

Title: Imagining a hunger strike: Guantanamo 2013

Presenter: Anita Howarth

Conference: Trauma, conflict and media

Key terms: Vicarious witnessing, trauma, imagining, hunger strike

Citation: Howarth, Anita (2016) "Imagining a hunger strike: Guantanamo 2013". Trauma, conflict and media conference. Liverpool John Moores University. 31 March. Accessed at:

### Abstract

Existing literature has explored the vicarious witnessing of trauma in which images, narratives and artefacts facilitate a reconstruction of a past event by those who believe that access to these gives them an intimacy with the event and an imagining of the experiences of another (Zeitlin 1998, Nelson, 1998, Keats 2005). This paper adapts the concept of vicarious witnessing to explore how media re-imagine contemporaneous events to which journalists do not have direct access but the application of particular techniques to the limited materials available can still offer powerful reconstructions that invite news consumers to vicariously witness trauma. The paper looks at the force-feeding of the 2013 Guantanamo hunger strikers who were protesting at the perceived desecration of the Koran and at their continued incarceration. Guantanamo has a history as a site of trauma and the inflicting of trauma that pre-dates 9/11. Its remoteness has contributed to the sense of Guantanamo as an out-of-sight-out-of-mind space beyond the usual judicial constraints and rigorous media scrutiny (see Campisi 2008) and for these reasons it was chosen to house captives in the War on Terror. Journalists do have access to the base but not to the prisoners, their movements are highly constrained, the content they take out of the base is vetted and individual permits to visit may be withdrawn. Notwithstanding these limitations, journalists were able to piece together bits of information into a coherent narrative and to visualize the trauma of the prisoners in a way that resonated powerfully, challenged the accounts provided by the Guantanamo officials and drew attention to the suffering of those force-fed.

### Introduction

In early 2013, initial reports on Facebook and blogs about a mass hunger strike at Guantanamo Bay (CagePrisoners 2013) were denied by camp authorities who claimed that nothing out of the ordinary was happening (Rosenberg 2013b). Their denials however were challenged by a video-clip captured during a routine visit to the camp by a Miami Herald journalist which showed camp guards throwing out large quantities of uneaten food (Rosenberg 2013a). Lawyers after visiting their clients detained on the base also reported on social media that significant numbers of them were on hunger strike. Faced with strong counter-evidence, three days after the first reports emerged on social media the authorities conceded that a mass hunger strike was underway (Rosenberg 2013) and began providing daily updates on the number of prisoners striking and the number being force-fed. Public responses to the protest revealed deep polarisations in American society over how the "War on Terror" was being waged and in particular the treatment of prisoners taken during it (Carroll 2013), the resort to force-feeding was heavily criticized by the American medical community and in the global media and Barack Obama's presidency came under intense scrutiny (Spetalnick 2013).

Guantanamo has a history of an out-of-sight, out-of-mind site where trauma can be inflicted on those held there. The remoteness of the military base on a small corner of Cuba has added to the sense of it as a space of exception beyond the usual judicial constraints or media scrutiny and for these reasons it was chosen by the Bush administration in 2002 to house captives in the War on Terror (see Campisi 2008). Since then access to the base for lawyers and journalists and the taking out of information has been tightly controlled (McCluer & Dickerson 2012). Notwithstanding these restrictions, journalists were able to piece together bits of information into a coherent narrative and an imagining of the trauma of the 2013 hunger strike that resonated powerfully, challenged the accounts provided by the Guantanamo officials and drew attention to the suffering

of being force-fed. This paper adapts the concept of vicarious witnessing from Holocaust studies (Nelson 1996; Zeitlin 1998; Keats 2005; Rentschler 2004) to explore how media utilized the limited materials available to re-imagine contemporaneous events of force-feeding to which journalists did not have direct access on ways that resonated powerfully and invited news consumers to vicariously witness or experience trauma.

### Context

Guantanamo has a 40-year history as a site of conflict, trauma and hunger strikes. Since the 1970s, the Cuban outpost has been used by American government to detain those not wanted on mainland soil because they were seen as too politically sensitive and of hunger strikes in protest at the treatment of detainees (Campisi 2008; Mitchell 1994). In 2002, the camp entered a new phase when Donald Rumsfeld decided to house captives taken during War on Terror there and during the Bush administration Guantanamo became synonymous with torture (Harlow 2011). Images of shackled captives in orange boiler suits became a powerful symbol not only of the reach of American power but also the abuse of it (Townsend 2013). Almost from the outset, there were hunger strikes but 2005 a mass one broke out, triggered by perceptions that the Quran had been mistreated but also to demand that the principles of the Geneva Convention on the treatment of civilian prisoners of war be applied in the camp (Olshansky & Gutierrez 2005).

The 2013 hunger strike was the first mass one since 2005 and the first of Barack Obama's presidency. A key factor in the decision of detainees to go on hunger strike was the sense of hopelessness because four years after he had been elected Obama had failed to act on his promise to close the base and the fear that those cleared for repatriation would die in Guantanamo (Alexander 2013). Attempts to do so by the Oval Office had been blocked on Capitol Hill (Finn & Kornblut 2011) and in January 2013 Obama closed the position of special envoy charged with closing the camp. The immediate trigger for the hunger strike was the perception that guards had mistreated the Quran (Gorman 2013) and authorities responded to the protest with the force-feeding of hunger strikers, sustained loud noise and lighting at night and body cavity searches before detainees could see their lawyers, all of which were intended to break the protest (Townsend 2013). Instead the protest gained momentum, peaking in June with nearly two-thirds of the 168 detainees on hunger strike and roughly one-third of those being force-fed (Lazara & Rosenberg 2013; Keller & Leopold 2013). The hunger strike attracted global media and public attention to the continued detention without trial at Guantanamo, widespread international condemnation at the use of force feeding and revealed deep divisions in American public sentiment about how the War on Terror was being waged and in particular the treatment of detainees. However, after the start of the holy month of Ramadan in July the protest lost momentum (Williams, 2013). The hunger strike was effectively over. It had however the desired effect of re-igniting media attention to detention at Guantanamo, Obama resumed the repatriation of those cleared for release (Savage 2013) and as of March 2016 only 91 detainees out of an original 780 remained in the camp (Human Rights First 2016).

The emergence of tight censorship of media images around which a resonant narrative could be told is itself significant. Journalist access to the camp, their movements around it and the content (images and texts) they can take out are tightly controlled (Mccluer & Dickerson 2012). Furthermore, they may not speak to any of the detainees and any breach these terms are barred from returning to the camp (Mccluer & Dickerson 2012). So, it is unsurprising that the dominant image of Guantanamo to this day remains the one taken in 2002 of shackled detainees, clad in orange boiler suits kneeling behind barbed wire while guards patrol between them (Van Veen 2011). This paper argues that a new dominant imagining of Guantanamo emerged during the 2013 hunger strike, which centred on the force-feeding equipment of a restraint chair and nasal tube. The images of the equipment were taken by the military or by journalists while being escorted around communal spaces. Additional information on force-feeding came from official daily updates, often contested by lawyers, on how many detainees were on hunger strike and how many were being force-fed. Information also came from standard operating manuals made available to journalists and from medical journals on the dangers of the procedure. However, there was a critical lacuna and that is the detainees themselves. In restricting access to the inmates, the authorities sought to render them invisible. Lawyers for the inmates, barred from

recording meetings with their clients, waited until they were outside then scribbled down what they had heard then passed the transcripts on to journalists (Townsend 2013). Despite or perhaps because of the restrictions on reporting and the limited range of materials available, journalists became particularly creative in where and how they pieced together bits of information into a coherent narrative and visualization of the trauma of the 2013 hunger strike that resonated powerfully around the world.

#### The vicarious witness and a fascination to hunger strikes

The 2013 mass hunger strike at Guantanamo was able to resonate powerfully when other prison ones have not because journalists were able to leverage off the few key images and information available. In an age in which images have proliferated exponentially (Ibrahim and Howarth, forthcoming) and mobile devices are assumed to be anywhere and anytime as the ever present “technological witness”, the spaces of “exception” (Agamben 2004) such as Guantanamo challenge our assumptions about the ubiquity of media as the all-seeing “eye”. One of the reasons the Guantanamo detainees gave for going on hunger strike was the belief that the world had forgotten them and that the authorities had succeeded in rendering them invisible. I suggest that spaces such as Guantanamo are characterized by a critical lacuna in which those present at the time of the event are problematic witnesses. The paradigmatic witness is the survivor or bystander who happens to be there at the time and who is charged with reporting what they observed (Peters 2001) so the concept privileges presence, authorises the first-hand witness to speak and adds credibility to their voice (Tamar & Pinchevski 2009). However, at Guantanamo the authority of the paradigmatic witness is questioned either because they are military employees or they are detainees whose voices struggle to get out. When the voices of the detainees do reach the outside world, the credibility of their testimony is contested by association with the War on Terror but because they have not stood trial they have not been able to ascertain their innocence or guilt. Thus, they have a liminal status which compromise their credibility as witnesses

At the same time, there is a public fascination with the idea of hunger strikes, of someone feeling so strongly about a cause that they are willing to starve themselves to death and with the force-feeding response of the authorities to this possibility. The fascination combines with the lacuna of the problematic witness to create a space of imagining and visualization. This combination was, I suggest, most graphically captured in the sketches of the imagined bodies of suffragettes contorted in the fight against being subjugated by force feeding during their struggle for equal rights. The potential of images of the wasting body of a hunger striker to resonate power can be seen in the international furore over photographs of the emaciated body of Bobby Sands, who protested at the treatment of IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland, and whose death was “spectacularly successful in gaining worldwide publicity” (Willis 1981). The power of his death to mobilize resistance against the Thatcher government is a key reason why governments use force-feeding as a means to avoid making martyrs out of prisoners. Cultural memories of the suffragettes, Bobby Sands and Mahatma Gandhi in India have created a rich repository of imaginings and imagery to draw on but Guantanamo also offered something distinctive.

This paper suggests that the 2013 hunger strike at Guantanamo was able to resonate powerfully partly because it was able to draw on existing symbolism and because the 2002 images of detainees clad in orange and the reports of routinized torture of these men during the Bush-Rumsfeld era had circulated globally (Townsend 2013). The imaging of the 2013 protest combined orange boiler suits with two new dimensions, the force-feeding equipment i.e. the restraint chair and the nasal tube. The combining of these with creative use of limited information into dramatic images and narratives facilitated a vivid public imagining not only of the event but also the experience of it. The lacuna that is central to Guantanamo goes beyond the problematizing of the paradigmatic witness to privilege the vicarious witness. The concept of the vicarious witness is more commonly found in literature on second and third generation experiences of the Holocaust studies and in medicine and psychology. The vicarious witness is the second-hand one, often but not necessarily a professional who testifies on behalf of the suffering, in so doing bears witness to their suffering and whose

authority lies in their professional standing. Keats (2005, 2007) argues that vicarious witnessing begins with abstract representations of an event, the evidence includes material artefacts and the witnesses first-hand accounts told to them. The *event* is pieced together from images, stories and artefacts then represented through the imagination. While the paradigmatic witness says “I have seen therefore I am credible” the vicarious witness says, “I have imagined what another has experienced ... hence I believe I know something about the event” (Keats 2005; Keats 2009). The vicarious witness is not an objective or dispassionate witness; she feels able to stand in on behalf of and is heavily influenced by the first-hand witness and this affects how the vicarious witnesses fill the gaps of the story through their own imagination.

The privileging of the imagination over direct observation does raise questions about the credibility of the vicarious witness. Primo Levi, xxx, is the epitome of the vicarious witness, telling the stories of the true witnesses to the Holocaust i.e. those who did not survive or were the Muselmann, so traumatised they could not speak. Agamben (1998) argues that the value of Levi’s testimony lies in what it lacks: the centre contains a lacuna that bears witness to the missing witness. Levi becomes a witness by proxy and what prevented him from becoming a true witness was what enabled him to become a vicarious witness. That is, Levi was removed in time and space from the actual events but through his imagining and connection with the suffering of others, not removed altogether, a precarious mix of distance and proximity that kept him from being consumed by it but still affected enough to testify about it (Tamar & Pinchevski 2009).

This paper argues that journalists, lawyers and anti-torture activists combined to tell the story and visualize the force-feeding of the hunger strikers. The creative ways in which they combined limited materials and information into copy for online newspapers enabled them to act as vicarious witness, filling the lacuna that is at the core of the *raison d’être* of the camp. The images used and created not only helped to reconstruct events that had taken place out of sight, but also to appeal to the imagination of the news user in ways that resonated powerfully. The article looks at how three key elements in the images of the hunger strike i.e. the orange boiler suits, the restraint chair and nasal tube were used in four dominant images.

#### Imagining trauma: The accoutrements of force-feeding



*Figure 1: By Brian Godette [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons*

The dominant image of Guantanamo in 2013 came from the narrative of force-feeding and comprised an empty restraint chair and a nasal tube, photographs of which were taken by the military and made available to journalists through the public affairs office or they were taken by journalists while being escorted around the camp. The “emergency restraint chair” had been introduced into Guantanamo in January 2006 as a “new technique” to deal with a mass hunger strike at the time (Annas 2006). Described by the inventor as a “padded cell” it has six restraint points for both arms and legs as well as the head and torso the objective being to immobilize the hunger striker so he could not fight the guards and do so in upright position so he could not regurgitate (Annas 2006). Medical practitioners then insert a nasal tube and pour liquid food down into the body. At Guantanamo, there is standard operating procedure for the “medical management of detainees on hunger strike” (Barr et al. 2013) so routinized had it become at the base. However, force feeding mentally competent prisoners is viewed by the World Medical Association as a political rather than medical act and one that is not only dangerous, risking permanent damage to the body of the hunger striker and so painful as to be tantamount to torture (Reyes 1998). Testimonies of hunger strikers that their lawyers managed to capture and pass on to journalists attest to the indescribable pain, the “agony in my chest, throat and stomach” and of “cruel punishment” (Naji 2013). These testimonies combined with the evidence of the material artefact, the photograph of the force-feeding chair to create a sense of sinister technologies of control. The stark image

with the grey metal, the black restraints and the empty chair awaiting the next hunger striker became a representation of the event of force-feeding. The event itself was pieced together from images, stories and artefacts then represented through the imagination. While the paradigmatic witness says “I have seen therefore I am credible” the vicarious witness says, “I have imagined what another has experienced ... hence I believe I know something about the event” (Keats 2005; Keats 2009).

### Conclusion

The 2013 hunger strike at Guantanamo renewed the world’s attention on the detention camp as a space of exception and on America’s conduct of the War on Terror. The use of force-feeding as a means to break the strike (and avoid creating new martyrs) was highly controversial yet also fascinating to journalists because of the cultural memories of similar treatment of the suffragettes. The problem in imagining these events though is that force-feeding in prison takes place behind closed doors and away from the eye of the camera. This paper has used the concept of vicarious witnessing to explore the power of a single image and of the imagination to envisage the experience of others, to reconstruct events and invite news consumers to vicariously witness trauma.

### Bibliography

- Alexander, J.C., 2013. The law-free zone and back again. *Illinois Law Review*, 2, pp.551–624.
- Annas, G.J., 2006. Hunger Strikes at Guantanamo - Medical Ethics and Human Rights in a “Legal Black Hole.” *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 355(15), pp.1377–1382.
- Barr, A., Faille, M. & Johnson, R., 2013. Graphic: The Guantanamo Bay Force Feeding Program. *National Post (Canada)*. Available at: <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/graphics/graphic-the-guantanamo-bay-force-feeding-program>.
- CagePrisoners, 2013. Statement on Guantanamo hunger strike. [Blog]. Available at: <http://www.cageprisoners.com/our-work/press-releases/item/6033-statement-on-guantanamo-hunger-strike>.
- Campisi, E., 2008. Guantanamo: Trauma, Culture, and the Cuban Rafter Crisis of 1994--1996. *ProQuest2*.
- Carroll, J., 2013. Guantanamo is an American moral failure. *Boston Globe*. Available at: <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2013/04/07/guantanamo-hunger-strike-highlights-public-moral-indifference/zPbUAoMGuL0twHUJUEmLgM/story.html>.
- Finn, P. & Kornblut, A.E., 2011. Guantanamo Bay: Why Obama hasn’t fulfilled his promise to close the facility. *Washington Post*. Available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/guantanamo-bay-how-the-white-house-lost-the-fight-to-close-it/2011/04/14/AFTxR5XE\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/guantanamo-bay-how-the-white-house-lost-the-fight-to-close-it/2011/04/14/AFTxR5XE_story.html).
- Gorman, C., 2013. Hunger strike at Guantanamo: The Men Demand Respect. *The Guantanamo Blog*. Available at: <http://gtmoblog.blogspot.co.uk/2013/03/hunger-strike-at-base-men-demand-respect.html>.
- Harlow, B., 2011. “Extraordinary renditions”: tales of Guantanamo, a review article. *Race & Class*, 52, pp.1–29.
- Human Rights First, 2016. Guantánamo by the Numbers. , (March). Available at: <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/gtmo-by-the-numbers.pdf>.
- Keats, P., 2009. Multiple Text Analysis in Narrative Research: Visual, Written and Spoken Stories of Experience. *Qualitative Research*, 9(2), pp.181–195.
- Keats, P., 2005. Vicarious Witnessing in European Concentration Camps: Imagining the Trauma of Another. *Traumatology*, 11(3), pp.171–187.
- Keller, M. & Leopold, J., 2013. A guide to hunger strikes at Guantanamo Bay. *Al-Jazeera [Interactive]*. Available at: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/multimedia/guantanamo-hungerstriketimeline.html#timeline->

event=strike-2005-08-08-02.

- Lazara, G. & Rosenberg, C., 2013. Tracking the hunger strike. *Miami Herald*. Available at: [http://www.miamiherald.com/static/media/projects/gitmo\\_chart/](http://www.miamiherald.com/static/media/projects/gitmo_chart/).
- Mccluer, M.L. & Dickerson, A., 2012. The Press and Guantanamo Bay. *American University National Security Brief*, 2(1).
- Mitchell, C., 1994. U.S. Policy toward Haitian Boat People, 1972-93. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*1, 534, pp.69–80.
- Naji, S., 2013. Gitmo is killing me. *The New York Times (Opinion Pages)*. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/15/opinion/hunger-striking-at-guantanamo-bay.html>.
- Nelson, T.S., 1996. Vicarious Trauma: Bearing Witness To Another's Trauma. In *20th Annual Convening of Crisis Intervention*. Chicago. Available at: <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/convening/vicariou.htm>.
- Olshansky, B. & Gutierrez, G., 2005. *The Guantánamo Prisoner Hunger Strikes & Protests: A Special Report By the Center for Constitutional Rights*,
- Peters, J.D., 2001. Witnessing. *Media*, 23, pp.707–723.
- Rentschler, C. a., 2004. Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering. *Media, Culture & Society*, 26(2), pp.296–304. Available at: <http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/doi/10.1177/0163443704041180>.
- Reyes, H., 1998. Medical and Ethical Aspects of Hunger Strikes in Custody and the Issue of Torture. *Research in Legal Medicine*, 19(1). Available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/other/health-article-010198.htm>.
- Rosenberg, C., 2013a. Exclusive video | Guards trash refused lunch. *Miami Herald*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sva0ZbvdWVA>.
- Rosenberg, C., 2013b. Lawyers: Conditions deteriorating at G. *Miami Herald*. Available at: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/03/04/3266793/lawyers-claim-guantanamo-prison.html>.
- Rosenberg, C., 2013. US acknowledges 14 on hunger strike at Guantanamo. *Miami Herald*. Available at: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/03/15/3288490/us-acknowledges-14-on-hunger-strike.html>.
- Savage, C., 2013. Obama lifts moratorium on transfer of detainees. *New York Times*. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/obama-lifts-moratorium-on-transfer-of-some-detainees.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/24/us/politics/obama-lifts-moratorium-on-transfer-of-some-detainees.html?_r=0).
- Spetalnick, M., 2013. Red cross chief presses US on Guantanamo hunger strike. *Reuters*. Available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/11/us-usa-guantanamo-redcross-idUSBRE93A10J20130411?feedType=RSS&feedName=domesticNews>.
- Tamar, A. & Pinchevski, A., 2009. Witnessing as a Field. In *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Communication*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan, pp. 133–158. Available at: <http://www.e-library.esut.edu.ng/uploads/pdf/3536925422-media-witnessing.pdf#page=144>.
- Townsend, M., 2013. The making of Guantánamo Bay: The Hunger Strikes. *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/13/making-of-guantanamo-hunger-strikes-animated-film>.
- Van Veeren, E., 2011. Captured by the camera's eye: Guantánamo and the shifting frame of the Global War on Terror. *Review of International Studies*, 37(04), pp.1721–1749. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001208>  
[http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0260210510001208](http://www.journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0260210510001208).
- Williams, C., 2013. Ramadan, court rulings ease tensions at Guantanamo. *LA Times*. Available at: <http://www.latimes.com/news/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-guantanamo-ramadan-hunger-strike->

20130712,0,7186735,print.story.

Willis, D., 1981. IRA capitalizes on hunger strike to gain worldwide attention. *Christian Science Monitor*, p.1.

Zeitlin, F., 1998. The Vicarious Witness: Belated Memory and Authorial Presence in Recent Holocaust Literature. *History and Memory*, 10(2), pp.5–42.