand in a national holiday parade with some tough grannies we were assumed criminal enough to warrant our treatment. Granted my US citizenship allowed me the privilege to come out scott free. Strangely enough the only person who took interest, was the dynamic Senator Paul Wellstone from Minnesota who died in a plane crash not long after we established a relationship with him and not long after he had established himself as an outspoken progressive outside in the halls of the capital. Even our own school showed no support, and compelled us to admit guilt and apologize.

Briefly late that night in the gleaming white of the international terminal we found ourselves an island, piecing our belongings back together that had been mixed together in the dozen or so garbage bags they gave back to us. Outsiders until we could find ways back home.