



# GLOBAL RACIALITY

EMPIRE, POSTCOLONIALITY,  
DECOLONIALITY

Edited by Paola Bacchetta,  
Sunaina Maira, and Howard Winant

*New Racial Studies*  
The University of California  
Center for New Racial Studies



# Global Raciality

*Global Raciality* expands our understanding of race, space, and place by exploring forms of racism and anti-racist resistance worldwide. Contributors address neoliberalism; settler colonialism; race, class, and gender intersectionality; immigrant rights; Islamophobia; and homonationalism; and investigate the dynamic forces propelling anti-racist solidarity and resistance cultures. Midway through the Trump years and with a rise in nativist fervor across the globe, this expanded approach captures the creativity and variety found in the fight against racism we see the world over.

Chapters focus on both the immersive global trajectories of race and racism, and the international variation in contemporary configurations of racialized experience. Race, class, and gender identities may not only be distinctive, they can extend across borders, continents, and oceans with remarkable demonstrations of solidarity happening all over the world. Palestinians, Black Panthers, Dalit, Native Americans, and Indian feminists among others meet and interact in this context. Intersections between race and such forms of power as colonialism and empire, capitalism, gender, sexuality, religion, and class are examined and compared across different national and global contexts. It is in this robust and comparative analytical approach that *Global Raciality* reframes conventional studies on postcolonial regimes and racial identities and expression.

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## **New Racial Studies**

The University of California

Center for New Racial Studies

This series of research publications focuses on the shifting and contradictory meaning of race in the aftermath of the massive racial upheavals that followed World War II: civil rights, anti-apartheid, major demographic shifts, decolonialization, significant inclusionary reforms and expansions of political rights on the one hand, combined with reinvented but still extremely deep-rooted patterns of structural racism, racial inequality, and “post-” imperial formations on the other hand.

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# **Global Raciality**

**Empire, PostColoniality,  
DeColoniality**

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Howard Winant**

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CHAPTER 10

**Solidarity Protests on US Security Policy**  
*Interrupting Racial and Imperial Affects  
Through Ritual Mourning*

CHANDRA RUSSO

**The School of the Americas Watch Vigil**

The 25th anniversary of the School of the America Watch's protest is being marked in 2014 at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia. Over 1000 gather on a chilly November morning for this year's vigil. The weather is less forbidding than it often has been; the rain comes in fits and starts. Many wear ponchos and galoshes. A few have thought to bring umbrellas. Children huddle under adults' umbrellas; a few brave ones stomp about in puddles when the drizzle lets up.

Every November these activists convene for a protest vigil, often accompanied by civil disobedience, in an effort to close the School of the Americas (SOA), a US Army training school where tens of thousands of Latin American soldiers and military dictators have been trained as foot soldiers of American imperial interests throughout the Western hemisphere. SOA Watch, which first formed in 1990, has linked SOA graduates to nearly every coup and major human rights violation in Latin America since the school's inception (Nepstad 2004).

When I arrive at the vigil, about ten people command the stage, singing and drumming. The performers are racially diverse—black, white,

Latino, Asian. A spoken-word artist declares, “We gather in the non-violent tradition of Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Aung San Suu Kyi.” Another poet decries corporate greed, the destruction of indigenous communities throughout Latin America, the disregard for Mother Earth and the North American “Trail of Tears.” While the original members of SOA Watch were a group of predominately white Catholic North Americans who had spent ample time living and working in Latin America, today’s crowd of protestors is much more diverse in terms of age, race, faith background, and organizational affiliation.

When it is time for the procession to begin, SOA Watch founder, Father Roy Bourgeois, a Vietnam veteran turned pacifist Maryknoll priest, now 76 years old, takes the stage. He explains that 26 years ago, on November 16, 1989 at the University of Central America, 20 or so Salvadoran soldiers, most of whom trained at the SOA, assassinated six Jesuit priests along with their housekeeper and her 14-year-old daughter. This massacre was only one of hundreds perpetrated by SOA graduates who have received training, weapons, and financial support from the US government since the 1980s. However, the Jesuit murders were a moral atrocity sufficient to ignite a transnational political movement. SOA Watch protesters gather at Ft. Benning every November to mark the anniversary of this tragedy and to call for the closure of the school.

The crowd is silent, holding white crosses marked with the names of the dead. It is time for the solemn funeral procession to begin. Father Bourgeois descends from the stage to lead the protesters, flanked on both sides by torture survivors, families of SOA victims, and fellow SOA Watch organizers. They hold up pictures of the murdered Jesuits and silently, slowly, walk through the multitude. Behind them follow tens of participants shrouded in black, their faces painted in macabre whites and grays. These are the “mourners.” Some carry long slabs covered in black fabric, representing coffins.

The rest of the nearly 1000 protesters fall into line. The routine is familiar to most. About ten people take turns on the stage announcing the names and narrating the stories of the dead. Among the litany of names are SOA victims, those killed by the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, civilians killed in US drone strikes throughout the Arab world, and black Americans killed by the police. At the end of each name, the crowd sings “¡presente!” in the same haunting tones protestors have voiced here for a quarter century. The ritual allows only an hour or so to read the names, hardly enough time to speak of all the known victims, much less the many unknown casualties. For each name and story, thousands remain unmentioned and untold.

## Introduction

The annual vigil at Ft. Benning is *the* quintessential action of SOA Watch, one of the three social movement communities examined in this chapter. These groups, all broadly from the Christian Left, protest the racialized violence of US national security policy against Latino migrants, Muslim detainees, and indigenous workers in the Global South. The movement communities under study are: 1) School of the Americas (SOA) Watch, which is endeavoring to close the military training facility at Ft. Benning, Georgia; 2) the Migrant Trail Walk, part of the US-Mexico border justice movement; and 3) Witness Against Torture (WAT), a grassroots effort to close the Guantánamo prison. Through memorial rituals, these groups contest the imperial dimensions of US policy while crafting symbolically rich modes of solidarity with the racialized targets of state violence. Their memorial protests are social dramas, merging culturally salient and emotionally evocative appeals to the public in an effort to bring close the disappeared, murdered, and detained. In so doing they contest the “racial feelings and fantasies” (Ioanide 2015) that undergird state violence and posit dissident ways of knowing and being in their stead. They point to the cracks in a consensus behind state violence and work to expose the contradictions in the state’s national security.

Somewhat different from the rich scholarship on how aggrieved and targeted communities contest structural racism in the US, I examine a predominately white, middle-class cohort of activists from the Global North. These are solidarity activists, members of a social group that enjoys certain privileges and often a socially structured ignorance—which not all those with privilege choose to ignore. The activists described in this chapter believe that the racial and dehumanizing logics that buttress the national security state, if most acutely felt by the immediate targets of state violence, must also be understood as destructive to broad swathes of the American public. This chapter investigates how the supposed beneficiaries of empire might enact a political practice of anti-imperialism and anti-racism.

First is an outline of how racial affect undergirds the US national security state and an introduction to the cases of resistance in this study. It then turns to the repertoire of memorial rituals that these activists employ with an examination of the importance of public mourning, of shaping collective memory through civil disobedience, and of repurposing recognizable symbols and spaces. Through memorial rituals, these activists use recognizable elements of the dominant culture to mobilize emotions and moral attachments that challenge the status quo of racialized state violence. Their efforts intend “to change the balance of power by turning bystanders into upstanders” (Lipsitz 2011: 1472–73).

### The Cases: Contesting US Security Policies

Racial discourses and practices of “security” have long been central to the cultural politics of US state-making and its forms of violence. At the onset of the 21st century, racialized representations of the illegal immigrant, the terrorist, and the criminal are mobilized to encourage a sense of defensive patriotism and implicit consent for violence against populations both at home and abroad (Tyler 2013, Ioanide 2015). Central to the cultural potency of these figures is the circulation of affect, as political alliances and social formations are undergirded by powerful subjective sensibilities (Ahmed 2015). Yet these menacing portrayals must be deployed not because they reflect unanimous support for the US national security state but because such a state is riddled with contradictions. Sunaina Maira (2009) suggests that one way of understanding the contradictory and differentiated ways that those living within the US security state experience policies of racism and militarized social control is by attending to “imperial feelings.” Building on William A. Williams’ (1980) suggestion that empire is a way of life in the US, imperial feelings shape how US citizens and denizens come to see, know, and feel the ramifications of state violence.

This chapter investigates three communities of solidarity activists that expose such imperial feelings as ubiquitous and dependent upon racist logics. These solidarity activists critique both the racial demonization of the state’s targets while contesting the forms of invisibility and erasure necessary to maintain the status quo of US national security policy. The groups under study have responded to the development of US national security policies from the rise of neoliberal globalization at the end of the Cold War, through early Free Trade Agreements and concomitant border enforcement, and through the “War on Terror” following September 11, 2001.

Data collection has included: weeks of participant observation and 49 semi-structured interviews; fieldwork on the Migrant Trail in 2011, 2013, and 2014; research conducted with SOA Watch and WAT from 2013 until 2015, including attending each group’s annual gatherings twice;<sup>1</sup> and attending WAT’s planning retreat in 2014. I administered demographic surveys of the approximately 50 participants who take part in the Migrant Trail and WAT’s annual gathering in DC but could not collect representative survey data from the thousands of SOA Watch participants that converge annually on Ft. Benning. A final key data source is an archive that SOA Watch has maintained since the group’s origins in the 1990s, which consists of hundreds of courtroom testimonies by those tried for civil disobedience after crossing into the military base to protest the school.<sup>2</sup> A brief outline of the three cases follows.

*School of the Americas Watch*

This chapter opened with my reflections on the annual protest to close the SOA, which was officially renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) in 2001 after grassroots pressure and public outrage about the practices of the school led Congress to nearly defund it. However, SOA Watch protesters continue to use the school's previous name (SOA), resisting the notion that by simply rebranding itself the school has somehow changed its role in US imperialism. The SOA has become iconic of transnational militarism, enacted under the guise of global security. The US and foreign allies violently suppress dissent against neoliberal and imperial structures that impoverish and structurally abandon the majority of the world's populations. Further, Lesley Gill (2004) argues that central to the SOA's operations are pedagogies that indoctrinate Latin American soldiers in the cultural politics of the US security state. Students at the SOA are taught "racist, anti-indigenous reasoning" (Gill 2004: 55) as a logic for eradicating democratic alternatives to US-dominated, militarized, capitalist accumulation throughout the Western Hemisphere. In line with long-standing colonial ideologies about the role of Europe, and now the US, in poorer, Third World nations, soldiers trained at the SOA are taught that those brutalized by military operations in Central and South America deserve such treatment because they are barbaric others that threaten progress or, sometimes, uncivilized innocents in need of saving.

*Migrant Trail Walk*

During the annual Migrant Trail, approximately 50 activists spend a week walking 75 miles in 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 US in the mid-1990s that spurred a wave of migrant fatalities. Between 1997 and 2013, 6000 bodies were recovered in the US-Mexico borderlands, and many more are likely never to be found (Martínez et al. 2014). Scholars suggest 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). Hernández (2005) suggests that these racialized cultural politics coalesce with state policies to produce the condition of "lesser citizenship." Immigrant communities residing in the US are removed from state protection, their race and immigration status produced and exploited as "intertwined vulnerabilities," making them

“susceptible and at times defenseless against incursions on their fragile constitutional status” (Hernández 2005:1).

The border justice movement emerges from two activist lineages in Tucson, Arizona, that have worked together since at least the 1980s, if not always seamlessly. One of these lineages is that of Mexican American and Chicano/a activists who have been involved in ethnic solidarity work with Mexican immigrants since the early 1900s. The other lineage is of white, Christian activists—specifically Presbyterian, Catholic, and Quaker—and emerges out of the Central American Solidarity movement of the 1980s (Van Ham 2011). Participants in the Migrant Trail, and certainly its core organizers, are a racially mixed group. However, the majority of participants, on the whole tend, to be white and female.

### *Witness Against Torture*

Every January about 50 members of WAT convene in Washington DC for a week of protest, fasting, and communal living to oppose the indefinite detention and torture of prisoners at Guantánamo. They are usually joined by hundreds more allies at their January 11 mass action, that usually begins in front of the White House. Guantánamo first took its current form on January 11, 2002, when a group of Afghan men were captured abroad and flown to the prison by the US government, inaugurating the long-standing military base as an indefinite holding site for “enemy combatants.” This legally unprecedented category, which replaced that of prisoners of war, was created by the Bush Administrations at the onset of the War on Terror. It was a far-reaching foreign and domestic policy response to the September 11, 2001, attacks on US soil that created a legal state of exception in defiance of international human rights law. Amy Kaplan (2005) suggests that “Guantánamo lies at the heart of the American Empire” linking “earlier imperial formations based on a nation’s conquest” with “today’s more dispersed forms of globalized power unanchored in particular territorial domains” (832; also see: Paik 2010). The military prison is situated in a US-occupied space in Cuba and has a history of quarantining Haitian migrants. It is now an infamous location for the indefinite detention and torture of racialized Muslim and Arab bodies. Building on Said’s (1994 [1978]) now foundational arguments, many scholars observe that the global War on Terror depends upon deeply Orientalist assumptions that conflate Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern peoples into the singular category of “potential terrorists” (Volpp 2003, Bayoumi 2009). Of the 780 men who have been or continue to be held at the military prison, *all* have been Muslim and the vast majority have been Arab.

Witness Against Torture formed in 2005 to respond to the first major publicized hunger strike being undertaken by the detainees at

Guantánamo. Original WAT members were all part of the predominantly white Catholic Worker network, living in faith-based, intentional communities, offering aid to the poor while advocating for systemic change. The notion of ministering to the prisoner is an important principle in the Catholic Worker movement, and most of the original members had spent ample time in jails and prison for their civil disobedience. For these reasons, the group decided their first act should be to actually take a trip to Cuba, to respond bodily to the physical cry for help being issued by the prisoners. Since its inception, WAT has faced years of near-victories and crushing defeats but has maintained an unwavering solidarity with the Guantánamo prisoners and a continued commitment to exposing the imperial logics that keep the prison open. Though still majority white and Christian, the group has become more racially and religiously diverse over time with people of color, Muslims, and atheists playing important leadership roles.

### *Memorial Ritual*

The solidarity activists across these groups use public memorial rituals as a challenge to dominant racial logics. While rituals often serve to uphold hegemonic social relations, social movements can also imbue dominant identifications and practices with subversive meaning. Such a strategy exemplifies Joane Nagel's (1996) concept of "turning hegemony on its head," deploying the tools of the powerful in ways that are legible yet subversive, that expose the contradictions and fragility of dominance. Religion provides activists with one such array of symbols, stories, and traditions that can be crafted into repertoires of dissent.

For these activists, Catholic Worker and Protestant lineages of radical pacifism merge with Liberation Theology, a tradition first popularized by Latin American Catholics in the 1950s that includes a faith-based focus on ameliorating poverty and addressing the root causes of social suffering (Smith 1991). However, the protest rituals that these groups perform are not strictly Catholic, Christian, or religious. They appeal to other traditions, such as the indigenous ceremonies on the Migrant Trail, as well as to secular values of social justice, US ideals of democracy, and universal humanism, for instance.

The US national security state is predicated upon narrow ways of seeing and remembering, knowing and feeling the imperial and racial affects that maintain the status quo. Through the subversive use of culturally salient traditions and visually evocative symbols and spaces, the solidarity activists in this chapter dramatize the national security state's contradictions and evoke collective emotions that counter dominant racial feelings and fantasies.

## Public Mourning

The Migrant Trail begins in Sasabe, Sonora, Mexico, one mile south of the US border. In 2011 Sasabe had become one of the most well-trafficked launch spots for migrants about to make their way through the Altar Valley toward Tucson. This is where the majority of migrants were crossing and dying, evidenced by the number of human remains recovered in the US border patrol's Tucson sector (Martínez et al. 2014). On Memorial Day, Monday, May 30, 2011, when 50 Migrant Trail participants, myself included, along with perhaps 100 more supporters, arrive in Sasabe during the early afternoon, the town appears quiet. A few mangy dogs walk the streets, but there is hardly a towns person in sight. The locals have taken sensible refuge from the temperatures, which hover above 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

We embark on the journey after a lunch of homemade tamales and a short ceremony in Sasabe's humble church. After a sermon, some readings, and songs, the Mexican priest, nuns, and congregants, carry three coffins—each painted with a cross of blue, pink, and white—out of the church, followed by the walkers. Two large coffins represent the men and women who have perished in their attempt to reach work and family in the United States. A small coffin signifies the children who have tried to cross with them. The silent procession makes its way through the town and up to the border fence and official port of entry, a journey of a mile on a dusty road.

Most of us hold wooden crosses, painted in white and selected before leaving Tucson that morning. Some carry a cross with a name and age scribed in black. Others carry crosses that hold the designation “desconocido/a,” signifying human remains discovered in the desert that could not be identified. The loved ones of “desconocido/a” will never know what happened to their family member or friend.

Nearing the border, the group approaches a billboard posted by the Mexican government warning potential crossers of the dangers of the desert: dehydration, overheating, and death from exposure to the elements. We pass a group of young Latino men, likely in their late teens, sitting in a cluster by the side of the road with their small backpacks. They wait for nightfall when they will cross to the east or west of the border fence. The faith leaders in our group go to them with rosaries and blessings for their passage. This group of men is not particularly unique, though their presence is an impactful reminder of why the Migrant Trail takes place. They seem receptive and grateful for the offering, though it is impossible to know their thoughts or feelings on this formidable occasion.

Migrant Trail organizers have explained their week-long walk as an act of remembrance, “a journey of peace to remember people, friends and family who have died, others who have crossed, and people who continue to come. . .[bearing] witness to the tragedy of death and to the inhumanity

in our midst” (participant packet). Dave, a social worker in his sixties who has done the walk regularly since its inception, compared the Migrant Trail to a funeral: “it’s like a funeral procession in the sense that we do it to honor the people who have died in the land that we’re walking on.” Referring to the history of the US-Mexico border, he reflected on the need to mourn this “tragic piece of our country’s history, that we have treated our neighbors to the South in the way we have. . . first we stole their land and now we set up circumstances that encourage them to take risks that result in death.” Within the notion of the walk as a funeral, then, is embedded a sociopolitical analysis that understands first, settler colonialism, and today, neoliberal free trade policies as instigators of the racial and national violence that needs to be contested and the deaths that need to be mourned.

The emotional remembrance that Dave identifies is central to the walk’s goals of contesting the dehumanizing logics of the racial state. Discussing the neglect and loss of migrants crossing the US-Mexico borderlands, Rocio Magaña (2008) argues that migrant deaths in the desert take place in “de facto exile”; because so many bodies are never found or returned to their families, the dead become “incomplete losses” (118). Efforts to recognize these deaths and remember those who have crossed are thus an important intervention. Rituals surrounding death serve many purposes, one of which is to signal to the living that those departed have social significance, allowing for grief and closure. Frantz Fanon (2008 [1967]) argues that under colonial rule, the racial subject is discursively and politically constituted as a non-human object to be feared, rather than a complex being deserving of the full range of human emotions. Judith Butler (2004) has built upon this to suggest that state violence becomes acceptable when its victims are not understood as worthy of mourning, a process of dehumanization that depends upon “the racial differential that undergirds the culturally viable notions of the human” (33). By granting perished migrants a basic dignity and acknowledgment, the Migrant Trail contests the public emotions of racial othering and condemns the state’s imperial violence.

Folklorist Jack Santino terms tactics of memorialization that maintain both grassroots origins and explicitly political aims as “performative commemoratives” (cited in Van Ham 2011). Performative commemoratives are not sanctioned by the state or any institutionalized religion; they are also distinct from individual funerals and encourage the involvement of the public at large. Further, performative commemoratives seek to “renarrate controversial deaths” (cited in Van Ham 2011: 129) that the popular media and dominant discourses have constructed as immaterial or deserved. Such rituals defy the public indifference and fear-laden logics that racialize the dead or disappeared as criminal others.

The solidarity activists in this study build upon a rich history of using funeral rituals to contest the public record, positing dissident ways of knowing and seeing state violence.<sup>3</sup> For instance, after the murder of 14-year-old black teenager Emmett Till in 1955 by white racists, his mother's choice to have an open casket funeral proffered the embodied proof of racial hatred, becoming an early turning point in the US Civil Rights movement. By creating structures for collective mourning in public space, these solidarity activists seek to reclaim the dead as important members of the social body. They contest the invisibility and exile to which non-white bodies are subjected, refusing the state's strategies of disappearing the fact of disappearance and dehumanizing racialized others.

### **The Courtroom and State-Sanctioned Memory**

Many solidarity activists engage in civil disobedience in order to bring their ritual mourning from the streets into the courtrooms, and sometimes into jails and prisons. For instance, SOA Watch calculates that since the late 1990s over 300 activists have been sentenced to jail, and sometimes prison, for "crossing the line" by walking onto the property of the Ft. Benning Army in their efforts to publicize the atrocities committed by SOA graduates. One of the ways activists understand the importance of civil disobedience is as a time to "speak truth to power" in the belly of the beast. Activists expose the secrets of the racial state and amplify the tragic impacts of imperialism. Through statements to judges, juries, and other bystanders, solidarity activists put the state itself on trial for the violence and injustice it instigates.

In speaking to the court, SOA Watch participants explain their ritual mourning as a way of contesting dominant modes of denial and forgetting, those that erase the realities of state violence. This is to reshape collective memory, understood here as the field of contested stories and meanings available to a group of people in making sense of their past (Durkheim 1995 [1912], Halbwachs 1992, Sturken 1997). Using the courts to explain their ritual mourning, these activists point to socially orchestrated and preventable suffering, helping audiences to make sense of the causes and impacts of injustice. Those who cross onto the Ft. Benning Base are tried in the US District Court in Columbus, GA. In 2006, Donte, a 19-year-old black man who had earned a prestigious scholarship to an Ivy League college only to be suspended for his activism with SOA, explained to the judge the importance of the annual protest at the gates of Ft. Benning:

We all know the hideously wretched history of the School of Americas. If anything, the protests at the WHINSEC military base act as candid retellings of the brutal and bloody history of repression and human

cruelty that has been happened (*sic*) at the hands of SOA graduates and continues to largely ignored (*sic*) by most Americans.<sup>4</sup>

In beginning with the words “we all know,” Donte refuses to believe the state’s claims to innocence or ignorance. He identifies that US imperial power is constituted by repressing knowledge of racial despotism and he voices the nation-state’s secrets for the public record. Speaking in a court of law, he also refuses to acquit the US public for ignoring a violence that they could contest. The “candid retellings” of history staged by SOA protesters are not necessarily first exposures but are the means to disrupt a norm of erasure.

Patrick, another activist then 21 years old, termed such erasure of imperial history “a case of obligatory amnesia.”<sup>5</sup> Speaking to the same court in 2003, he observed that for the state to charge activists who crossed onto the base as criminals required forgetting “colonial roots,” the removal and extermination of “indigenous populations throughout the Americas,” and a series of foreign policies that have systematically impoverished and oppressed the peoples of the hemisphere. Patrick concluded:

If these memories could present their case[,] a courtroom that thrives on an amnesia preserved in legal text would simply crumble under the pressure of justice. When we “crossed the line” onto Ft. Benning we acknowledged this fact and chose to unlock these trapped memories ourselves. Disobedience is our only democracy, our only memory, so long as the past exists only to rationalize a present world so uneven in its distribution of power and wealth.<sup>6</sup>

In linking disobedience, democracy, and memory, Patrick speaks cogently to the efforts of solidarity activists to shape forms of counter-memory. He names a lineage of settler colonialism, racism, and US militarism, pointing to the cruel irony of criminalizing activists for trespass in a nation built on theft and occupation of native territories. He demands that the scope of the dominant collective memory be expanded to include systematic injustices that did not originate during his own lifetime or those of his audience. He also makes an important distinction between justice and the law, identifying the state’s legal system as a site where the denial of violence is codified.

WAT has also sought to reveal the US security state’s contradictions by exposing the failure of the so-called justice system to administer anything but injustice to the men detained at Guantánamo. During mass civil disobedience undertaken in both 2007 and 2008, WAT participants did not carry their own identification but rather gave the names of Guantánamo detainees to their arresting officers. In so doing, they made a powerful commentary regarding the hypocrisy of the US justice system in the War

on Terror. Those held at Guantánamo have never been named, tried, or convicted in a US court of law, denied the basic due process rights guaranteed to all detained peoples by the US Constitution, specifically the writ of habeas corpus. WAT member Jeremy Varon explained:

What we tried to do is embed our argument in the action itself. . . The idea was to symbolically give detainees the day in court that they had been denied by the system. Entering them into the system is the platform for talking about the denial of this fundamental right of habeas corpus.

(cited in Grele 2011: 78–9)

Eighty were arrested in the 2008 action when WAT activists, dressed in orange jumpsuits, took over the steps of the Supreme Court. Thirty-one were ultimately brought to trial. On the occasion of their court date, WAT members once again staged a public event, dramatizing the reasons for their original civil disobedience. Dressed in orange jumpsuits and black hoods, group members solemnly walked from the Supreme Court to the Federal Court House where the case would be heard. Outside of the courthouse, those facing trial knelt while various speakers addressed the crowd. One speaker noted that those being tried understood that “in five months we have gone further in the legal system than these people have gone in seven years.” Some of those standing trial testified about who their detainee was, humanizing him for the audience of reporters, supporters, and other bystanders. Then, one by one, those kneeling took their hoods off and laid the name of each prisoner in front of what WAT members had erected as an “altar of justice,” a collection of culturally potent iconography, including large representations of the Constitution and the Magna Carta.

In telling the story of this day, Jeremy Varon reflected, “This is a press conference, but it is theater, and people are crying. It is a spectacle.” The story of the trial became front-page news in the *Washington Post*. Jeremy added:

The folks on trial have by now [been] de-hooded. They are no longer detainees—they are American citizens. . . The whole ceremony ends with this tableau where you see all thirty-one people. Some are Catholics with collars. They made the transition from a detainee, laid the name at the altar of justice, and now they are a citizen of the world standing up for what is right.

(Grele 2011: 78–9)

In this action WAT wielded their privilege as solidarity activists—US citizens who could shed the attire of indefinite detention; Christian

religious leaders with moral authority—in order to challenge the moral attachments and sense-making that undergird the national security state. They used an emotionally evocative visual drama to insist on the humanity of the abjected and racialized Guantánamo detainees and to demand the prisoners be afforded the basic legal protections that supposedly prevent the US government from imperial overreach. This action was particularly effective at challenging the continuing operation of a place such as Guantánamo because of the savvy use of symbolically significant public space and iconography, a tactical strategy that is explored further in the following sections.

### Visibility, Symbolism, Space

The scenes these solidarity activists enact in public space critique the dominant forms of seeing and knowing that undergird US security culture, offering participants and passersby alternative affective investments to those that maintain the racial status quo. One way this is accomplished is by repurposing culturally significant symbols and spaces, evoking images and ideas that the public can instantly and affectively recognize. In crafting visual messages of political dissent, activists turn hegemony on its head (Nagel 1996). They recast hegemonic symbols and spaces to generate compelling visual spectacles that are simultaneously resonant and rebellious.

Such a strategy became the only option for SOA Watch when the military erected an imposing metal fence at the edge of Ft. Benning after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Leah, a white woman in her early twenties who grew up in a Catholic Worker community, had been attending SOA Watch with her family since she was a child in the late 1990s. She explained how activists have responded to the fence, transforming it into a monument to victims of the school:

The fences turn into really a giant memorial to the people who have died at the hands of soldiers educated at the School of the Americas. So there's crosses with victims' names on it. There's flowers. There's pictures. There's just a beautiful, incredibly moving display in memory of people who have lost their lives there because of the graduates of the school.

SOA Watch protesters repurposed a built structure of the Army, one of the more tangible exemplars of radical divisiveness that they contest, into a site of collective mourning.

Another example of subversive symbolism is the white, wooden cross bearing the name of one of the dead that is central to the memorial rituals enacted by both SOA protesters and participants on the Migrant Trail Walk.

These crosses come from a decades-long lineage of faith-based resistance and demonstrate the centrality of religious iconography to the strategy of turning hegemony on its head. Since Vatican II and the spread of Liberation Theology, social movements throughout Latin America have repurposed the artifacts of Catholicism (Smith 1991). The cross is one such symbol that has been reimagined and rearticulated.

Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) discusses how activists in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, paint crosses to call attention to the murder of hundreds of women working in the maquiladoras that has gone unacknowledged by the Mexican State. In deploying such crosses, Juárez protesters introduce what Fregoso terms “religiosity” as a culturally salient way of grappling with “the trauma of the unrepresentable: death as the ultimate other” (21). Far from the institutionalized religion of the official church, religiosity becomes a grammar of resistance and a contrapuntal force to dominant ways of knowing and being, those that disappear the fact of disappearance. The crosses used by protesters at SOA Watch and on the Migrant Trail are not dissimilar. They attest to the fact of death and disappearance and insist that the US security state be accountable for its unspoken violence. Thus, while these crosses may resonate with a dominantly Protestant US public, they hail from a different tradition, that of Latin American Catholicism, and Liberation Theology more specifically. Positioning the cross in this history speaks to another level of resistance, an anti-capitalist Catholic movement from the Global South.

On the Migrant Trail, participants traverse the US-Mexico borderlands with these crosses emblazoned with the names of perished migrants. This is a symbolic way of allowing the dead to finish the journey they began. As participants walk from remote stretches of the desert toward the more trafficked Arizona highways and, finally, into Tucson, they hold the crosses high, announcing the presence of the disappeared in a public space. By carrying crosses along the road, participants also create a visual scene to which Americans have grown accustomed: the roadside shrine (Van Ham 2011). Though carried *en masse* by a group of people on the move, rather than being stationary at a given site, the carrying of crosses evokes a culturally familiar concept, a memorial to a traveler or travelers who died suddenly while on a journey. Migrant Trail participants seek to use their national, and often racial, privilege to challenge the social distance that so much of the dominant social order encourages. They wield their privilege to traverse militarized space without incurring harm as well as causing their privilege to be visible and vocal in a region where so many racialized subjects are forced into clandestine and deadly crossings. Their journey forcefully argues for a social collective that is not predicated on abandoning racialized outsiders to the point of death.

Another way that solidarity activists challenge the racial and imperial status quo is by moving through and occupying culturally significant space. The importance of place is inherently cultural, a dynamic that is particularly obvious at important national, religious, or cultural sites. The built environment becomes socially meaningful through people's collective actions and narratives. In his work on both pro- and anti-immigrant groups at the US-Mexico border, Lawrence Taylor (2007) defines moral geography as the cultural work of assigning symbolic significance to different places. Through culturally significant movement through, and actions within, space, Taylor suggests that social actors can become "moral entrepreneurs. . .conjuring the moral geography of the nation" (2007: 389). The solidarity activists in this study use memorial ritual in just this way, crafting new moral geographies that contest the distancing and racial chauvinism of US security culture.

One of WAT's more memorable inversions of the spaces of power was a performative commemorative action at one of the more commanding monuments in Washington DC. In June 2006 the US military reported the first deaths of Guantánamo detainees, suggesting that three prisoners had committed suicide (Risen and Golden 2006). In a 2010 article for *Harper's Magazine*, Scott Horton, an investigative reporter who had covered issues at Guantánamo for nearly a decade, cast doubt on the government's claims of suicide, suggesting that the detainees had been tortured to death.<sup>7</sup>

Faith was the reason WAT decided to undertake an action at the Capitol Rotunda in January of 2010. "One person said, 'this is what we should do. We should memorialize these men at the same place that our President was laid in a wake.'" Part of the affective power of working in and through the national monuments in DC can be explained by Robert Bellah's (1967) notion of a civil religion. Bellah argues that similar to Judeo-Christian religions, the US has a civil religion constituted by a series of "prophets and. . .martyrs. . .sacred events and sacred places. . .solemn rituals and symbols" that build on "Biblical archetypes" but are also distinctly national as opposed to Christian (1967: 18). The Capitol Rotunda constitutes one of the foremost sacred spaces of US civil religion. It is where deceased national heroes and other eminent citizens are given public viewings before burial, a ceremony known as lying in state. Indeed, painted upon the domed ceiling of the Rotunda, which soars up 96 feet, is *The Apotheosis of Washington*, in which George Washington is depicted as a divine figure. He sits in the heavens surrounded by important figures from classical mythology. WAT would memorialize the most degraded and ignored at a sacralized site reserved for the most honored and celebrated in nationalist mythology.

Jeremy Varon described the WAT action:

a group went to the rotunda at the very spot where dead presidents and Rosa Parks have lain in state. . .[they] put a death shroud with the name of the three guys who died in 2006, sprinkled orange flower petals on the shrouds, and got arrested.

(2011: 90)

He reflected on how turning hegemony on its head in this way held great affective and cultural impact. “To put the death shroud of detainees possibly murdered by the US government at the epicenter of a building officially called the Temple of Liberty. . .that is pretty friggin’ powerful” (2011: 91). The Rotunda action also epitomized Van Ham’s understanding of the performative commemorative as seeking to renarrate controversial deaths in that WAT members highlighted spurious claims of suicide at the military prison by taking their message to a national center of power.

## Conclusion

The US national security state is predicated on affective investments and fantasies. It requires that the public find a moral distance from the racialized targets of state violence. Those that are tortured abroad or in US military prisons, sequestered indefinitely without rights, and abandoned as they journey for survival must be dehumanized and ignored. To push against this is to demand of the state a moral accounting and to appeal to the various tendencies in the American public that have not been won over by an imperial consensus. By making those that their government abandons and violates more morally proximate, solidarity activists challenge the racist logics that delineate those whom the state must protect from those who can be abandoned or persecuted. Even if they are not always successful in achieving meliorist reforms, these activists seek to enact anti-imperial ways of seeing and being, to push for a different frame.

These solidarity activists leverage the tools available to them: collective memory; affect; culturally salient traditions; visually evocative symbols and spaces; and their racial and national privilege. These are, in some sense, “the weapons of the weak” (Scott 1987), not because they are wielded by those most acutely impacted by state violence but because a few hundred, or even thousand, grassroots activists seeking to take on a global security complex are not particularly powerful in any traditional sense of the political. Nevertheless, in their choice of tactics, social movements can reveal how society is governed, and how such governance functions in practice.

Ritual mourning confronts a system of structural racism that is undergirded by powerful affective investments. If these groups' most explicit aim is to expose the US "security" state and its forms of violence, their forms of protest reveal that state policies are only one piece of racial governance. The racist and imperial *feelings* that undergird dominance are also a pressing consideration. By positing morally and affectively compelling narratives that replace xenophobic and racist ways of seeing and knowing, these groups indicate that some of the work of solidarity in the racial state is to confront dominant racial affects, narratives, and fantasies. Ritual mourning accomplishes this, speaking back to power in a manner that is both legible and subversive.

## Notes

1. While I first encountered SOA Watch and Witness Against Torture as a researcher, I had participated in the Migrant Trail three times before beginning to conduct research on the walk. My involvement is thus different across the three groups, a point that importantly informs my research position, but is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate further.
2. These court documents offer a rich account of an important part of SOA Watch's history that is nevertheless far from complete. Information given about each "prisoner of conscience" varies a good deal and, in most instances, information about each activist, such as age, race, religion (or lack thereof), is only evinced by their words in the court record.
3. Of course, the political work of the funeral can bolster the racial state, as Michelle Martin-Baron (2014) shows in the case of the US military funeral, a performance that upholds "the US war machine," eliding the various forms of racial abjection that constitute current military practices, ranging from violence against foreign populations to racialized domestic recruitment practices.
4. <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/pocs/153-court-statements/1255>
5. There are no documents that reveal Patrick's racial identity. As opposed to Donte, whose race is discussed in various news stories and public documents, Patrick's race goes unmentioned.
6. <http://www.soaw.org/about-us/pocs/153-court-statements/598>
7. "Salah Ahmed Al-Salami, from Yemen, was thirty-seven. Mani Shaman Al-Utaybi, from Saudi Arabia, was thirty. Yasser Talal Al-Zahrani, also from Saudi Arabia, was twenty-two, and had been imprisoned at Guantánamo since he was captured at the age of seventeen. None of the men had been charged with a crime, though all three had been engaged in hunger strikes to protest the conditions of their imprisonment. They were being held in a cell block, known as Alpha Block, reserved for particularly troublesome or high-value prisoners." See more at: <https://harpers.org/archive/2010/03/the-guantanamo-suicides/>

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