

BEYOND RHETORIC AND THEORY: A Graduate Student Activist on Witnessing the Inauguration

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On the flight to Washington, D.C., I remember asking myself why I felt such a need to witness the inauguration not on television, but live and in person with a group of thousands. What also compelled over two million people from around the world and country to travel great distances to witness Barack Obama's inauguration? That was the question I would ask myself and many others throughout my trip.

First and foremost, I wanted to be at the inauguration so that I could witness history unedited. As an activist, you know that change doesn't come without a price. You also know that the whole story is never told in the media. (For example, my mother said she saw on television how many people enthusiastically waved in national pride when Bush's image was shown to the crowd gathered for the inaugural events. In actuality, at the event, people gestured and booed.)

I bought my flight ticket in early November. I did not have an actual ticket to the inauguration, but I did have the couch my friend George Luna had offered. I had sent Senator Feinstein an eager email to convince her why I, a graduate student and political activist, should receive tickets. I knew there were a limited number available, even to politicians, yet I hoped that I would get at least one. Sure enough, early December, while I was in line at the bank of all places, I received a phone call from Feinstein's office. I was being given two blue tickets to the inauguration!

On the crowded, luggage-filled bus ride from the airport into the city, I had the opportunity to meet sixth graders, Trinity and Malik, from South Los Angeles. They both won the Virgin Airlines essay contest at their school and received free flights to the inauguration. Trinity shared that she was the first of her friends and family to board an airplane and had anxiety about flying. Malik shared that he was most excited to witness this moment because of what it meant to his family. He described the emotional tears and sentiment from his grandmother and mother, and he told us that while he didn't understand fully why they were crying so much that night, he did comprehend that this moment stood for "change" and "hope." Looking into the future, he shared that he was going to go to college and become either a reporter or a lawyer. As my friend Brenda and I got off at our stop, I struggled with my bag and mumbled that I couldn't get my luggage out. Trinity smiled and said, "Yes, you CAN! Yes, you CAN!" We shared a laugh. I replied with "Sí, se puede!" and then we said goodbye. Many of the youth of color with whom I spoke shared that Obama stood as a symbol that they too could be president some day. In my head, a flag would immediately raise, and I would feel critical of this "anything is possible" trope people associated with Obama. I remember two teenage boys from Georgia singing a song they had especially written for what they described as this "historic moment of change." They made a specific point to perform on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day because of Obama's call to celebrate the day through an act of community service. They both sang beautifully with their eyes tightly shut as if envisioning the change of which they sang. While red flags went off in my head, I couldn't ignore the obvious energy that directed these newfound dreams and the shared vision of possibility that would now inspire an entire generation of new activists. Later, hopefully, they would realize the limitations of rhetoric, but for now they were thriving in the waters of possibility.

Throughout the weekend, much of the conversations I had with people were likewise centered on the ideals or concepts of change, hope, faith, restoration, and the possibility represented in the transition from President Bush to President Obama. On Monday, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, my friend Brenda and I made our rounds of site seeing. That night we went back to the Lincoln Memorial. I stood watching from a distance a single black mother with her four children taking turns reading the Gettysburg address. They all stood so proud and together boldly recited “all men are created equal” as if for the first time they actually believed it. That night was truly intimate. In writing, these scenes seem cheesy, like something orchestrated for television. However, they were actually profound moments that carried a lot of emotional force. Very simply said, people were moved; people believed that their lives were about to change in very measurable ways. For they had; the image of who could be President of the U.S. had just measurably shifted. For that mother and her children, what had seemed impossible was now possible. Something like this cannot be simply dismissed by theory and criticism.

There were many times throughout the ceremony when people cried, embraced and yelled out in excitement. I vividly remember the moment when Reverend Warren began reciting the Lord’s Prayer. That was the only time during the entire ceremony when the crowd around me was completely silent. I recall closing my eyes and bowing my head, noting the variation of distinct voices and accents as people collectively recited the prayer. Even though I’ve always been scolded not to do so, I opened my eyes and scanned those around me: everyone—young and old, black, brown, white—had their eyes closed and heads bowed. In prayer, I heard the diversity of voices rising around me, the voice of the Southern woman behind me melding with the voice of the New Jersey dude next to me. I was touched by how many people, regardless of their faith, stood collectively and declared, collectively, their wish for things to

change and improve. Regardless of ethnicity, age, class, gender or religion there was a perceived urgency for the sharing of faith and (yes, that word again) hope for this country. Once again, the performative moment defined the word as so much more than just a slogan.

Certain moments during the ceremony became difficult to follow because of the overwhelming emotional energy that resulted in my being inspired to make connections to various stories and people in my own life. When Obama began speaking about our current state of crisis, I thought of issues abroad, like the political crisis in Gaza, along with my dad's hours being cut to just 1-2 days a week. When Obama addressed the Muslim world and provided the imagery of extending a hand to a fist if it is willing to unclench, I thought of a Muslim college student I had met in line when I picked up my tickets. She remarked how excited she was that for the first time she saw her parents feel engaged in American politics and also feel safe in expressing their views, like citizens rather than the enemy, calling this country "home." Her story made me think of other family stories about struggle and citizenship, and I cried. Most inspiring of all, was witnessing this shift in direction and active participation in a politics of possibility, the ultimate reason why I had felt so compelled to participate in the collective witnessing of the inauguration.