

# **Witness Against Torture, Guantánamo and solidarity as resistance**

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*Abstract:* The Guantánamo Bay detention camp is a quintessential structure of the US national security state and contemporary Empire. For such imperial formations to proceed as if they are 'normal' requires solidarity from various publics. This paper explores what it means to refuse such solidarity through an ethnographic examination of Witness Against Torture (WAT), a group of US citizens enacting solidarity with the men detained at Guantánamo. WAT's tactical repertoire intervenes in three ways. The Guantánamo prison is not supposed to be seen, but WAT travels there to expose state secrets and the administration's myth of transparency. The prisoners are not supposed to be heard, but WAT publicly amplifies their testimonies through affectively potent street performances. Indefinite detention and torture are meant to remain distant, but WAT links the plight of detainees to that of Black communities in the US interior. Through these acts, WAT simultaneously reveals and contests the culture of erasure and radical divisiveness upon which the US national security state depends.

*Keywords:* Black Lives Matter, Guantánamo, imprisonment, solidarity activism, US national security state, Witness Against Torture

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*Fahd Ghazy has been held at Guantánamo for 13 years.  
He has never been charged with a crime.*

'Fahd Ghazy In His Own Words', [witness-torture.org](http://witness-torture.org) film, January 2015

On a January morning in 2015, so cold that it burns their faces despite the bright sun, a group of twenty have gathered in front of the White House. Many wear orange jumpsuits, some with black hoods. They are spectres of the now infamous images of Guantánamo detainees, kneeling in the dirt behind barbed wire fences: the indefinitely imprisoned.

This group, Witness Against Torture (WAT), has been engaging in protest performances such as this one in Washington, DC, New York City, Chicago and elsewhere, for a decade. Today, they have convened to tell the story of Fahd Ghazy, a Yemeni national and Guantánamo detainee who was captured at the age of 17, likely for a bounty.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of November 2014, after twelve years of being held without charge, Ghazy wrote an appeal to the American public and gave it to his attorney at the Center for Constitutional Rights to share.<sup>2</sup> His is a heart-rending story, if hardly unique. Ghazy is one of eighty-nine men still being held at the Guantánamo Bay military prison.<sup>3</sup> While cleared for release both under the Bush and Obama administrations, Ghazy's detention remains indefinite – in large part because he is from Yemen, a nation with which the US government has a particularly embattled relationship.

With a single microphone, a portrait of Ghazy's face painted on a queen-size bed sheet, and the orange jumpsuits, WAT calls out Ghazy's words for all to hear: 'It hurts me that I do not have the privilege to express myself. I want to have the honor to speak out in my own voice and reach you directly – you who are thinking people.'

One by one, members of WAT take the microphone: young, old, male, female, Latino, Arab, White, Christian and Muslim. They amplify Ghazy's words; they make his plea known. Ghazy's testimony speaks of missing half a lifetime of cherished experiences, the births, weddings and funerals of his loved ones. He speaks of his parents, robbed of their son, his wife, robbed of her husband and the father of her child. He speaks of his daughter, Hafsa:

I have missed the best moments a father could ever enjoy: Hafsa's first steps; walking her to school; witnessing her successes; helping her when she stumbles ... I am starving for those moments, when she looks at me and smiles or says a kind word or laughs.

Ghazy's words choke a bit. There is pain in the voices of those who deliver them. In front of this iconic building that once housed Bush's administration and now Obama's, both of which have held the power to close Guantánamo, the witnesses convey Ghazy's closing words. 'Now that you have heard my story and seen my dreams, you cannot turn away. You are excused only when you do not know. But now that you know, you cannot turn away.'

### The prisoner's hand

Since it began organising in 2005, WAT has not turned away, and has endeavoured to make it harder for others to do so. Instead, the group has pursued a range of embodied and symbolic expressions of solidarity with the men at Guantánamo. WAT's actions have been premised on learning from the men, allowing those modes of fierce dissent that emerge from within the military prison to fashion the space for acts of solidarity. Hearing and responding to those who are detained and tortured, who lack the practical freedoms to advocate for themselves in any traditional sense, is not an easy task, however.

At the end of scholar Avery Gordon's stunning 2010 meditation on being imprisoned at Guantánamo, a detained man holds out his hand to those who are 'not-yet-captured'.<sup>4</sup> The man wishes to show that, contrary to appearances, the living and the free also inherit and inhabit 'the prisoner's curse', a condemnation to what Orlando Patterson terms 'social death'.<sup>5</sup> The prisoner's curse afflicts all those whose 'solidarity is required for the whole regime to operate in a state of normalcy'.<sup>6</sup> This dominant mode of solidarity instructs its participants, teaching that there is an ontological distinction (and so a racial differential) between those who have already been sentenced to social death and those who have not yet been. It instructs in how not to see, in how to forget that by sentencing others to social death, the free are ultimately sentenced as well. The prisoner offers his hand as a different horizon, a different way of knowing and acting. Understanding the racialised system of contemporary imprisonment as it emerges as a 'chattel logic' tied to a lineage of slavery is an important piece of this lesson.<sup>7</sup> Yet there is more to be grasped, Gordon observes, understandings structured by hope and resistance; there is 'a pedagogy of finding and making life where death and destruction dominate'.<sup>8</sup>

We might wonder what it could mean, in practical terms, for the not-yet-captured to take the prisoner's hand that is offered here in allegory. In some sense, this is what WAT has been up to over its decade of organising and resistance, seeking to learn from and with the men being held at Guantánamo. I have been spending time with the community of WAT for a few years, engaging in participant observation, surveys, interviews and archival research.<sup>9</sup> Without suggesting that the group 'gets it right' at every moment of members' engagement, their expression of solidarity with the men at Guantánamo strikes at the heart of the racial logics of contemporary Empire. WAT refuses to offer its solidarity to the US national security state as a most bombastic proponent of the global 'war on terror'.<sup>10</sup> Instead, WAT participants place their alliance with those who have seen and lived the state's violence from within its most degrading recesses. WAT members use their own bodies, voices and privileges to amplify the experiences of those detained at Guantánamo, demanding their release and the state's moral accountability for its actions.

The Guantánamo military prison is a structure of Empire. Countering it requires WAT to imagine and enact solidarity with the detainees. In so doing,

WAT's tactical repertoire reveals and contests imperial logics in at least three ways. First, the Guantánamo prison is not supposed to be seen. WAT's inaugural action, a journey to the prison, drew attention to state secrets and exposed the Bush administration's myth of transparency. Second, the prisoners must be dehumanised, their agency stripped away. Thus, on returning to the US, WAT commenced a series of direct actions and street performances to bring detainee testimonies into the public sphere in affectively compelling ways. Third, the practices of indefinite detention and torture at the off-shore military base must be distanced from US practices 'at home'. So, during its January 2015 gathering, WAT allied with the Black Lives Matter movement in Washington, DC in order to link torture and detention abroad to the murderous policing and hyper-incarceration of black and brown communities throughout the US, exposing the deep hold of US racial despotism. I begin by examining the Guantánamo detention camp as a structure of Empire.

### **Empire's packages**

*I have been a package for 12 years now. I am a package when en route to Camp Echo, the solitary confinement wing. I am a package en route to a legal call. 'The package has been picked up ... the package has been delivered.'*

Guantánamo detainee Shaker Aamer's 2014 letter published in the *Guardian*<sup>11</sup>

On 11 January 2002, a group of Afghani men were delivered to the military prison at Guantánamo as the first group of captives to be held there. The spectacle of male bodies, shackled and hooded, crouching below uniformed military officials was in turn delivered to the world. The US Executive swiftly began eroding basic tenets of liberal democracy. Pre-eminent among these has been a disregard for the writ of habeas corpus, the right to contest the legitimacy of one's detention in a court of law. Established in the thirteenth century's Magna Carta, habeas corpus is one of the most elementary protections enshrined in the US Constitution as a fundamental bulwark against tyranny. By August 2002, the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel also began issuing memos giving the US government legal authority to practise torture.<sup>12</sup> US heads of state claimed that the prisoners posed the highest threat, terming them 'the worst of the worst'. Yet to date, only a tiny percentage has ever been alleged to be involved in 'terrorist activities'.<sup>13</sup> What is much more clear is that the US national security state has engaged in a regime of racialised terror, detaining and torturing Muslim men in a manner that defies legal precedent.

Colonial logics have long been a structuring force at Guantánamo Bay. One might say that the violence of capture, slavery and sequester have been sown in the soil. Because of its strategic location at the southeastern end of Cuba, Guantánamo was an important transit point during the Atlantic slave trade. By 1903, the land surrounding the Bay was secured to become what is now the United States' oldest overseas naval base, territory that the US gained when it

waged the US-Spain War of 1898. The US has held the forty-five square miles under 'lease' now for over a century, though the Cuban people have been demanding its return since at least the 1959 Revolution, a demand that the US has plainly refused.<sup>14</sup> In 1991, following the US-backed overthrow of democratically elected Haitian president Jean Bertrand Aristide, the base was used as a detention centre for Haitians seeking to escape a violent regime. Because, following international law, the US could not simply deport the refugees, they were instead intercepted mid-voyage and held in prison-like conditions, with a special quarantine zone for those forcibly tested and found to be HIV positive.<sup>15</sup> Spawned through this history of conquest and violence, Guantánamo, observes Amy Kaplan, 'lies at the heart of the American Empire', which today takes the form of militarised dispossession, war-making and a gluttonous carceral apparatus.<sup>16</sup>

Empire, and its contemporary executor in the US national security state, is a decidedly racial beast. Among the reigning logics that make a place like Guantánamo possible, there is a good deal of slippage between ethnicity, religion and criminal proclivity. Building on Edward Said's 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'.<sup>17</sup> Of the 780 men who have been or continue to be held at the military prison, *all* have been Muslim and the vast majority Arab. Moreover, in a place like Guantánamo, and arguably in a range of arenas both interior and exterior to the US, being found guilty through a proper juridical process is no longer necessary. As Gordon observes, for many 'war on terror' detainees, 'captivity itself confers a legally binding judgment of pre-established criminal status'.<sup>18</sup> To be imprisoned is to be already criminal. Even without explicit reference to race, then, the logic that there are *kinds* of subjects, bodies and peoples who can be incarcerated indefinitely without recourse to basic legal rights and procedures depends upon racial thinking.

The processes of capture, incarceration and torture materialise racism, defined by Ruth Wilson Gilmore as the 'state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death'.<sup>19</sup> Certainly the racial distinctions that undergird Empire depend on divisive logics and affective investments. Figures of insecurity – the illegal immigrant, the terrorist and the racialised criminal, to name but a few 'enemies of the state' – circulate widely, encouraging a sense of defensive patriotism and an implicit consent to violence. Torture and detention make these cultural forces physical, imprinting the bodies of the subjugated with the proof of power. The administration of such violence codifies in the most grotesque manner what Achille Mbembe terms a 'biological caesura between the ones and the others'.<sup>20</sup> For Marnia Lazreg these practices of racialised violence are integral to the political structure of Empire, drawing the bodies of Empire's labourers (military personnel and torturers) into a horrifying relation with the bodies of its expendable Others (the tortured).<sup>21</sup>

Physical violence is not only about making race, of course. It also works to dehumanise, to void the subject of agency. This is an observation at once banal and fundamental in the case of Guantánamo and for those who wish to act in solidarity with its detainees. Following Elaine Scarry, we might observe that to be human is to have agency, defined as the power to imagine and create, as well as to have a voice with which to express that agency. This voice is both figurative and literal. The body in acute pain can scream and groan but is largely without language. As Scarry suggests, the administration of physical pain makes 'the body emphatically and crushingly *present*' and 'the voice *absent*'.<sup>22</sup> Capture, detention and torture seek to undo the agentic subject. The body in pain loses a dignified voice. The prisoner at Guantánamo is not meant to speak, or be heard, or be seen.

### **Seeing Guantánamo**

*The War on Terror has a huge dimension of invisibility to it, and part of the fight against it is to see what cannot, should not and must not be seen. They [WAT] physically went to Guantánamo to behold the place.*

Jeremy Varon, member of WAT<sup>23</sup>

*But if you've got questions about Guantánamo, I seriously suggest you go down there and take a look.*

President George W. Bush, statement to the press at European Union event,  
20 June 2005<sup>24</sup>

Witness Against Torture began as a journey, an embodied response to the resistance being undertaken by the detainees at Guantánamo. In the early months of 2005, some friends convened to clean out the New York City apartment of their much admired and recently deceased fellow activist, Elmer Maas. Among his many acts of resistance, Maas was well known for being part of the Plowshares Eight, a Catholic pacifist group that, in a 1980 act of civil disobedience, had trespassed into a Pennsylvania missile facility to damage nuclear weapons components and pour blood on documents. This act inaugurated an international nuclear disarmament movement. Those who had gathered to mourn Maas and sort his things were themselves members of the Catholic Worker Movement, living in faith-based, intentional communities in accord with the Works of Mercy. Catholic Workers simultaneously administer to the poor by offering necessary services such as soup kitchens, while advocating for systemic change to address poverty, often protesting US militarism and wars abroad. Wanting to honour Maas's memory at a moment when many had already long been organising against war, the group began to talk about their next steps together. Matt Daloisio, one of WAT's founding members, explains of the time period, 'Things were shifting in the country. This was a couple years into the Bush administration, a couple years after September 11, and it seemed like things were getting fairly bleak.'<sup>25</sup> The idea was to take off the table the fear

of consequences, principally significant jail time for potential civil disobedience, as the group considered a meaningful response to ever more draconian US policies against the vulnerable, both at home and abroad.

Around this time, spring 2005, the mainstream media began to cover one of the larger hunger strikes at Guantánamo where about 700 men were then being held. Matt explains that the group's central question quickly became:

How do we as American citizens who feel some responsibility for what our government is doing respond to these men who - regardless of their innocence or guilt, which at this point really wasn't clear - who are using the only tool that they have, which was their own bodies, to cry out? How do we respond in a way that's going to end up being heard?

While those in the Catholic Worker Movement often prioritise 'being faithful over being successful', which means targeting society's moral shortcomings even if there is little chance of seeing policy change, this time the group thought they might do both. In 2005, it did not seem so far-fetched that people of different political perspectives would agree that Guantánamo was an abomination. Matt notes that the prison seemed 'outside the bounds of even mainstream American thought - that we would indefinitely detain people, that we would torture people'. The group believed that, at least for the vast majority of US citizens, 'this was not what they wanted America to be about'.

If the military prison already seemed an obvious outrage to both western law and American values, the detainees' hunger strike further revealed the human stakes of the situation. The notion of ministering to the prisoner is a central tenet in the Works of Mercy. As part of their involvement in both the Catholic Worker Movement and, for some, in Plowshares actions more specifically, members of the group had spent ample time in jails and prison for their civil disobedience. They knew that happenings outside a prison had a way of making their way in, especially in the case of protest. The group decided that it had to respond to the detainees in a physical way, by taking a trip to Cuba. Even if group members would not be allowed into the prison, they hoped that the detainees would hear that US citizens had made a journey in response to their government's practice of indefinite detention and the detainees' hunger strike.

In June 2005, President George W. Bush announced that anyone who wanted to know more about the situation at Guantánamo was welcome to visit the prison. This gave WAT members an opportune moment to call the administration's bluff, to reveal that Guantánamo was not, in fact, open to the public. The military prison was neither a transparent nor legal operation, as the Bush invitation had seemed to indicate. When WAT members ultimately arrived at the edge of the Cuban military zone that surrounds the US naval base, they were stopped. Cuban officials explained that if the group had permission from the US government, they would be allowed through Cuban military territory to the gates of the US base. Lacking this, they would not be permitted. As the group had suspected, President

Bush's invitation was not without very particular conditions. WAT opted to stay at the fence, camping and fasting for five days in solidarity with the hunger strikers. 'We called the base every day to tell them we were there and wanting to get in', Matt noted. There were many reasons for this daily call. One was to push for the access promised by the US government. Another was to generate 'chatter', a hope that word would make it to the detainees that US citizens had heard their cry for help and were responding.

The journey to Guantánamo was not without its challenges. In planning for the trip, the activists were concerned about how to best navigate their protest with Cuban authorities. They wished to 'speak to their own government', as WAT organiser Frida Berrigan puts it, without putting Cuba itself into an impossible position. Group members held a long-standing affinity with the vision of the Cuban Left. They also wanted to stay focused on the detainees' hunger strike, without creating some sort of 'international incident'. In preparation for the trip, WAT actively sought permission from the Cuban government but received no response. Upon their arrival, the Cuban government first threatened the group with deportation. However, after a day of negotiating in Santiago, officials agreed to a more well-humoured, if still quite aggressive, management strategy. Representatives of the Cuban government, present throughout the trip, suggested everything from places to stay to how the protesters should frame their media message. Sometimes group members gratefully accepted help. Other times they politely refused.

In the end, the process of walking to Guantánamo emerged as a kind of counter-imperial voyage in its own right, something that the group could not have expected. The journey from Santiago to Guantánamo was seventy-five kilometres, about fifty miles, which the group walked in five days. Twenty-five people ranging in age from 20 to 80 travelled together. Two drove a support car with some of the group's equipment, though most carried their own backpacks and tents. As to lodging, the group asked local home-owners if they could set up tents on their land. Matt reflected bemusedly:

people were amazingly receptive and gracious – the fact that a group of Americans knocked on their door and asked to camp. I like to think of the opposite scenario: a group of twenty five Cubans like landed and started to walk, knocking on doors, asking if they could camp in people's yards. I imagine the reception would be a little different.

Matt's hypothetical inversion of this scenario offers some humour in the face of deeply unjust geopolitical dynamics. There is an obvious dynamic of global privilege here, in that a group of predominantly white Americans were able to travel through space in a manner that would not be afforded to working-class Latin Americans seeking to do the opposite. Yet WAT members were on a journey precisely intended to acknowledge and deconstruct their unearned racial and national privilege. In practice, the journey became a means of connecting to the Cuban people in a manner that contested the radical divisiveness that otherwise organises built spaces and citizen psyches under global neoliberalism.

Walking has become trickier in many parts of the world, as corporations sequester space and gated communities reflect the criminogenic logic that some bodies do not deserve to be in any place. Rebecca Solnit suggests that the act of walking places the body in public space, which is 'being abandoned and eroded ... and shadowed by fear in many places'.<sup>26</sup> She adds that in shutting down the spaces of walking, democracy itself is jeopardised, as 'the street is democracy's greatest arena, the place where ordinary people can speak, unsegregated by walls, unmediated by those with more power'.<sup>27</sup> By walking the island of Cuba, and perhaps even more so in many of the Cubans' acts of eager and hospitable welcome to the group of walkers, WAT's journey contested the privatisation of space, a development rooted in the same imperial logics that have led to a global security regime that must detain and torture.<sup>28</sup>

WAT journeyed to Cuba to embody its political and spiritual vision and to make the most tangible connection to the prisoners that it could, given the presiding political and legal barriers. WAT organiser Jeremy Varon eloquently explained some of the many functions of this trip:

They also conceived it as an act of Christian mercy – you were sick and I healed you, you were in prison and I visited you. Right out of scripture. It was a conventional political protest and a way to bridge this very small yet infinite divide separating concerned humanity from these degraded prisoners.<sup>29</sup>

One interpretation of the journey might suggest it was an ultimately futile, if noble, effort by an idealist micro-minority with little measurable impact. The group's hopes of making a media splash were better realised through international outlets than US news organisations. Cuban television covered the walk, as did the BBC. Bush administration officials had no public reaction to it, and nothing in the disposition and administration of the prison at Guantánamo changed as a result.

A different perspective would emphasise its cultural, psychic, and even spiritual benefits, for the group and, to some degree, for the prisoners as well. About a month after the trip, many of those who had travelled to Cuba were in Washington, DC, holding a vigil outside of the Department of Justice. A lawyer from a firm in the neighbouring area approached the group, explaining that she represented some of the Guantánamo prisoners. She told them that her clients in Guantánamo wanted the group to know that when they had gone to Cuba, the prisoners had known that they were there. Just as WAT had hoped, word had made it into the prison that US citizens were camping and fasting outside the gates, responding to the detainees' hunger strike. The lawyer said that the men at Guantánamo had been moved and that they wanted to express their gratitude. Aware of both the necessity and insufficiency of hope in this instance, Matt reflected, 'I think having those very human connections has been profoundly important [to us], and we hope important for the men there.'

By travelling to the Guantánamo prison, WAT drew attention to state secrets, revealing to itself and others occluded elements of the US national security state

as well as the myth of transparency promulgated by the Bush administration. This was a culturally potent journey – to the heart of darkness, to different imaginings, and in some small way, to be closer to the aggrieved. Yet WAT's journey to contest imperial logics had only just begun. Upon returning from Cuba, the group commenced over a decade of impassioned advocacy, bringing detainees' stories into public life in dramatic and affectively potent ways.<sup>30</sup>

### From sequester to public spectacle

Since their inaugural journey to the prison, 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. While WAT participants engage in various actions in their home communities across the country throughout the year, each January, to mark the anniversary of the prison's opening, a group of about forty core members comes together for a week. They live communally in spaces provided by area churches, fast for up to ten days in solidarity with the detained men, and engage in creative direct actions in the nation's capital.

Key to its repertoire, WAT stages symbolically rich dramas in public, naming and showing the faces of Guantánamo detainees, while telling their harrowing stories, often in their own words, as a corrective to the often unseen violence of the national security state. In January 2014, just two days before the group's January gathering, the *Guardian* published an open letter from Shaker Aamer, a British national and Guantánamo detainee. In the letter, Aamer provided a devastating account of having his name stripped from him at the military prison in Cuba, being treated 'like a number' and delivered around the detention centre 'like a package'. The group organised its actions in DC to respond to Aamer's experiences at the military prison.<sup>31</sup>

WAT member and artist, Donna, had the idea that she could paint a huge portrait of Shaker Aamer's face around which the group might organise its performance. Between the group's many meetings and late into the evening, Donna used buckets of black acrylic to paint Aamer's face on a queen-size bed sheet and then decided to paint more portraits, using client pictures from the Center for Constitutional Rights' website, a legal organisation which has represented many Guantánamo prisoners. The four portraits she painted included the face of Fahd Ghazy, which the group was to use the following year.

For their Aamer piece, the group planned and practised the performance a few times in the church that served as their home base for the week. Two WAT members wearing military fatigues would yell out to WAT member Saad (playing the role of Aamer) from one side of the scene, 'Prisoner!' They would march Saad, attired in the iconic orange jumpsuit and black hood, towards about fifteen others, also in orange jumpsuits, standing in a line, shoulder to shoulder. The two detainees in the middle then unfurled the portrait of Aamer, in front of which Saad knelt (see Figure 1). The representation of Aamer's face was larger than life;



**Figure 1.** WAT performance (Photo courtesy of Justin Norman).

the man meant to represent him was small and crouched in body. On either side of the portrait, WAT members held up the letters to spell out 'SHAKER AAMER'. Once everyone was in position, a WAT member initiated a call and response. The *Guardian* letter was the script.

WAT member Karen wrote about the performance:

Saad knelt with a hood over his head to represent Shaker; two of us wore fatigues to represent guards, and patrolled the scene in chilling slow motion. We recited excerpts from Shaker Aamer ... 'At best, we are numbers. I worry that when I come home that my children will call for "Daddy", and I will sit unmoving. I am two three nine. I am not sure when I will ever be anything else.' When we recited those words of Shaker's, we hid the letters spelling out his name. In their place, our guards strung the number '239' around Saad's neck. He knelt with his name stripped away and his humanity concealed under a black hood.

At the end of the scene, the group mounted its collective demand, 'Stop torture now! Close Guantánamo now!' They then processed away from the scene, singing Peace Poet and WAT member Luke Nephew's Sweet Honey and the Rock's 'Ella's Song': 'We who believe in freedom cannot rest / We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes / We gotta close Guantánamo today / We gotta close Guantánamo today, Stop Torture Now.'

WAT took the performance to important sites throughout Washington, DC: both outside and within the major transport hub of Union Station; in front of the Supreme Court; outside the American Portrait museum – where the group held up its own powerful portrait of Aamer's face; and inside the Kennedy Center, a performance venue where hundreds had just attended a free gospel concert. Karen reflected on how the skit was received by the bystanders at each place that

WAT performed: 'The volume, the visuals, and the dynamic and concise nature of the piece we had rehearsed attracted listeners, some of them recording the event with their phones.' In a technological age when the production and distribution of media is more popularised and accessible than ever before, at least through certain venues, captivating the public through a visually and aurally striking message that can then be shared digitally has been one savvy means of giving the detainees the public voice that they otherwise almost always lack.

By dramatising the detainees' own critiques, WAT highlights the voice, analysis, and agency of those most directly impacted by the racialised violence of Empire. Aamer's story of having his name replaced by a number is a reference that many American audiences will associate with stories of the mistreatment of prisoners during the Nazi Holocaust, a widely accepted instance of socially orchestrated horror. WAT members also wielded the portraits of Ghazy and Aamer as a way to counter violence and dehumanisation. The state could unname the prisoners, sequester them far away, and inflict pain on their bodies. However, it could not disappear the fact of their existence, evinced by the humanity of their faces, which served as fulcrums in both street performances. This is a way of 'taking the hand' of the prisoner to open a lens on what is otherwise unknown and unseen.

I now turn to a different instance of learning with and from the direct victims of state violence, when WAT was called to extend its repertoire, linking movements and analyses across different sites of racial despotism.

### **'Ferguson to Guantánamo'**

Matthew Ajibade. Tanisha Anderson. Emmanuel Okutuga. These names were emblazoned on three symbolic coffins, each honouring a black person killed by the police.<sup>32</sup> Witness Against Torture members had offered to construct the coffins, which they now helped to hold in front of the Justice Department in the freezing drizzle. It was 12 January 2015, and communities across the US were reeling as two grand juries had recently declined to bring charges against the police involved in the separate but similar murders of unarmed black men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The Black Lives Matter campaign was continuing to gain attention, and its DC-based Hands Up Coalition had invited WAT to join a vigil memorialising the black victims of police violence.

Emmanuel Okutuga's mother, who had been given the affectionate nickname 'Mama Emmanuel' by Hands Up organisers, was the guest of honour. At the age of 26, in 2011, Emmanuel had been shot and killed by police in Silver Spring, Maryland, just six miles from where the group had now gathered. At one point during the murder investigation, there was video footage that appeared to demonstrate that the level of force used on Okutuga was disproportionate to the threat he posed. The family was planning to sue Montgomery County for his wrongful death. However, the evidence had been mysteriously 'lost' by officials, and the possibility of this small shred of justice for their tragic loss quickly slipped away.

Mama Emmanuel stood with a microphone and, between long pauses, the pain of losing her son often inexpressible in words, she told the story of a family ripped apart by police violence and continuing state impunity. WAT members flanked her on both sides. Some wore the quintessential orange jumpsuits, protected by transparent ponchos. Those not holding the symbolic coffins propped up banners, 'From Ferguson to Guantánamo', 'White Silence = State Violence', 'We Demand Accountability for Torture and Police Murder'. A WAT member holding an umbrella to shield Mama Emmanuel from the cold, driving rain, wept as she listened.

Mama Emmanuel explained, 'My children do not want me to be out here because they do not think that I can get justice. But I am here because I want to help save other mothers from going through this pain. I don't wish this on my worst enemy.' She surrendered to her weeping, held by the other speakers of the evening. Faces across the crowd mirrored the pain of tragedy and injustice, jaw-lines strained, eyes tearing or closed.

WAT member Sumaira, a Pakistani American woman who had helped organise the evening's actions, was the next to speak. 'Just as the military occupies Afghanistan, so the police occupy our streets here, picking off brown and black bodies ... We challenge the white supremacy that underlies anti-black racism and Islamophobia both. We are here to break the silence.'

With their tradition of civil disobedience, WAT had been invited to join the Hands Up's weekly vigil, and contribute whatever creative action its members wished to plan. WAT had decided to march to the DC Central Cell Block, a jail only a ten minutes' walk away, in which many WAT members had spent ample time imprisoned for various Guantánamo-related direct actions over the past decade. As is the case with most US detention facilities, time spent in the jail offered a stark depiction of just how disproportionate is the incarceration of black men compared to the imprisonment of other races and genders. WAT decided that this would be a good site for its civil disobedience linking Guantánamo with domestic policing.

Led by Mama Emmanuel, the 'honour guard' carried the symbolic caskets, followed by WAT members in orange jumpsuits and black hoods. The group took to the streets. Or as WAT member Karen accurately observed, '*we took the streets*'. With no police escort or official permit, the procession took over an entire lane of traffic during the height of evening rush hour. Those at the back of the line encouraged vehicles to make way for the group, and, somewhat remarkably, the walkers processed up the busy Pennsylvania Avenue, then 7th Street, and then Indiana Avenue with little harassment from passing cars. As they walked, the group sang in lieu of chanting.

Upon arriving at the jail, the twenty WAT members wanting to risk arrest entered the building. Everyone else remained at the top of the steps outside for a separate and parallel action. There was some singing, and then each person who identified as white was invited to take the microphone and finish the sentence, 'I am breaking white silence because ...'. Tens of WAT members finished the

statement with deeply personal reflections, and then offered a more systematic call to all white people around the country, asking that they also break their silence and stand against racism. They then read the names of black people killed by US police officers and vigilantes.

While a few members of WAT judged this action as ineffectual, hokey or self-aggrandising, participants of colour later reflected on how moving this public call to 'break white silence' had been. For instance, Ángel, an Afro-Latino man, recalled looking around at the other people of colour during the action. 'We were all in a bit of shock', he remarked. 'As a person of color, you grow up with this sense that you're a bit crazy, and even when you get all this education and consciousness, this still haunts you.' Having a group of white people affirm in a public way their acknowledgement of unearned privilege and how it dehumanises and materially disadvantages the lives of others was a kind of affirmation. As Ángel put it, 'I guess the wound needs a witness.'

Inside the jail, the twenty seeking arrest entered and explained their intention to get past the metal detectors. A black police officer spoke quietly with WAT's predetermined leader for the action, Leo. After a bit of back and forth, the officer asked amiably, 'So you're doing this for people that look like me?' Leo explained the officer's reaction in that evening's debrief. The officer explained that he agreed with the group's message but asked that they not push for an arrest. They were welcome to stay in the lobby, where they would be highly visible but not arrested. The group had to quickly make a hard decision. Leo consulted with the others as best he could, and it was decided that WAT would not push for confrontation in this instance. A majority white group seeking to challenge a majority black police force countered their message, intention and stance of non-violence. Instead, the group stayed in the lobby for twenty-eight minutes to represent the fact that a black person is killed by US law enforcement or vigilantes every twenty-eight hours. The group sang in hymn-like fashion to the faces of police the audacious lines, 'We remember all the people / the police killed / we can feel their spirit / they're with us still', and read the names of hundreds of black men killed by the police as well as the names of those still being held at Guantánamo.

While some members of WAT had already been active with Black Lives Matter in their home communities, when they came together in DC, WAT member Jeremy Varon assesses that the group faced, 'both an obligation and an opportunity to again deepen the analysis of state power, connect more dots and link struggles'.<sup>33</sup> WAT has long focused almost exclusively on closing Guantánamo, which has seemed strategically necessary, if at points artificially narrow. The group has understood the importance of concentrating solely on Guantánamo because the abuses there have been exposed as so egregious. Closing this one institution seemed quite feasible, at least at one point in time. Taking on too many issues can dilute the power of a campaign, spreading thin the limited resources and political capital acquired.

Still, WAT members have also been aware, and sometimes painfully so, that the kinds of practices undertaken at Guantánamo are hardly unique, resembling

standard operating procedure in many US prisons. Extended solitary confinement, for instance, which is increasingly understood as a form of torture, has become commonplace in many domestic prisons. During my early research with the group, a participant explained to me her sense that some US-based racial justice activists were frustrated or at least confused by WAT. ‘Why does a group of white Americans concentrate so much on one US prison overseas, when such egregious abuses are being perpetrated in prisons all over the country?’ she recalled being asked. She understood the logic and sentiment behind the question. As Sohail Daulatzai observes, parsing domestic imprisonment from ‘Guantánamo and other structures of imperial imprisonment in the “War on Terror,”’ neglects the truth that, ‘the legibility of “terrorists” as detainees, as well as their treatment within these prisons is made possible through the domestic politics of race and incarceration’.<sup>34</sup> In essence, the indefinite detention of Muslims at Guantánamo has only become possible through the legacies of capture and inhumane treatment perpetrated on racialised bodies within the US.

From their time spent in prisons and living in intentional communities housed in some of the nation’s poorest neighbourhoods, the Catholic Workers who forge WAT’s core membership have long understood the links between Guantánamo and domestic injustices. They chose to contest Guantánamo in part because it exemplifies what Daulatzai identifies as ‘the increasing consolidation of the two major security institutions within American imperial culture – the military and the prison’.<sup>35</sup> However, in order to tactically make these connections, WAT members took a lead from the prisoners. Indeed, in early 2013, the detainees at Guantánamo recommenced a massive hunger strike, thrusting the horrors of their captivity and treatment back into the public eye. Just months later, taking inspiration from this action, the prisoners at Pelican Bay State Prison organised the largest prison protest in California’s history. Tens of thousands of inmates across the state commenced a massive hunger strike to bring the practice of solitary confinement in US domestic prisons into the public consciousness. As Varon observes, ‘prisoners themselves broke through the wall separating concern for torture abroad and in the United States’.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly by January 2015, WAT was responding to a political and social moment that could not be ignored. Issues of racial injustice – the regimes of capture, incarceration and torture that undergird the US national security state – were sweeping the country in newly visible and tangible ways. However, WAT also conceived of itself as taking guidance from the men at Guantánamo who had easily connected their own persecution under Islamaphobic pretexts to the murderous policing and imprisonment of young black and brown men across the US. During the summer of 2014, a lawyer representing the Guantánamo detainees tweeted from the base, ‘At the #Guantánamo prison for Yemenis, talking a lot about #Ferguson and the deep roots of the racism & dehumanization here.’

WAT’s alliance with Black Lives Matter exposed Guantánamo as symptomatic of a racial status quo. Even among those who concede that Guantánamo does not represent the best of what the United States is about, the prison is often treated as

an illiberal and draconian aberration. Taking their cue in part from the men at Guantánamo, WAT exposed this logic of exceptionalism as a comforting and convenient myth. While continuing to appeal to the ideals of US constitutionalism, upon which so much of the legal challenge to Guantánamo depends, WAT insists that Guantánamo be understood as part of the systemic racial violence upon which the US nation state is forged. This is a lesson embodied by the prisoner, where chattel slavery takes new form, the human who was once rendered property of the plantation owner is now the property of the state. Property can have no voice, or this is what we are led to think.

### Multiple voices

*We are not here to make angels out of prisoners.*

*We don't know them.*

*But we know that they are still men.*

*And so we defend those that disappear under hoods and into jumpsuits,  
bringing back into the light every CIA Black Site  
because right now there is a man under that hood,  
a brother breathing prayers of desperation  
striking hunger so hard that his ribs are about to crack.*

From 'There is a man under that hood', Luke Nephew, member of WAT and  
the Peace Poets

The prisoner speaks in multiple voices. He must. He contests his dehumanisation: 'I am not what you say I am.' He demands reparations: 'You will carry the burden of guilt in front of the world for me.' He warns that the 'not-yet-captured' are always perilously positioned: 'It could be you, it might be you, don't you see!?' He reminds that the sentence to social death possesses and is possessed by those who enforce its violence, who turn away from its impacts. Still, his is not a punitive voice, not only, not with this gracious hand he offers: 'Here, let me show you what remains unimaginable to you. Here, we will return somewhere else together.'<sup>37</sup>

Those who respond to the prisoner, who wish to enact solidarity with the Guantánamo detainees, must also speak in multiple voices. They use their bodies, walking, fasting, haunting in the attire of those detained. They use their words in poetry and song.

Today, WAT responds to the prisoner whose statement members of the group have been carrying. They have taken Fahd Ghazy's words and portrait all over the city. They have processed in orange jumpsuits and black hoods. They are tired and worn by the cold and their own small hunger after days of fasting with little sleep. They don't say as much, but you can see it in the pallor of their faces, in the dark shadows under their eyes. They are much more worn by the years of knowing, by the pain, the indignities.

Today, they do not just speak Ghazy's words. They speak their own; they respond. They speak to him in some small way. They speak to each other. They speak to everyone who offers their solidarity so that Guantánamo can proceed as if it were not there. Or as if it does not matter that it is.

This might be what it means to take the hand of the prisoner, to take Ghazy's hand, at this juncture. 'Now that you know, you cannot turn away.' One by one each person takes the microphone, explaining why:

*'I will not turn away because ...'*

*'I see beauty in the eyes of each person.'*

*'I am a mother who has lost a son.'*

*'I am a human being, a Muslim, a target of the war on terror.'*

*'I am blessed to know love and family, and will never deny that to another.'*

*'the existence of the prison at Guantánamo is illegal and immoral.'*

*'we need the courage to face the truth of the ugliness.'*

*'I am a human being horrified at enforced hopelessness.'*

*'I too, in a small way, have suffered.'*

*'the US does this in my name and I never gave my permission.'*

## References

- 1 86 per cent of the men held at Guantánamo were captured for a bounty paid by the US, usually about \$5,000 per man. See Mark Denbeaux and Josh Denbeaux, *Report on Guantánamo* (Newark, NJ: Seton Hall University Report, 2006), pp. 2–28.
- 2 Ghazy's note was made public in conjunction with a short film that the Center for Constitutional Rights produced with Ghazy's family and a campaign to call for his freedom, 12 June 2014, [ccrjustice.org/waiting-fahd-one-familys-hope-life-beyond-guant-namo](http://ccrjustice.org/waiting-fahd-one-familys-hope-life-beyond-guant-namo).
- 3 This statistic was true as of April 2016.
- 4 Avery Gordon, 'The prisoner's curse', in Herman Gray and Macarena Gómez-Barris, eds, *Toward a Sociology of the Trace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. 17–65.
- 5 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
- 6 Gordon, 'The prisoner's curse', p. 44.
- 7 Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: imprisoned radical intellectuals and the U.S. prison regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- 8 Rodriguez, *Forced Passages*, p. 21.
- 9 This paper is based on two research trips to the Witness Against Torture weeks of action in Washington, DC, in January 2014 and 2015 and an additional research trip to the group's planning retreat in March 2014 with fourteen days of participant observation, thirteen interviews and an in-depth survey administered to thirty-eight core WAT members in 2015. Quotes not otherwise referenced are from these sources. I supplement these primary sources with a range of online videos and photos, an oral history conducted by Ron Grele in 2011 with key WAT

member Jeremy Varon, and the group's self-published book and DVD: Anna Brown, Matthew Daloisio, Michael Foley, Patrick Stanley and Matthew Vogel, eds, *Witness Against Torture: the campaign to shut down Guantánamo* (New York: Yellow Bike Press, 2008).

- 10 In the vast and instructive scholarship on transnational neoliberalism and its incumbent security regimes, there is a good deal of debate regarding the nature of Empire itself and the role of the US nation state within this matrix. It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline the distinct merits of each perspective. I therefore utilise a loose and encompassing notion of Empire and its racial logics as it takes shape in the 'war on terror'. I identify the US national security state as a key agent in this arrangement, if not necessarily the sole or original source of violence.
- 11 Shaker Aamer, 'In Guantánamo, national security rides roughshod over human rights', *Guardian*, 5 January 2014, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/05/guantanamo-national-security-human-rights-us-military-constitution>.
- 12 Key members of the Department of Justice, specifically Jay S. Bybee and Jon Yoo, issued memoranda that vastly broadened the scope as to what kinds of physical and psychological harm could be administered without being legally defined as 'torture'. See Karen Greenberg and Joshua Dratel, eds, *The Torture Papers: the road to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- 13 In their analysis of the Department of Defense's own documents released in 2006 in regards to the 517 men then being held, Denbeaux and Denbeaux show that only 8 per cent of the detainees were even accused of being al Qaida fighters. See Denbeaux and Denbeaux, *Report on Guantanomo Detainees* (Newark, NJ: Seton Hall Public Law Research Paper No. 46, 2006).
- 14 Michael Ratner and Ellen Ray, *Guantánamo: what the world should know* (White River Jct., Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004). The US maintains this refusal even after the recent shift in relations between the two countries in 2015.
- 15 A. Naomi Paik, 'Testifying to rightlessness: Haitian refugees speaking from Guantánamo', *Social Text* 28, no. 3 (2010), pp. 39–65.
- 16 Amy Kaplan, 'Where is Guantánamo?', *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005), p. 832.
- 17 Leti Volpp, 'The citizen and the terrorist', *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002), pp. 1575–600.
- 18 Gordon, 'The prisoner's curse', p. 39.
- 19 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: prisons, surplus, crisis, and opposition in globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 20 Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), p. 7. Translated by Libby Meintjes.
- 21 Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: from Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 22 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 49.
- 23 Ronald Grele, 'The reminiscences of Jeremy Varon', *The Guantánamo Bay Oral History Project* (Columbia University, NY: Columbia Center for Oral History), pp. 69–70.
- 24 US Department of State, 'President hosts United States–European Union summit', 20 June 2005, available at: <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/48389.htm>.
- 25 Those WAT members whose full names are given in this article have offered express permission that their words and actions be attributed to them. All other names have been changed to protect anonymity.
- 26 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: a history of walking* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 11.
- 27 Solnit, *Wanderlust*, p. 216.
- 28 Video footage from this journey shows multiple groups – schools, churches, families – that have organised to welcome WAT.
- 29 Grele, 'The reminiscences of Jeremy Varon', pp. 69–70.
- 30 The group returned to Cuba in 2015, a decade after their first trip. This journey was taken after this article had been written.

- 31 Aamer was eventually freed and returned to the UK in October 2015, after being imprisoned for nearly fourteen years without charge.
- 32 Ajibade and Anderson were both in police custody at the time of their deaths. Their loved ones had called on emergency assistance for help during mental health episodes. Ajibade died while in solitary confinement, his pleas for help ignored. Anderson, violently taken into custody at her family home, was dead by the time she reached the hospital.
- 33 Jeremy Varon, 'Fighting racism and torture from Ferguson to Guantánamo', *Waging Nonviolence*, 18 January 2015, available at: <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/01/18/fighting-racism-and-torture-ferguson-guantanamo>.
- 34 Sohail Daulautzai, 'Protect ya neck: Muslims and the carceral imagination in the age of Guantánamo', *Souls* 9, no. 2 (2007), p. 139.
- 35 Daulautzai, 'Protect ya neck', p. 137.
- 36 For a good discussion of the California Hunger Strike, especially in terms of its internal racial dynamics, see Keramet Reiter, 'The Pelican Bay hunger strike: resistance within the structural constraints of a US supermax prison', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 3 (2014), pp. 579–611.
- 37 Gordon, 'The prisoner's curse', pp. 46–47.