“It Is an Honor to Be Suspended for Palestine”

Dispatches from the Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University

Anonymous, CrimethInc.

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Contents

On April 17, students at Columbia University and Barnard College set up an encampment in solidarity with Palestinians facing genocide at the hands of the Israeli military. On April 18, the university administration brought in massive numbers of police to arrest the demonstrators and crush the encampment; yet in response, students established a new encampment, bigger than the first, inspiring copycat actions from Yale to St. Louis. In the following report, participants offer a blow-by-blow account of the events at Columbia and a strategic appraisal of the tactics that the demonstrators have employed.[1]

First, it is necessary to emphasize the urgency of the situation in Palestine. The Israeli military has killed well over 34,000 people in Gaza, the majority of them women and children, and is now preparing a catastrophic ground invasion of Rafah. The Israeli government has already gone to great lengths to make Gaza uninhabitable, demonstrating that they will butcher as many Palestinians as they are permitted to—and the United States government has aided and abetted them every step of the way. Fierce actions that interrupt the material functioning of the war machine are the only hope to put a halt to the genocide that is unfolding before our eyes.

The protest at Columbia emerged in the wake of a coordinated day of action involving blockades across the country. In taking on a prestigious university, the demonstrators are interrupting the functioning of a small part of the global machinery that enacts and excuses colonial violence. At the same time, the horizon of campus organizing is limited by the structure of higher education itself, which functions as a way of gatekeeping access to power and legitimacy. If universities persist in suspending students who express compassion for those enduring colonial violence around the world, we owe it to those students to foster vibrant movements for liberation that can offer a better venue for their aspirations and talents than the capitalist economy ever could have.

> "I think all of these administrators need to get a grip and listen to their students and watch the news and see how many people have been killed."
>
> —Maryam Alwan, one of the suspended students

The Backstory

Since the 1960s, Columbia's campus has been both a bastion of privilege and a hotbed of activism. In April 1968, at the high point of the anti-war and Black liberation movements, students and their non-student comrades occupied many buildings at the university. The notorious anarchist group Up Against the Wall Motherfucker—"a street gang with an analysis"—made their public debut during that pitched struggle. The building occupations that spring hold a mythical place in the history of 1960s campus resistance.

You can read a full history of the 1968 occupation of Columbia here.

A student activist occupying the office of the president of Columbia University, smoking one of his cigars, during a six-day campus uprising and strike in 1968.

In the 1980s, campus activists waged a powerful campaign to force the university to divest from apartheid South Africa, including a three-week-long tent encampment. The Palestinian-American academic Edward Said, author of *Orientalism* and one of the most prominent public intellectuals in support of Palestinian liberation, taught at Columbia for nearly four decades, until

[1] This text incorporates firsthand testimony from many witnesses, including Ry Spada.

his death in 2003. His presence helped establish the university as an important node within pro-Palestine scholarship and activism, even as a vocal Zionist contingent within the student body and faculty pushed in the opposite direction. Through much of the twenty-first century, conflicts over Israel and Palestine marked some of the most visible and contentious activism on campus.

The cover of a pamphlet from 1968, showing one of the hundreds of demonstrators injured by police during the strike that year.

In 2016, the Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) coalition linked together an array of different student organizations in support of Palestinian liberation. The coalition helped to bring about a referendum on divestment in 2020. The proposition passed with a majority of votes from Columbia College students, but then-President Lee Bollinger ignored it, and the coalition went dormant.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Student Workers of Columbia union campaign and strikes absorbed much student energy over the following years. But pro-Palestine activism remained a critical fault line on the divided campus.

Within days of the October 7 attack, large demonstrations in support of Israel and in support of Palestine took place on campus and just outside of it. While the majority of the politically active student body stood for Palestinian liberation, an active pro-Israeli student minority with strong alumni support received the solid backing of the administrations of Columbia and Barnard. Over the following weeks, administrators cancelled pro-Palestinian speakers and events and censored a faculty webpage that attempted to post a pro-Palestine message; graduate students who conveyed pro-Palestine messages to classes and students faced censure. An activist who got into a scuffle with a former IDF soldier was arrested and charged with a hate crime; by contrast, two Zionists who sprayed an Israeli-developed stink chemical onto dozens of pro-Palestine demonstrators at a campus event were merely suspended, despite the attack sending one person to the hospital. In November, after a walk-out, art installation, and die-in protest on campus drew hundreds, a Columbia administrator suspended Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP), claiming that the groups had violated campus event policies. Outraged faculty held a demonstration in support, while a revitalized CUAD soon incorporated over 100 different campus organizations, including the 3000-strong student workers union.

The groups that joined the coalition reflected a wide range of political perspectives and ethnic and religious backgrounds, tapping into a diverse range of the campus's social networks. These would be instrumental in the struggle to come.

Participants in Columbia's graduate worker union demonstrating during the previous round of protest activity at Columbia.

The Calm before the Storm

As late as Tuesday afternoon, the campus was locked down, support for Palestine was not visible anywhere, and a Zionist student group had a table set up in the center of campus with no opposition. It was dispiriting. But behind the scenes, furious preparations were taking place.

We are told that at first, the organizers had set a goal of starting the encampment when they had commitments from more than two hundred participants, but they were only able to confirm a little more than a hundred. On the morning of the occupation, when it was time to set up the

tents, numbers had dropped to about sixty. There was internal disagreement about whether to go ahead with the plan right up to the last minute. But fortune favors the brave.

Wednesday, April 17

At about 4:30 am on Wednesday morning, students flowed onto the East Lawn with camping supplies and determination. By dawn, dozens of tents covered the grass. A banner addressed those on their way to the library: "While you read, Gaza bleeds." The Muslim participants held their first morning prayers at 5:45.

The East Lawn on Columbia University campus on Wednesday, April 17.

As Columbia President Minouche Shafik sat before right-wing politicians in Washington, DC attempting to prove that she was sufficiently committed to repressing any sign of support for Palestinian liberation, hundreds of students occupied the space and marched in a picket around the fenced-in lawn.

On Wednesday afternoon, the area around the encampment became a field of debate, as campers and picketers exchanged barbs with small clusters of Zionist counter-protestors.

"Terrorists go home! Rape is not progressive!"—"Shame on you! Shame on YOU!"

"Israel is a terrorist state!"—"Raise your hand if you know Hamas kills Palestinians!"

"This is a shameful, shameful moment in history that we will never forget!"—"Release the hostages!"

"Resistance is justified!"—"This is not resistance!"

Whenever the picket line and chants slackened, the trolling would intensify. As marchers paused briefly to get lunch, the counter-protestors launched into a painfully off-key rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner. Through the small sound system, campers blared Mohammed Assaf's anthem "Ana Dammi Falastini" ["My blood is Palestinian"]. The struggle to hold the camp was sonic as well as spatial.

Around 3:30 in the afternoon, a light rain began to fall, and organizers zipped up the walls of the central white canopy tent. Reports arrived that access to campus through the main gates at 116th Street had been entirely shut off. Student members of the University Senate arrived with an update that the administration had agreed that they would not attempt to evict the encampment until the following day in order to provide time for negotiation.

Having little reason to trust the administration's words, organizers worried that the promise was a pretext to induce the encampment to let its guard down and slacken the picket and occupation, paving the way for an easier sweep. They saw the closing of the university gates and the questionable promise not to raid as elements in a slow kettling of the encampment. In response, they encouraged supporters to post up nearby in dorms and libraries and remain on call. As one undergrad organizer put it, "Lasting through the night required a certain tact. We needed the students to surround us."

The administration sent representatives to negotiate. In the first round, they offered a "non-binding, university-wide divestment referendum"—an unimpressive offer, since the university had refused to take any action after a similar referendum passed at Columbia College in 2020 with 61% of the vote. Employees from Columbia and Barnard handed out leaflets urging the protesters to disperse, threatening "interim suspensions," apparently a new form of discipline. Perhaps in response to the multiracial and BIPOC-led encampment, which contrasts with the

white-dominated and socially segregated norm on Columbia's campus, the administrations sent "women, mostly Black, in pencil skirts, and men of color in two-piece suits—the 'Public Safety Diversity Pamphlet Remix,'" one organizer observed archly.

Around 7 pm, the administration issued an ultimatum to clear out by 9, threatening arrests. Tense negotiations continued. The University Senate refused to sign off on bringing the NYPD onto campus, which is required according to the formal procedures established in the aftermath of the 1968 protests, though organizers doubted that the administration would honor them.

The university offered some concessions. They promised to disclose the financial ties between Columbia and Israel and to offer amnesty to the campers if they left before 9. Presumably, the goal was to make it easier to carry out a raid targeting whoever remained. "They wanted us to decrease in numbers so they could fuck us," growled one organizer afterwards.

The administrators tried to play hardball, insisting they wouldn't negotiate further. The occupiers stood firm. Students from a range of religious and political backgrounds insisted on their commitment to the movement. Some echoed the sentiments of a JVP member who spoke at the rally the next morning: "My Jewish values demand that I take this stand against injustice." Another student organizer explained: "We don't fear the NYPD or Columbia. The only thing we fear is Allah."

As the deadline approached and organizers reached out to their networks, scores of messages circulated the campus. The trickle of supporters from nearby dorms and libraries became a flood. By 9 pm, a massive picket encircled the entire encampment, the supporters linking their hands and arms, with three different chants going. The deadline passed, but the numbers were growing, not shrinking. Students knelt to pray, songs resonated over the lawn, spontaneous dancing broke out. New tents arrived to complement the dozens already set up. "They said they would sweep at 9—where the fuck are they?" wondered one camper. At 10 pm, rumors spread that NYPD had mobilized in riot gear outside the gates, but the crowd held strong.

In the end, the size and spirit of the camp proved too much to evict that night. At 10:44 pm, organizers got word that the administration had been forced to abandon plans for a sweep. The camp survived the night.

The East Lawn on Columbia University campus on Wednesday, April 17.

Thursday, April 18

Thursday morning arrived gray and chilly with intermittent rain. Manhattan's Upper West Side was abuzz. NYPD vehicles swarmed the streets surrounding the campus. Inside the camp, organizers busied themselves with logistics, managing food donations and keeping the camp clean; "This is not our land, this is Lenapehoeking," anti-colonial participants emphasized. They made plans for the day's activities: a rally and walkout at noon, lunch and art-making at 2 pm, a teach-in on labor and Palestine at 3, a vigil later on. But around 10 am, while reports were arriving about a massive police force assembling nearby, three Barnard organizers who had taken public roles received notice of their immediate suspension from school and eviction from their dormitories.

A fiery rally got underway. One of the suspended organizers took to the microphone: "It is an honor to be suspended for Palestine. It is an honor to be evicted for Palestine. And if it comes to that, it will be an honor to be arrested for Palestine."

Four converted school buses fielded by NYPD arrived on Amsterdam Avenue. Cops blocked the subway exit closest to campus. Three surveillance drones buzzed overhead. While some still couldn't believe that the administration would violate the policy against NYPD incursion that had held since 1968, it was becoming clear that a raid was imminent.

As afternoon arrived, participants who had agreed to face "red" levels of risk huddled at the center of the East Lawn in the center of the field of tents, while others joined the march encircling the encampment. Around 1 pm, a phalanx of NYPD officers entered campus from the 114th Street gate next to Butler Library with truncheons and zip ties. Some people linked arms and attempted to obstruct police from reaching the lawn; but few were willing to take this step, and the police shoved past those who did. As hundreds screamed in rage, officers calmly took up positions around the lawn, blocked off any exit, and began blaring an order to disperse on threat of arrest for trespassing.

Police enter Columbia campus on Thursday, April 18.

A captain yelled at two green-hatted legal observers standing near the seated circle of campers to get back. When they answered that they had a legal right to observe, officers arrested them.

At 1:28 pm, the officers began zip-tying the students and hauling them off. A ferocious wall of protestors looking on from outside the lawn screamed, cried, filmed, and chanted "Shame!" Round after round of occupiers were led out through a tunnel of police to 114th Street, shouting out their names and information to legal supporters hovering at the edges with notepads as the throngs bellowed at the officers and sang hymns of praise to the arrestees. By about 2 pm, over a hundred people had been hauled off; the East Lawn was strewn with abandoned tents but empty of campers.

Police and university facilities staff walked across the lawn, disassembling and bagging up the tents. A crowd of hundreds remained on the other side of the fence around the lawn, furious but unsure where to direct their energy. Some surged off the campus and reassembled at 114th Street and Amsterdam, attempting to block the four NYPD buses carrying arrestees. Eventually, the busses escaped by driving the wrong way down one-way 114th Street to Broadway and headed downtown. Dozens of people clustered in noisy solidarity demonstrations on both sides of 116th Street. As word spread throughout campus about the raid, more and more students, faculty, and others crowded into the center of campus.

At this point, around 2:30 pm, some students spontaneously took a step that proved decisive. A few people scaled the low fence surrounding the entirely empty West Lawn, just yards away from the evicted East Lawn. "Come on!" yelled a couple of voices, then a chorus. "Hop the fence! Everybody onto the West Lawn!" Within minutes, a line of dozens of students sat in the center of the lawn facing the evicted space, arms linked, singing and chanting. Organizers quickly called for the amorphous crowd to reform as a march encircling the new lawn. Someone dragged a tarp out onto the grass. Before long, flags were planted and banners were laid out on the new space. Something new and unpredictable was brewing. Would it last?

Most of the NYPD officers had melted away as soon as the tents and blankets had been hauled away from the former encampment site on the East Lawn. A facilities employee with a forklift quickly covered the grass with large pallets of the supplies used to construct the temporary flooring that will be set up for the Commencement ceremonies in early May. Campus Public Safety staff still thronged the space with some NYPD presence, and drones still buzzed overhead, but the officers no longer stood tense in preparation to hold lines. They stayed away from the West

Lawn, and emboldened students swarmed the grass. Within hours, an entirely new encampment had taken root.

Across town, a large contingent converged to do jail support for the arrestees. Before midnight, everyone had been released; they had not received criminal charges, but simple $250 citations, with no bail required. As night fell, they emerged from lockup to a cheering crowd offering snacks, drinks, hugs, and updates.

While the mass arrest frightened many people, it outraged and emboldened others. Protesters kept chanting for hours, while a ring of students holding hands continued to march around the growing presence in the West Lawn. As night began falling, many hauled in sleeping bags, blankets, and more tarps. There had been some previous discussions for a contingency plan regarding what to do after the eviction of the original encampment; but amid the chaos, organizers scrambled to decide how to respond to this organically emerging sequel.

There was a palpable determination to hold space. On receiving indications that the NYPD would not be called back in to sweep the West Lawn provided students did not set up tents again, dozens of students decided to curl up and sleep out in the open air. Despite the eviction and the arrests, a Palestinian solidarity camp held strong for a second night, just yards away from the original.

Police seizing the East Lawn on Thursday, April 18.

Reflections on Thursday's Events

This encampment marked the first protest some of the participants had ever experienced, and the first experience with police repression for many more. Here, one experienced participant shares reflections on the day.

One of the most significant factors shaping how the struggle at Columbia has unfolded since the beginning of the encampment on Wednesday is the restriction of physical access to the campus. Columbia's Morningside campus itself is relatively small, just four short blocks by one long block; the perimeter is comprised of walls and iron gates. An archway over Amsterdam Avenue connects to additional campus buildings and the law school in another linked area of two square blocks. Barnard College, Columbia's sibling institution on the other side of Broadway, is similarly compact, forming a rectangle one block long by four blocks wide, fenced in with even fewer entrances and exits, though those with Columbia and Barnard IDs can freely enter either campus.

Beginning last fall, after large and contentious pro-Palestine demonstrations and Zionist counter-demonstrations took place on campus, the university began selectively restricting access to campus by locking nearly all the access gates and requiring people to swipe an active ID card at a reader staffed by private security guards. This has been an immensely unpopular move across the board, on account of both the inconvenience it creates and the Orwellian police state vibe it imposes.

From last October when the university instituted the policy until this week, the access restrictions were only in place for a few hours at a time, or at most a day, timed to coincide with planned demonstrations on campus—sometimes, according to administration emails, based on NYPD intelligence. However, on the Monday before the encampment was launched, the administration announced that the restricted access policy would be in place *the entire week,* intensi-

fying resentment across campus. These policies were strictly enforced throughout the week. At one point on Friday, the guards at some entrances began visually comparing cardholders to the photographs on the cards they presented in hopes of preventing people from sharing their IDs. While this strategy has not succeeded in completely excluding unauthorized rebels, it has dramatically reshaped the terrain of student struggle and its relationship to the broader movement for Palestinian liberation across the city.

We can imagine that in the future, more and more campuses will resemble Columbia today: locked down with access almost totally restricted to cardholders (or controlled via more advanced biometrics) and hyper-surveilled inside the gates. While this will remain impossible at campuses that are integrated into urban centers such as NYU, we can expect that geographically concentrated campuses will increasingly adopt this model, especially in response to student unrest. In this context, it's worth considering how to strategically approach the relationship between authorized and unauthorized rebels.

Throughout the conflict, police and security attention and the most stringent restrictions on access have concentrated on the entrance at 116th Street and Broadway. Less used entrances, while still protected by card readers and guards, often see little traffic, with only one or two unarmed rent-a-cops staffing them. A determined group that moved quickly could easily enter en masse. They would be vulnerable to surveillance once inside, but once they reached the crowd, they could probably blend in.

That said, since the confined and surveilled space limits tactical possibilities, assembling unauthorized rebels probably only makes sense in high-stakes moments, when more experienced crews could tip the balance and open up a wider range of possibilities. Had even a dozen rebels with tactical skills and experience working together been present during the raid on Thursday, things could have unfolded differently. Outside of such moments, however, there's no reason for a non-occupational movement to be tied to one specific area. Both students and non-students have more mobility and flexibility off campus, not to mention a broader array of options for taking action and connecting with others.

A march outside Columbia campus.

The almost complete restriction of participants in the encampment to Columbia and Barnard students helps to explain the distinctive treatment that the arrestees received from the NYPD. As horrifying as the raid was, it was abundantly clear that the police had been strictly commanded to handle the students with kid gloves. Apart from some brief shoving and scuffles, they didn't hit anyone, and no injuries were reported at the time, although apparently one arrestee who fainted did not receive immediate medical attention. [*Update: it has since been reported that one protestor suffered a broken wrist during their arrest by NYPD.*] Indignant claims by student organizers in the aftermath about the "violent" arrests notwithstanding, in my many years of interacting with police at demonstrations, I've never seen them display this kind of timidity in the course of carrying out arrests. In one peculiarly tender moment during the raid, a slim young person being led off the lawn with their hands zip-tied said something to the officer leading them, who reached forward and gently pushed their glasses back into place on the bridge of their nose.

Similarly, after arresting the participants, police and university staff carefully went through all of the tents one by one, disassembling them, placing them and the strewn belongings in plastic bags, and loading them into a truck; they have since sent messages confirming that a process is in the works to return students' confiscated property. Compare this with the way NYPD officers

treat the tents and belongings of the unhoused after sweeps of homeless encampments in the city, for example.

Many witness accounts and some press coverage described the invading cops as wearing "riot gear." Presumably, these observers have never seen a genuinely militarized police response. The officers who conducted the arrests did not have shields. They wore very little body armor. None displayed the capacity to fire tear gas canisters, rubber bullets, or flash-bang grenades. Some had visors and helmets, but many were in standard uniforms. By contrast, some cops in more formidable riot gear were located off campus; they have been present at some of the demonstrations outside the walls.

All media accounts and police statements to the press report that no one resisted arrest. In fact, a number of people went limp and refused to cooperate; police dragged and carried them away gently, compared to the usual treatment of arrestees. It seems to have suited everyone's narratives not to define this as resistance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many NYPD officers were annoyed at having to "babysit" the rebellious students. The police's own media narrative emphasized that the camp and its participants posed no danger and offered no resistance. The fact that even the NYPD have tried to distance themselves from the decision to carry out the raid indicates how much social power, media attention, and public sympathy the students are perceived to have.

In this context, we can reflect on other possibilities that could have unfolded that afternoon. The universal outrage provoked by the raid and the subsequent retaking of space on campus have shifted the advantage back to the movement, so the mass arrest was not a defeat in a broader sense. But the unique situation offered by the strong limits of police tactics could have enabled fiercer resistance.

At several points, some participants outside the "red" team awaiting arrest on the lawn had the opportunity to engage police more directly. For example, as the squad of arresting officers approached from 114th Street to enter the lawn, a few linked arms and invited others in the crowd to do so, so as to obstruct the police from beginning the operation before they could establish control of the space. Had a crew of even ten to fifteen been ready to lock down to the gates or form a firm line to block the police, it could have bought time for more participants to join the encampment, forcing the police and administration to rethink their plan of simply sweeping out passive occupiers.

Likewise, while the police were prepared for a large arrest, they were nonetheless substantially outnumbered by the participants. If rather than conceding the lawn to those anticipating arrest, the crowd had set the goal of preventing any arrests from happening, they might have swarmed the East Lawn en masse in numbers that would likely have exceeded NYPD's mass arrest capacity, at least for a time.

Of course, we recognize and respect that different people are willing and able to take on different degrees of risk. But considering that a large group of people had decided that they were prepared to be arrested, it is worth considering how to employ that risk tolerance to achieve the maximum results. By sitting in a circle and waiting to be hauled off, the arrestees created a photogenic spectacle, crafting an appealing narrative about peaceful campers dragged off by fascist cops at the beck and call of the tyrannical university president. But if the campers who considered themselves "arrestable" had deployed their risk levels in an attempt to prevent or at least obstruct the eviction rather than accepting it as inevitable, they could have created a less

predictable situation in which the hundreds of others present could have taken on active roles themselves, rather than being relegated to serving as spectators.

Once the arrests began, those who were looking on could have reconvened at *both* ends of 114th Street in order to block the buses from leaving. Since this tactic would have taken place outside the gates, it would have enabled us to draw on larger and more experienced crews from around the city, perhaps immbolizing the police and spreading the conflict to a broader terrain.

Of course, it's easy to speculate thus in retrospect. We mean no criticism of the organizers, the crowd, or the courageous arrestees. But as Palestinian solidarity encampments and occupations spread across the country, we anticipate that many more will confront situations like these in the coming days and weeks. We offer these reflections in hopes that others can consider in advance how they might act in similar situations.

One thing to emphasize is the urgency of acting *quickly* when opportunities appear. Whether it's a walkway on which only one officer is telling people to turn back, a tent just out of reach that could be snatched back across the fence before the police grab it, or a new patch of territory that remains undefended, these possibilities may only open up for a matter of seconds. Police and other mercenaries go into these situations with orders from above, anticipating a predictable situation; presenting them with a surprise of any kind can completely change their calculus, shifting the balance of power.

The bold decision to occupy the West Lawn exemplifies this. It was significant, first, because holding physical space has proved to be a critical element in focusing the energy and attention of the movement on campus. Countless demonstrations have taken place at Columbia since October, but however energetic and well-attended they were, all of them dispersed within a few hours, conceding both the physical territory and the initiative to the administration, which ratcheted up repression by targeting the participants after the fact. By contrast, holding territory has compelled all sides to confront the fact of the ongoing genocide; it has drawn many more people into the movement, creating a new cross-pollination between campus life and protest activity. To the extent to which the administration cannot distinguish between the student body as a whole and the protesters, everyone involved is safer.

The occupation of the West Lawn unfolds.

In the decision to occupy the West Lawn, it was strategic to open up a gray area between risk and arrest. When the participants in the encampment were threatened with arrest, they sorted themselves into distinct roles—some arrestable, some not. This presented the police with a legible situation. On the other hand, once people hopped the fence, they entered an undefined zone in which their courage and creativity could rapidly transform the decisions facing the authorities. At the beginning, when people first stormed the West Lawn, they immediately sat down—signifying, it seemed, a willingness to be arrested. But once a critical mass of people began to use the space for other purposes, creating an ambiguous situation, new horizons opened up. The move to the West Lawn was successful because it was unplanned, rash, passionate. It defied the expectations of the administration and police as well as many of the organizers and protesters. None of the parties involved knew what would happen, so none could contain the possibilities.

Finally, the immediate reestablishment of an occupied zone successfully leveraged an asymmetry between the protesters and the administration when it came to their vulnerability to negative publicity. The administration had decided to arrest the participants who refused to disperse from the encampment, and the police had prepared to do so. But even though the police had the material capacity to do far worse, neither the administration nor the police were prepared to

bear the negative consequences of going further. The students regained the initiative by taking advantage of the fact that the authorities were already risking bad press, which could be magnified exponentially if they overreacted in an unpredictable situation. This turned what could have been a devastating defeat into a pivot that built the movement's momentum.

Columbia campus on the morning of Thursday, April 18.

Friday, April 19

It's Friday afternoon, and we're sitting on a green tarp on the occupied West Lawn surrounded by a festive swirl of resistance. At least three or four hundred people are thronging the West Lawn of Columbia's campus. The crowd is mostly undergraduates, with growing numbers of grad students, faculty, alumni, and others. Most are sitting, though a few dozen circulate or cluster in small groups. Perhaps half are masked, many sport kaffiyehs, and nearly as many are wearing hoodies, sweats, or caps with Columbia or Barnard logos. A dozen large Palestinian flags dot the landscape, along with many more small ones; the original banner reading "Gaza Solidarity Encampment," rescued from the wreckage of the original occupation on the neighboring lawn, now stands proudly on plastic poles held up with duct tape, only a bit smeared from rain. If the Columbia administration expected that ordering a full-scale New York Police Department raid would quash or dampen the resistance, they could not have been more wrong.

We'd arrived a few hours before, laden with bags of bagels and takeout containers of rice and curry. As we stepped up to the open gate to the West Lawn, a smiling student in a kaffiyeh stepped into our path.

"Hey there, we're here to drop off some food in support," we explained.

"OK, cool," they responded. "Are you Columbia students, or alumni, or what?"

"Yeah, we are."

"What part of Columbia are you from?"

Each of us mentioned a school or department.

"OK, cool. You pass the vibe check. Come on in!"

Having made our way through the whimsical "security" at the open gate, we proceeded onto the lawn.

In a corner of the northern end, a couple dozen student organizers are sitting in a closed planning meeting. An outer ring stands holding sheets, towels, and banners to obscure view of their deliberations. Passersby approach the fence in a continuous stream to take pictures or film, some with clearly hostile intent and others with ambiguous aims. A surveillance drone buzzes overhead ceaselessly; a helicopter growls by periodically. Although one of the gates to the lawn has been opened (if you're willing to brave the "vibes" vetting), so many people are still hopping over a closed section of the fence at the opposite corner of the lawn that a volunteer is posted there with a folding chair to assist.

People looked surprisingly relaxed, given the previous day's events. Most of them are smiling; a few have that manic, electric, slightly dazed look that I associate with participating for the first time in some sort of revolutionary upheaval. I remember the first glimpses into a new world we experienced in our first protests and occupations—the FTAA, Occupy Wall Street, the George Floyd Rebellion—and wonder how these students will remember these days in the years to come.

Some sleep or read and plenty look at phones, but most are actually talking to each other. Every conversation I hear around me is about action. Knots of first-year undergrads debate strategy and try to anticipate how the university will respond; adjunct instructors share reports about the arrestees with graduate teaching assistants; friends give updates about those suspended; multiracial clusters of sophomores tease out the parallels and differences between anti-Semitism and anti-Blackness. Insofar as we can venture a guess based on visual cues, the gender balance seems heavily skewed towards women, femmes, and nonbinary folks. Erotic cultures are on display—hand-drawn cardboard signs declare "Dykes For Divestment" and "Bottoms For Boycott"—but the vibe doesn't feel charged in a sexual way. It's chill and friendly, with an undercurrent of rage and determination.

Some people wearing media credentials circulate, taking pictures or approaching individuals for interviews, but without the aggressive intrusiveness common to mainstream media. Some people hand out fliers, books, and pamphlets, but this doesn't create the impression of sectarian parties swarming with cult literature that I've experienced at many Palestine solidarity demos. One of the interesting consequences of the university authorities converting the campus into a fortress and excluding all outsiders is that the culture of the encampment is an extension of the culture of the campus.

Overheard: "No Taylor Swift in the liberated zone!"

On the microphone at the south end of the lawn, a succession of speakers keeps up the energy. A fiery woman in a green dress leads impassioned chants, alternating between Arabic and English. Representatives from nearby universities make their case for solidarity across campuses. An organizer from the Amazon Workers Union gives a rousing speech and pumps up the crowd with chants: "SHUT IT DOWN!" A young woman in a black headscarf wanders from tarp to tarp asking if anyone wants a cough drop or Advil. Barnard enbys in Carhartts studiously scrawl signs with fat sharpies. Someone giggles as they imitate how a friend strutted out of jail after their release.

A friendly graduate student on a blanket near me strikes up a conversation:

"How are you doing, brother?"

"Pretty good, how about you?"

"Awesome, but I'm pretty tired."

"Were you here all night?"

"Yep. Are you just getting here?"

"We were here yesterday too."

"I've been here since Tuesday night. Yesterday was really something, huh?"

"Yep. Heartbreaking to see all the arrests, but super inspiring to see everyone swarm onto this lawn afterwards."

"Yeah, I know! When we were in jail yesterday, we had no idea people were going to do that. It wasn't even planned. Then when we got out and we heard that people had taken this space—we were ecstatic."

"You think folks are going to stay?"

"Oh, definitely. If it starts raining, I think people will put up tents again, regardless of what the administration says—fuck them! There's no way I'm going anywhere." He snuggles into a sleeping bag.

In every space of freedom opened in the course of struggle, however temporary, one of the most important steps is to establish a revolutionary commons through which resources can reach people outside the logic of capitalism, profit, and private property.

Word is circulating is that the administration has promised not to call NYPD back in, provided the students don't set up tents. Many participants are expressing a deep-rooted determination to stay until evicted. At the same time, the university is going forward with assembling the bleachers that they plan to use for their commencement ceremonies—which are just a couple of weeks away. There's no way they'll allow this assembly to remain here while they are trying to confer degrees. Another conflict is coming, though whether it will involve another mass arrest remains to be seen.

Beyond the immediate environs of the occupied lawn, the campus is mostly deserted. As we stroll across an empty courtyard en route to a bathroom, two young NYPD officers walk past us. They look surprisingly timid beneath their affected swagger. "Fuck you," my friend hisses as they pass by. After a beat, one of them replies sarcastically, but softly, "Have a nice day." After yesterday's raid, both NYPD and campus cops are keeping a lower profile.

Celebrities have taken an interest. Cornell West came just after the arrests and spoke to the crowd at the newly occupied West Lawn. Susan Sarandon turned up outside the gates to show support. Camera-hungry vultures, I grumble, but these sightings really do seem to generate excitement and boost morale.

Cornell West speaking on the West Lawn.

We chat with a professor we recognize. A group of faculty from various departments held open office hours to meet with students out on the lawn earlier in the day. Everyone is having emergency meetings, from academic departments to the UAW-affiliated student workers union to the students at the professional schools. Dozens of statements are circulating, editorials are being written, call-in and mass email campaigns are underway: a flurry of relentless activity.

Somehow, Gen Z has learned the "people's mic" from the Occupy era. Between speakers, we all repeat after an organizer who spells out the "community agreements": no drugs or alcohol, don't engage counter-protestors, "We do not police each other but we also keep each other safe," clean up after yourselves, eat the food if you're hungry. A tarp in the center of the lawn offers a surprisingly well-organized array of sandwiches, bagels, Indian food, granola bars, waters and sodas, and a continuously replenished stash of other snacks and supplies.

As the evening approaches, word circulates of an emergency general body meeting for the union. Nearly 150 people turn out on a couple hours' notice. The conversation is impassioned: *Should we do a walkout? What's the legal status of a wildcat strike? Do the suspension of student workers who were arrested at the encampment constitute an unfair labor practice that can be the basis of a legal strike? What other forms of escalation are possible? Where are the faculty at? With such a short time left in the semester, what would be impactful?* The vast majority agree: striking is on the table. A walkout is planned for Monday. Will the faculty join us? Will this university just shut down?

"Disclose, divest—we will not stop, we will not rest!" Rebels in kaffiyehs dance enthusiastically, others bang on pots. In a thick sleeping bag next to me, the student who got out of jail last night sleeps angelically.

The encampment on the night of April 18.

Midnight, April 19–20

Midnight, on the seam of Friday night and Saturday morning. The crowd is even larger, five hundred or more, and the energy is defiant and festive. A large cluster on the south end of the lawn continuously dances, cheers, drums, waves flags, sings. At one moment, dozens lift up their phones with their flashlight apps blazing like lighters and sway in a circle. Despite the constant cheers and ruckus, dozens have already bunked down in sleeping bags and under piles of blankets. Others wander, chatting excitedly or gathering up trash.

An hour ago, a breakaway march of fifty or people circled outside the gates; we heard about one arrest. A graduate student from the union wanders from tarp to tarp, canvasing people to gauge how much support there could be for a wildcat strike in different departments. A knot of undergrads discuss the day's events; one rattles off a list of other universities where solidarity encampments are popping up, awe tingling in her voice. It feels like we are collectively stepping through a door into the unknown. Something big, bigger than we can imagine. The university thought it could break our spirit of defiance and crush our experiment with Palestinian solidarity.

But today has made it undeniably clear: this is just the beginning.

The encampment on the night following April 18.

Appendix I: The View from Outside

Most people never have the opportunity to attend prestigious institutions like Columbia or Barnard. We offer a perspective from one such person, in order to emphasize the importance of non-students in the struggle for Palestinian solidarity and against the university administration.

I arrived at Columbia on Friday evening around 6 pm. All day, I had been listening to live reporting on WKCR, the Columbia student radio station. Every few minutes, the reporters announced which metro stops were barricaded and which were open, along with the location of the winding street demonstration and announcements from the lawn encampment. My body was buzzing, my energy fueled by the constant stream of information. I had to make it uptown. I found a friend to join me.

As I approached campus, the situation became clear. The front gates are directly adjacent to several metro stops. The NYPD probably recall the anti-fare-hike protests of 2019, during which protesters took over the subways; they may even know about the Chilean students whose subway protest catalyzed an uprising that same year. Dozens of NYPD were gathered outside the main gates of campus, some in riot gear, adjacent to a demonstration of about 200 people in a "protest pen." Most of the demonstrators appeared to be non-students, primarily young people, while about ten students were hanging over a wall about one story above the crowd, waving a massive Palestinian flag. They were reaching down from the ivory tower, doing their best to connect the protests inside and out.

The gulf between the two was stark. I had heard that entrance was limited to students, but I had not understood that Columbia is essentially a fortress. Like the fenced-in protest pen outside, the campus had been turned into a semi-sanctioned protest zone surrounded by police. Granted, this was also the result of the determination and defiance of the students, whose protest has obstructed the daily operations of the campus.

To enter campus, students had to pass through tightly controlled entrances manned by Columbia campus security, hired security from Allied Universal, and NYPD officers. I watched police turn away a group of students carrying sleeping bags and tents. We heard a rumor from inside that the administration would not bring NYPD in to sweep if the students did not set up tents. "The NYPD hates tents." They remember Occupy.

All the other gates to the main campus, which spans several city blocks, had been locked with chains and bike locks. There were few ground-floor windows, and many of them were covered in burglar bars. This did not stop dozens of groups of people from wandering the vicinity. Some spoke on the phone with their friends inside the campus, peering through cracks in doors without handles to describe what they could see inside, in desperate hopes that those within would be able to find the doors and open them. Others waited outside unguarded doors, or pointed at the skybridges, windows, fences. As the hours passed, many of these groups vanished. I began to see holes in the fences, open windows that were near enough to the ground that one might be able to climb to them. Other people were sweet-talking the guards, scanning borrowed ID cards, circulating the locations of possible entrance points. The fortress proved penetrable, though the security details were growing before our eyes.

Let's talk about the distinction between student and non-student, which is so important to the university administration and the NYPD. On Thursday, the administration had suspended students and brought in police to arrest them for "trespassing": in effect, they were equating "protester" with "non-student." But this attempt to quash the protest failed; the existential threat only catalyzed more students into solidarity. Growing in response to repression is a vital sign—a strong indicator that a movement will not back down.

Thwarted, the administration and police shifted to tolerating the protest, so long as there were no tents—and *no outsiders.* Having failed to purge the student body of protesters and accidentally blurred the lines between students and non-students in a way that turned people against them, they sought to reestablish and re-legitimize that division by imposing it from the opposite direction. That is why the NYPD is stationed outside the metro and the university gates: to prevent the influx of non-students.

In surviving the attempt to evict it, the encampment at Columbia has become a symbol of the courage and determination of the movement in solidarity with Palestine. As long as it persists, it will inspire demonstrators elsewhere around the country to expect more of themselves, too. But as we have seen in previous movements, the only way for a movement to persist is for it to grow.

There are three ways that the movement occupying the West Lawn can grow. First, it could continue to draw in more elements of the student population within Columbia. Second, it can proliferate to other universities; already, students at Yale and other universities are organizing occupations of their own. Third, and most importantly, it can grow by overflowing the boundaries that separate academia from the rest of society.

New York City has seen some of the most robust, sustained, and sophisticated protests against the genocide in Gaza, most of which have not been organized by students. In previous movements on Columbia campus, such as the building occupations of 1968, non-students played a crucial role.

This is why the most important boundary to overcome is the distinction between *inside* and *outside.* As long as a strict separation remains between students and non-students, between **included** and **excluded,** those who wish to act in protest will have to choose between a venue in which any action will be seen as possessing social legitimacy but must be undertaken by highly surveilled students who consider themselves to have a lot to lose, and a space outside the walls

where more forms of action are possible but less is at stake in terms of perceived legitimacy and the power to disrupt. ***The solution is to tear down the walls.***

Appendix II: A Handout

This text was distributed at Columbia.

1. This is about stopping the genocide in Palestine.

2. Both political parties are fundamentally committed to supporting the genocide.

3. To the extent that commitment might waver, Israel is prepared to drag the US into war with Iran, and this might look like a better and better option for one or both political parties.

4. So this movement to stop the current war on Gaza has to consider that it may have to become the movement to stop the war that is coming to distract us from the war on Gaza.

5. At the same time, even the liberals, the scholars of bureaucracy, are telling us that the US political system is on a terminal collision course with the November election. This is the spring before the fall.

   Once again, we are told to dutifully support the lesser of two evils. But now, choosing the lesser of two evils amounts to choosing which PR campaign you prefer to justify the absolute evil of genocide. There is no lesser of two absolute evils. The logic of the two-party system that has deceived us for generations has finally reached its end.

   Under these circumstances, this movement could be our last chance to open up some other possibility before something even worse than democracy is imposed on us.

6. The question facing all of us now is how to stop the genocide in Palestine. But the only possible answer to this question involves asking how to stop the war machine that is the economy, how to stop the political system that is the war machine, how to stop the universities that are the political system, how to stop it all before it kills more. How to tear it down and not let it build back better. If we dig just a bit into our collective memory, we've had some practice with this.

7. Recently, we've seen small groups of people paralyze metro areas for hours using simple blockade tactics.

   What if these tactics of grinding traffic and commerce to a halt spread to the scale of the George Floyd uprising? What if we blocked everything? For Gaza and for whoever is next in their sights? For the earth and for the people who come next? For each of us, so that we can live with dignity, knowing that we have done what we swore we would do if ever it came to that?

8. What happens if we stop everything? Could it really be worse than keeping it going? Could an apocalypse that resulted from our not working to feed the war economy really be worse than the apocalypse that is being created—in Gaza, the ocean, the atmosphere—by our working lives? These are not abstract questions. It really has come to this.

9. In the last week, we've seen the tactic of occupation spread across university campuses at a rate that we can only compare with the Occupy movement over a decade ago. During the fall of 2011, we witnessed and helped to build something we thought was impossible. We are once more witnessing and helping to build the impossible.

   Blocking everything for Palestine demands that we rapidly create a set of options for life that are currently beyond the bounds of what is realistic—which really just means "what the police will allow."

10. For decades, the Israeli military has trained and been trained by US police departments. Palestine is about everything because Palestine is the model for the cop world they are building everywhere. This is our moment to rise to the task of defeating it.

Anonymous, CrimethInc.
“It Is an Honor to Be Suspended for Palestine”
Dispatches from the Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University
April 21 2024

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