

I

“Not Free to Be Completely Human”

Leo stands and invites the rest of us to do the same.¹ We push back our small, plastic chairs. About forty of us rise in the circle, acknowledge each other with small nods, and join hands. Witness Against Torture has gathered at Saint Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Washington DC. It is the first week of January 2014. People are now entering the fifth day of their fast. Many have bundled themselves with scarves and hats. Those wearing orange jumpsuits have packed layers of wool and down under the iconic outerwear, preparing to stand for hours in front of the White House in what is certain to be a freezing drizzle.

The room is necessarily large for all that it must accommodate. Rectangles of butcher paper scribbled with colorful notes line the back wall. There are lists of team members and their requisite tasks, words, and shapes from direct action planning. A ten-foot plastic folding table is set up for letter writing – letters for the Guantánamo detainees to be delivered through attorneys, letters for various politicians demanding due process for the prisoners. Against another wall there are props for street theater: an assortment of cardboard signs, two sets of folded military fatigues, other cardboard props. A queen-size bed sheet with a large portrait of detainee Shaker Aamer painted in black acrylics has been rolled up carefully. Against another wall are more plastic folding tables holding laptops, various electronic chargers, a camera case, and detachable lens. This is “media headquarters,” where appointed photographers and those who compile the daily email to the listserv sit late into the night, quietly editing

¹ Leo is a pseudonym. Throughout this study, I intersperse the use of pseudonyms and actual names. Many activists in this study were open and even eager to have their identity shared. Due to the size of their groups, it is very difficult to render them fully anonymous, most specifically from other group members. While I have done my best to protect identities from public recognition, there are two situations in which I relinquish pseudonyms altogether. The first is when drawing upon published or otherwise public documents. The second is when a participant explicitly asked to be named.

and uploading photos and video, corresponding with allied organizations and journalists, collecting relevant media coverage. A tall stack of books constitutes the lending library. Titles range from classical tomes of the activist left to theology and political theory, as well as books written by friends of the group. The prospect of reading such dense and despairing content about US militarism, torture, Guantánamo, or the prison industrial complex without having had a proper meal in days astounds me.

Where the room snakes around toward the bathrooms and small kitchen, more folding tables have been set up with all manner of liquid nourishment: fruit and vegetable juice, a continually brewing electric coffee pot, an assortment of teas and hot cocoa, and bouillon packets. As it is now early morning, sleeping rolls and personal belongings have been locked in a storage room while the group leaves for the day.

We hold hands, a shared warmth. Leo needs no microphone; his confident Bronx accent always offers structure to the space, its tenor calm, the words clear. He issues a rallying cry before the group leaves the church and makes its way out into the city. This recitation is less rehearsed than Leo’s spoken word performances, but it still reverberates as poetry.

I’m not free while racism and militarism do what they do. I’m not free to be completely human. That makes me linked to crazy oppression ... I feel really strongly that I am fighting for liberation. John Brown was not *just* fighting on behalf of slaves. Our liberation is bound up in each others’.

Leo brings the circle to a close with the famous words of Lilla Watson, an Australian aboriginal activist and artist who became well known in the 1970s: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

When Leo asks the group to stand together, he speaks to the vision of solidarity that Witness Against Torture adopts. Like the other groups in this study, Witness Against Torture holds foremost a commitment to make injustice visible and to testify to the conditions of the aggrieved. These activists engage in this practice, what I term *solidarity witness*, not solely because they oppose the state-mandated suffering of others but because they believe their own fates are intertwined with the targets of state violence. For some, this is a theological principle. For most, it is a moral commitment, a practice to produce the kind of world they wish to create.

INTRODUCTION

This study explores what it means to engage in a practice of ethical witness as an expression and instantiation of solidarity across cavernous divides of wealth and power. At the onset of the twenty-first century, global inequality and militarized social control are both targets of protest and practical challenges for social movements seeking to enact solidarity across borders (Kurasawa 2007;



FIGURE 1.1. WAT Protester
Photo credit: Justin Norman

Robinson & Barrera 2011). More specifically, contemporary US security policies have become an important focus of resistance even as they present significant obstacles to transnational solidarity (Butler 2009; Pease 2009). In the face of these daunting realities, US residents like the members of Witness Against Torture engage in collective resistance to the US security state by imagining and enacting solidarity with some of those who are tortured, detained, murdered, and exposed to life-imperiling conditions at the behest of the US government. This study proceeds through an ethnography of three distinct but similar protest groups: (1) School of the Americas Watch, which seeks to close the military training facility at Fort Benning, Georgia; (2) the Migrant Trail Walk, part of the US–Mexico border justice movement; and (3) Witness Against Torture, a grassroots effort to close the Guantánamo Bay Detention Center. Often rooted in theologically informed cosmologies, those involved in these campaigns understand “bearing witness” as their foremost means of standing up to state violence and forging solidarity with those who lack the practical freedoms to advocate for themselves. For the activists in these groups, this practice of solidarity witness is also a means to disavow and disinvest in the systems of dominance that show up in their own lives in complex and damaging ways.

In the face of structural violence and injustice, aggrieved communities have long generated alternative epistemologies and decolonial practices. Among these are what Paula Ioanide (2015) terms “epistemologies of ethical witness” – ways of seeing, feeling, and being that expose the contradictions, injustices, and violence of the neoliberal state. Examples of ethical witness include the Black Radical Tradition (Robinson 1983), Borderlands epistemologies (Anzaldúa 1987), the self-determination of Palestinians in exile (Said 1992), and the Chicana/o Movement (Blackwell 2011). This project builds on this idea of witnessing as an important form of resistance, exploring how it is used to contest the US security state.² Distinct from previous scholarship, however, this study identifies the emergence of a political practice among relatively privileged groups acting in solidarity with the aggrieved, rather than among those conventionally thought to be the most acutely violated by US security policies. Through this practice of “solidarity witness” social movement participants utilize resistant modes of seeing and being seen to respond to political injustices that do not most immediately impact them.

Avery Gordon (1997) suggests that the impact of “Capitalism and State Terror” might be understood as a “haunting,” in which “structures that appear

² In terming these instances of witness, I draw from Ioanide (2015). None of the authors cited above was centrally preoccupied with the concept of “witness” per se. In fact, there have been limited theoretical or empirical investigations of witnessing as an organized social movement effort (Kurasawa 2007; Givoni 2013). There is, however, a vast literature on witnessing as the necessary but imperfect response to socially orchestrated suffering. Most of this work tends to respond to the German Holocaust (Felman & Laub 1991; Oliver 2004; White 2004; Derwin 2012). While this important body of literature informs my own understanding of the term *witness*, it is not centrally referenced.

removed from us make their impact felt in everyday life” (19). This manner of haunting shows up in complex, riddling, and sometimes counterintuitive ways. It is destructive not only to the most directly violated but also to those who are asked not to see or feel the degradations of this system. Through engaging in solidarity witness, those who are generally thought to enjoy certain privileges along with a socially structured ignorance – white, middle-class social groups from the Global North – refuse to ignore or offer consent to conduct they deem unacceptable and indecent. Rather, they make an effort to recognize and respond to the US security state by making its violence and injustice visible and undesirable to themselves and others. Through this study, I address two central and intertwined questions. First, I ask how these movement groups imagine and enact solidarity across the divisions of power and reverberations of violence that organize today’s global society. Second, I seek to better understand the political avenues available for those seeking to disrupt the status quo of the US security state.

This chapter begins by explaining how I arrived at this topic of study and briefly describes its case studies and the methodology. Next, it elaborates on the neoliberal US security state as the impetus for these campaigns and narrates a brief history of the radical pacifist lineage from which these groups emerge. It then turns to some basic parameters of solidarity witness and situates this political practice within more traditional approaches to social movement studies before previewing the chapters to come.

COMING TO THE RESEARCH

The seeds of this research project were planted during the five years I spent involved in immigrant rights activism in Poughkeepsie, New York; Zacatecas, Mexico; and Denver, Colorado between 2005 and 2010. During this time, I began to think through what it means to be in solidarity with those who are under the thumb of the state in a way that I have not directly experienced. Through my organizing experience with those who shared similar concerns and commitments, I realized that many came to their work as solidarity activists for reasons of faith or religion. Because my own orientation was decidedly secular, I was at first surprised by this. Yet I quickly found that the kinds of practices that these predominately Christian activists pursued, including pilgrimages through the desert, solemn ritual, and creative civil disobedience, were emotionally evocative and meaningful in a way that more traditional protest and policy work did not feel to me. I wanted to understand why that was. Why were these somewhat unusual forms of political expression so much more appealing, transformative really, at least by my own barometer?

My first real exposure to this kind of activism was when I joined the Migrant Trail walk in 2007. I lived in Colorado at the time and was part of a group of US citizens advocating for the rights of unauthorized immigrants. This group was loosely affiliated with Quaker traditions and had supported the Migrant Trail since its inception. I had never been to the US–Mexico border

and believed the walk, as daunting as it sounded, would be an important way for me to learn more about migration policy while allowing me to connect with activists who had been doing this work for longer than I had. My first time on the Migrant Trail walk was one of the most transformative experiences I had had as an activist. In subsequent years, as I established myself in Colorado as a full-time employee of a nonprofit organization committed to immigrant rights, I returned to the Migrant Trail every May to remember and mourn the dead, reconnect with the border justice movement, and nourish myself for the social justice struggles ahead. There was something particularly sustaining about this week of action. I had completed the Migrant Trail three times when I chose to take it up as a topic of research during my first year of graduate school.

The research itself proved somewhat grueling; administering surveys and conducting multiple interviews with exhausted activists, their clothes caked with desert dirt and dust, added a level of challenge to the already difficult walk. What I was able to document and assess was well worth the effort, however, allowing me to begin to consider the importance of embodied witness to the work of solidarity activism (Russo 2014). I had stumbled upon a kind of political practice and a target of activism – which I term the US security state – to which I wanted to give more attention. In the end, I decided I would choose two more group events that were similar to the Migrant Trail in three important ways. First, the activists involved across the three groups are predominantly white, middle-class, faith-driven practitioners of nonviolence. Second, each group engages in similar tactics, including fasting, pilgrimages, civil disobedience, and ritual protest. Third, the iterations of state violence that each group contests are tied to the neoliberal US security state and its military-carceral expansions from the end of the Cold War through early Free Trade Agreements and concomitant border enforcement and into the “War on Terror” following September 11, 2001.

This project, then, proceeds through an ethnography of three activist communities, broadly from the Christian Left, that protest the racialized violence of the US security state against Latino migrants, Muslim detainees, and communities and social movements throughout Central and South America. Part of what unites these groups is their loose connection to a common lineage of radical pacifism, though this is something I discovered through the research process and not why I initially selected each case. My data collection, elaborated in the methodological appendix, has included days and sometimes weeks of participant observation with each group, forty-nine semistructured interviews with activists, fifty-four surveys, and an archive of hundreds of courtroom statements from the trials for those who have committed civil disobedience. Here is a brief overview of each case.

School of the Americas Watch

Between the early 1990s and 2015, School of the Americas (SOA) Watch activists convened every November to participate in workshops, marches, and

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planned civil disobedience in an effort to close the SOA, a US military training school for soldiers from South and Central America.³ Formed in 1990, SOA Watch has linked SOA graduates to nearly every coup and major human rights violation in Latin America since the school's inception (Nepstad 2004). The SOA was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC, or WHINSEC) in 2001 after grassroots pressure and public outrage about these practices led Congress to nearly defund the school. Iconic of the US security state's transnational militarism, the SOA/WHISC continues to be a site where US and Latin American elites collaborate to suppress dissent against neoliberal policies that impoverish and structurally abandon the majority of the world's populations. Lesley Gill (2004) argues that central to the SOA/WHISC's operations are pedagogies that indoctrinate Latin American soldiers in the logics of the US security state and the interests of a transnational capitalist class.

Migrant Trail Walk

During the annual Migrant Trail, approximately fifty activists spend a week walking seventy-five miles through the US–Mexico borderlands to oppose migrant deaths and the growing militarization of the border. The Migrant Trail began in 2004 to respond to ever more draconian border enforcement measures initiated by the United States in the mid-1990s that have spurred a wave of migrant fatalities that number well into the thousands. Scholars contend that the public obsession and mass investment in preventing unauthorized migration points to “a global immobility regime” wherein “surveillance and control over migrants” is undergirded by cultural politics in which affect figures centrally – “a new xenophobia as part of a modern culture of fear [and] the paradigm of suspicion” (Turner 2007: 290). Leo Chavez (2008) explains that by the logics of today's US security state, Latino immigrants, particularly those from Mexico, are treated through the frame of supposed “illegality,” as if they are already criminal, illegitimate, and undeserving of social supports. David Hernandez (2005) describes this condition as “lesser citizenship” in which race and immigration status combine to render immigrant communities doubly vulnerable to incursions from the state and vigilantes.

Witness Against Torture

Witness Against Torture (WAT) formed in 2005 when twenty-five activists decided to travel to Cuba in response to the first major publicized hunger strike being undertaken by the detainees at the Guantánamo Prison. Since their return, Witness Against Torture participants convene every January in Washington DC for a week of protest, fasting, and communal living to oppose the indefinite

³ Beginning in 2016, SOA Watch changed their annual convening to the US–Mexico border at Nogales, Sonora/Arizona. A more complete account of SOA Watch follows in Chapter 2.



FIGURE I.2. In 2013, a few thousand SOA Watch participants gathered at the gates of Fort Benning
Photo credit: Chandra Russo



FIGURE 1.3. In 2015, fifty-nine Migrant Trail participants completed the walk, here pictured in the Buenos Aires Refuge with Baboquivari Peak in the background
Photo credit: Eric O. Ledermann

detention and torture of the Guantánamo prisoners. Guantánamo took its current form in 2002 as a detention center for so-called enemy combatants captured in Afghanistan as part of the “War on Terror,” a far-reaching foreign and domestic policy response to the attacks of September 11, 2001. Amy Kaplan (2005) argues that Guantánamo traces a long and sordid history that positions it at “the heart of the American Empire” (832; see too: Paik 2010). At this US naval base in Cuba, the earlier territorial conquests that marked US imperialism in the twentieth century have been consolidated into a key military-carceral apparatus of the current US security state. The military prison is situated in a US-occupied space in Cuba, with a history of quarantining Haitian migrants, and is now an infamous location for the indefinite detention and torture of racialized Muslim and Arab bodies.

A BRIEF NOTE ON TERMS

The groups in this study use different terms to explain what they perceive as their distinct roles in the social movement landscape. SOA Watch and Witness Against Torture, for instance, call their groups *movements*. The Migrant Trail, by contrast, understands itself as part of a larger movement, which I term *border justice*. An accompanying feature to this distinction is that whereas SOA Watch and Witness Against Torture each organizes multiple actions, gatherings, and strategies to advocate for their issue, the Migrant Trail is the most patterned and constrained, conducting one week of action, once a year. The Migrant Trail and WAT, however, are similar in that they resist the label and form of “organization,” which some SOA Watch participants more readily adopt. SOA Watch, as distinct from the other two groups, has been around for more than twice as long, has hemispheric reach, and does at this time have paid staff, office spaces, and other resources.

The vast literature on movements and organizations defines these concepts in ways that do not always accord with the language used by activists. The term *movement* continues to be ill-defined, and scholars have defined a *social movement organization* as everything from a very formal group arrangement with written rules and paid staff (McCarthy & Zald 1977; Kriesi 1996) to a very loose association of people with common ideals about how society should be organized (Lofland 1996).⁴ When SOA Watch and Witness Against Torture use the term *movement*, it is as a descriptor indicating political resistance with clear objectives linked to a history of similar struggles, which these groups understand to also be social movements. I suspect all three groups understand the term *organization* by the most formal definition, including paid staff,

⁴ Hanspeter Kriesi (1996) suggests that organizations require membership criteria, written rules, and paid staff, to name but a few basic parameters for his typology. John Lofland (1996) defines movement organizations quite differently, as human groupings excluded from mainstream society that advocate for certain social arrangements on idealistic or moralistic grounds.