

## A Skeptic's Inauguration Diary

Eleonora Mazzucchi (January 27, 2009)



When my Italian mother all but dragged me to Washington on the day of the Inauguration, it helped me believe again

Full Disclosure: I was not, and am not to this day, an Obamista, as it is understood in the context of earnest yet bordering-on-fanatical Obama supporters. My Italian mother, however, is. And were it not for her and her single-minded idealism (she has been at one time or another, a Communist, a

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Buddhist, a Freudian, a power-mom) I might not have decided that attending the Inauguration was a priority. If you ask my mother, it was mandatory, and in the run-up to our trip to Washington not a

moment passed when she didn't wonder aloud, in the reproachful tone reserved for child molesters and whale poachers, how anyone could have stayed home. Those, she said, who thought making the hike to the capital was grueling or uncomfortable or inconvenient were sissies. So thank you, Mom, for getting me up at 4 in the morning and sparing me from the class of people you termed lazy and cynical. It was worth it.

In her usual fretful way my mother kept on reminding me to use a bathroom. She started this chant Tuesday morning when we were an hour early for the train out of Penn Station, as the pamphlet she clutched warned, perhaps too alarmingly, once in D.C. there might not be anywhere to relieve oneself. As it turned out, the city abounded with port-a-potties, a skyline of them conjoined with the Capitol and Jefferson Monument. For an instant, taking in the blindingly bright, cold day, I had the impression of having landed in a bizarre political-themed



amusement park. The effect was disorienting. Drove of people, uncertain of which road to take, moved away from the station, each covered in at least twelve layers of clothing—having evidently heeded the recommendation to keep warm—while vendors hawking Inauguration paraphernalia pushed through with their carts. They were, in terms of gleaning any information as to where to position oneself for an optimal view of the proceedings, utterly useless. In fact, when I asked one which direction the Mall was in he scratched his head in all sincerity and asked, “The closest shopping mall?” Another, selling dubious slangy t-shirts (“A Black President! Wutchu Think About Dat!?”), portly and in need of a good dentist, responded in a gruff Southern accent that he wasn’t from the area. It is difficult to say whether this is heartening news for our economy or not, but apparently some came from far and wide for the sole purpose of making a buck.





We made our way toward a 7th street shortcut, off a tip from an overwhelmed and enervated police officer. When he gave directions he didn't fail to add "Yeah, if you make it there". He was visibly pained by the civil disorder that encircled him and something in his distracted, tortured eyes suggested he couldn't wait to get back to writing up parking tickets.

As we followed the tide of roaming flocks up E street, a wide thoroughfare that yielded entrance to the event, a couple of things struck me: the first, a sizeable majority of our fellow Inauguration watchers, if not three quarters, were black. I had to ask myself why. Was this not a moment that belonged to all of us, did white people feel it was less important? Second was that Washington, an unattractive city that outside of its monuments offers no more than a sprawl of drably colored monoliths, looked far more appealing in its new topsy-turvy guise, with roads closed off to cars, red-white-and-blue banners and Obama's image ubiquitous at every turn. The formerly solemn and powerful capital had become a populist one. A spirit of good will took hold, a common pulse, a sense of anticipation stirring within the people who, squinting toward the sky, followed the echo of helicopters. They knew they were on the cusp of something significant—dare I say change?

As it were, access to the Inauguration was all but refused to anyone who hadn't camped out on the

Mall in the middle of the night. But oddly invigorated by the cold, my mother and I were not discouraged. We stood behind one of the many gates that sealed off the Mall and contented ourselves with an audio version of the program, as did others—except for a nimble teenage boy, who, in a flash, jumped the gate and walked away casually, as though he had been on the other side the entire time. I watched him go and for a moment wished I had had the courage to do the same (naturally, if I'd been endowed with superhero high-jumping skills). Yet there was something to be said about those like us who watched through the grid: a mother feeding her boy a cold slice of pizza, a man and his elderly father. They were appropriately Norman Rockwell-like, ideal for the picture of America we no longer recognized in ourselves. It was part of the image Obama sought to resurrect, though in his Inaugural address he was saved not so much by use of compelling imagery as the orotund quality of his voice. The familiar, almost liturgical sound effaced the words it was meant to deliver—perhaps a blessing given the unusually clichéd historical references that were made. But a few phrases rose above the tangled speech: "To all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: Know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more. [...] Our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint." It was the instance of definitive rupture with our all-too recent



past, the closest we have heard to a promise of peace.

There were funnier moments too, ones worth relishing for their sheer displays of glee. In a hot crowded bar televising the passing of the torch from Bushes to Obamas, spectators laughed at a helpless, and clearly disgruntled, wheelchair-bound Cheney. They yelled "sayonara!" and waved goodbye to the former first couple, speedily flown away from their seat of power. Joy and relief had their place again.

As I remember walking away from this scene with my mother, rubbing our hands for warmth with the weather chillier and the sunlight dwindling, a silly story I heard through the grapevine comes to mind. A New York high society girl, fortunate enough to have had a ticket to the Inauguration, overslept that morning, ran her shower too long, and as a result, missed her seat outside. Instead she was invited to watch from the Senate, an exclusive perch reserved for tycoons and their political allies, not unsimilar to box seats at a stadium. When she returned to meet her friends at a luncheon she burst into tears, bemoaning the discomfort of the whole situation, the crowds, the attention singularly and devotionally paid to a black man who had become the first Presid

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ent of the United States. Her wails carried through the hall, all of this much to the horror of Obama wonks and supporters piling cold cheese and ham onto their plates. It made me grateful I had been outside in the crowd, and that even if I hadn't been afforded the privilege of seeing the new President sworn in, I had felt his presence in the renewed, tenuous hope of those around me. I had been skeptical of this idea of change, and only a week has passed since Obama has been at the helm, but he is proving himself to be a man of swift and unswerving action, a man who makes good on his rousing proclamations.



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