

## Notes from 100 Centre Street

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Sometime into my 43rd hour in the custody of the New York Police Department, I started to cry. “I just don’t see how we can stop this,” I pleaded with my cellmates through my tears. “I feel this country and myself just sinking and sinking. At what point does this kind of repression stop being proto-fascist and become just plain old fascism?” My cellmates gave me toilet paper to wipe my tears and hugged me until I stopped crying. They had no words of comfort to offer. We all felt the same way.

An hour later, we were banging on the bars and shaking the floor with our chant, “This is illegal! Let us go!” Within minutes, several floors of demonstrators joined in the chanting, and those on vigil below sent their voices up to meet ours. After twenty minutes, the guards promised we’d be next to get our photos taken, another step on the excruciating process of being arraigned and released. After another hour, we were waiting still, seven women in an eight by nine foot cell, taking turns sitting on the bench and stepping over our comrades sleeping fitfully on the cold, concrete floor.

After almost no one was processed or released on Tuesday night, somewhere I knew the delay was part of a deliberate strategy to keep the streets clear of demonstrators until Bush could give an expertly directed, perfectly choreographed acceptance speech on Thursday. And, while that knowledge didn’t prevent me from hanging onto every false estimate of my release time given to me by my wardens (which ranged from “I don’t know” to “six more hours” to “we can keep you up to three days”), I placed more stock in the combination of rumor and information circulating among the cells about habeas corpus and threats of contempt charges and fines levied against the NYPD. I left the courtroom at 6:45 pm on Thursday, a bit disoriented that I wore no chain on my right wrist and that no one was yelling at me to keep my shoulder to the wall. But I knew Bush’s speech would start soon and I would miss it because I needed a medical exam, legal advice, and the first nutritious food I’d eaten since breakfast two days before. The Republican plan, if I might call it that without hard evidence, had worked on me and hundreds of others. We were too busy taking care of ourselves and each other to protest what had hurt us. For some of us, it felt like a slap in the face. We weren’t used to being immobilized like this. We were going to miss the big event, and it was going to go on with or without us.

There is an unacknowledged myth about radicalism among white people that allows us to feel like we’re supposed to be at the forefront of social change movements. It goes something like this: white, middle-class people are well-positioned to become vanguard activists because our privilege gives us the economic and social capital to use in our work and shields us from the worst oppressions of the state. At times there is an element of truth to this myth, as there are to many. But if it sounds like a variant on white guilt, or an apology for why white people can’t stay in the background, it probably is. But it might help explain why even in New York City and against the Republican Party, the counter-convention events were still overwhelmingly white. Our radical Valhalla is too full of white people: my friends are more likely to argue about the spirit of Paris in 1968

than Kinshasa in 1960. I'm no exception—I needed to Google to find the date for Kinshasa but not Paris.

As self-centeredly myopic as our unspoken vanguardism has been, it has also never been so wrong. The comfortable padding of privilege is being worn a little thinner by the Bush administration, and the pre-emptive arrests at the RNC are only the most recent and visible examples. (The prosecution of artist and professor Steve Kurz on counter-terrorism charges is another). We could, of course, try to shore up our racial and economic position (as Log Cabin Republicans seem masochistically desperate to do), or, worse yet, claim our time in jail as an 'authentic' experience of oppression that is on par with the experiences of others. But I don't think that we will do that. In New York, the bystanders swept up in the mass arrests were as supportive of the protesters and outraged at the guards as the demonstrators, and no one (least of all the police) was keeping track of who 'should' have been arrested and who 'shouldn't' have been. I'd like to see that happen on the outside, and I believe it can. We, who find our white skin and middle-class backgrounds not buying us as much as they used to, must develop more complex forms of solidarity and collaboration with those who have been too busy taking care of themselves and each other to come to 'our' protests.

I've returned again and again to that 43rd hour crying spell and gotten angry at myself for having no better inking about how to stop the spread of fascism than I did then. I've cried about it all over again, and then laughed at myself for the arrogance of wanting to have all the answers. I'm still sorting through the contradictory emotions, observations, and conversations that came out of being in jail for two and a half days. I'm vigilant not to allow the peculiar combination of weariness and bravado that accompanies being a political prisoner (for however short a term and minor an offense) to obscure the fact that I still know nothing about living in prison for years on end. "Why does my story matter?" I ask myself as I tell it to anyone who will listen. There is no way to impose artificial coherence on my experience because what this story will matter has more to do with what we all do now than with what has already happened. We have a collective responsibility to gather the threads of these experiences, observations, emotions, and conversations and weave them into a new narrative. We need to take charge of what stories are told about us and what stories we tell ourselves. Being a reflective activist, I can't help but make this sound like a consciousness-raising session where everyone sits around in a room and talks. But it isn't. It's a collective working out of error, experience, and coexistence through action, and the action had better start right now.