

THE GUANTÁNAMO BAY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Jeremy Varon

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

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PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Jeremy Varon conducted by Ronald J. Grele on May 12, 2011. This interview is part of the Guantánamo Bay Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

3PM

Session One

Interviewee: Jeremy Varon

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Ronald J. Grele

Date: May 12, 2011

Q: This is an interview with Jeremy Varon being conducted at the Columbia University Oral History Research Office. I guess a place to start is by asking you about your family, where you were born, where you were raised and your early life.

Varon: I was born in July 1967 — the height of the summer of love, as I like to think of it — in Alexandria, Virginia, which is a suburb of Washington, D.C. My father was born in Turkey, in Istanbul, as part of a Sephardic Jewish family. He came to the United States in 1960 to go to the Wharton School [of the University of Pennsylvania]. He was in his family's business. He never went back to Turkey. He settled in the United States. My mother was a German immigrant. She was born in 1940 in Berlin and came to the United States in 1959. They met at Penn. They moved to the Washington, D.C. area because my father got a job with the World Bank after completing his degree. I grew up essentially as a Washingtonian, and that is politically important because Washington is the epicenter of American political and military power. I always felt close to the action and I attended every major demonstration taking place in Washington that I reasonably could for decades.

Q: What was your family's religious background?

Varon: For practical purposes, my family was not religious. My father was raised very Jewish, but more in the sense of a commitment to tradition. He obeyed the Sabbath and he was bar mitzvahed, but he had no religious instruction that stuck in any way. Being a Sephardic Jew from the Mediterranean, he had zero intuitive connection with mainstream American Ashkenazi Judaism. Hebrew school and synagogue and everything that you think of when you think of suburban American Jews had zero meaning for him whatsoever. He was actively trying to repress memories of his Turkish heritage and submerged the religion along with it.

Q: Can you give me an example of how he actively submerged this?

Varon: The culture that he was a part of was very crassly materialistic. He was part of an urban haute bourgeoisie of the Jewish community in Istanbul. His father was a trader in wholesale products. The business was once doing well, and then started to fail. My father was the heir apparent to take over the family franchise. He came to America to learn the techniques of microeconomics to bring back to Turkey to save the family's business, but the culture that was all about money was distasteful to him. The women went to French lycées and would learn to play piano and become cultured for the purposes of being eligible. Marriages were fixed. There was a substantial dowry. The father, a very decent man, was truly a paterfamilias who was responsible for providing for generations of people, cousins and second cousins. My father did not want that responsibility, so like a lot of immigrants he remade himself in a radical way. We would travel to Turkey as a family, but he would completely shut down for about two weeks before and was essentially insensate because he was so nervous about the bonds of family re-attaching to him. He wanted no part of it. I knew very little about who he was. He had a love of classical music

that was completely in submission. He had a certain love of Turkey that was in submission. The religion was completely pushed down. He has recently reconnected with his past. He published a book of Turkish-Jewish folklore he remembers from his youth, and has written a lovely study of the family name “Varon.” The name is Spanish, dating back to pre-Inquisition Spain, so the book is really a history of the Sephardic diaspora. But again, I heard almost nothing of his Judaism growing up. By contrast, my mother was a devout atheist — a German rationalist.

Q: She being raised Evangelical?

Varon: Nominally Lutheran. She lived for a time near the famous abbey where [Martin] Luther penned the 95 Theses, and would do midnight mass in the church of which Luther was a member. There is also a heavy tradition of German rationalism, and she had an active distaste for religion. Her father died shortly after the war, and then the Catholic Church came to her mother's door and said that for the sake of my mother's soul, wouldn't it be better if the Catholic Church took the child away from her mother? There was this heavy-handed moralistic notion that the church in Germany could re-moralize and re-Christen a broken population. I think that reinforced my mother's distaste of religion. Her ATM pin number was K-A-N-T for Kant. That shows you how deeply committed she was to that. She believed in the universal abstract idea and the idealism of the mind. She was a deeply intelligent person — almost genius-level smart. In no sense did religion and faith fit into her worldview.

Q: Did you have brothers or sisters?

Varon: I have a sister who is four years older than me. She is a very successful historian who studies women, slavery, the Civil War and race. She is now teaching at UVA [University of Virginia]. We were two peas in a pod. She was absolutely my best friend. We did anything and everything together. My identity as a human being is completely and totally inseparable from this person with whom I have a level of soul connection that runs as deep as any can.

Q: Where were you educated?

Varon: The public school system in northern Virginia, and for two years my father worked at the United Nations so I went to UNIS [United Nations International School], the UN school. This was in probably 1974 or 1975. It was a great time to be in New York. I like to call it John Lennon's New York — the New York of *Saturday Night Live*. It was a time that people describe as the last golden age of the city before it became corporatized and cleaned up. The city was also broke, but it had a gritty charm to it and danger zones that made it exciting. I think the significant thing about the UN school was that it was a bastion of a gauzily idealistic one-worldism. They saw themselves as the great institution promoting global peace. The majority of the kids were not Americans, so I interacted with kids from all over the world. There were two Japanese girls, Mariko and Akiko. My best friend was a guy named Voravut Ord Sarabungchung from Thailand.

Q: That one we are going to have to spell out.

Varon: Well, we called him “Ot.” There was a de-emphasis at UNIS on the importance of America. The official ideology was that every people, every culture and every nation is in

principle co-equal, and that we are the children who embody this dream of a harmonious human fellowship. Imagine the “free-to-be-you-and-me” ethos of childhood education in the sixties hooking up with this institutionalized ideology of world peace. We were too young to know that the UN had no real political power and that the Security Council could not enforce its decisions, but we would celebrate UN day and no American holidays or Christian holidays. We observed a UN calendar. I would like to think that that exposure to people from other parts of the world socialized me away from a kind of parochial American-ness. It was really an extraordinary experience that I cherish to this day. For the rest of it I was in crappy suburban high schools. I almost went to Sidwell Friends, but my sister did not get in because there was an admission crunch at her age. I was at the mercy of the public school system. It was very challenging because it was militantly mediocre in every respect, know-nothing nihilistic suburban culture. I had the proverbial “great teacher” or two who made it bearable, but just barely.

Q: Those suburban Washington schools are supposed be pretty good.

Varon: They have gotten very good, but back then the suburbs had not really taken off. It was a lot of military, a lot of CIA [Central Intelligence Agency].

Q: What particular suburb was it?

Varon: Fairfax, Virginia. It has changed enormously. It now has the most linguistically diverse student population in all of America.

Q: A very large Muslim population.

Varon: Very large Muslim population. Back then there were some Vietnamese in the post-Vietnam era and some Latin American and Central American immigration was trickling in, but it was still very white bread. My teenagehood was a lot like the movie *Dazed and Confused* that is set in Texas. This is the seventies and early eighties burnout culture just before the “Just Say No” of Ronald Reagan. It was all about long hair and roach clips on your dungaree jacket and skipping school to smoke pot in the woods, which they had to cut down by my school because a quarter of the student body was just completely non-compliant and would spend class time in the woods partying. You had this post-sixties youth culture separated from the idealism of the sixties. Drug use and the generational conflict and the idea that parents suck and we are different from them. They drink martinis and listen to swing music and we listen to rock and roll and smoke pot. We still had that mindset. That dynamic has completely disappeared because the parents of today's kids —

Q: How did that play out within your family?

Varon: My parents, both being non-American, never fully imbricated themselves into American culture. It remained something somewhat strange and alien to them. My father's clique was all internationals by virtue of his working at the World Bank. He did not give up his Turkish citizenship until about ten years ago when he retired. On the one hand, I celebrated this sense of difference. We were more cosmopolitan, we were more sophisticated and we were more worldly than the suburban unwashed. I also had a desperate desire to root myself in and connect with

things that were quintessentially American. I discovered folk music and Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead and became a huge Deadhead. That was a pathway into an American mythology having to do with dissent, rebellion, Woody Guthrie and all kinds of social justice struggles and the language of the land and the people. I think my mother recognized and appreciated that quest. Aspects of it also terrified her. I got pretty thoroughly into drugs at a young age — marijuana at thirteen, smoking pot every day probably between thirteen and twenty, and then LSD at fifteen. I was a whacked-out kid who stumbled my way through life. My parents were afraid at some level because they knew I was in a danger zone, but they did not know enough about the culture to know how dangerous it was. My mother was a rebel at heart who lived vicariously through my own rebellion, and at some level encouraged a rebel streak in me. The last way to put it is that she could not justify or defend the garbage that was the suburban culture. Her fear was that I would blow my future and narrow options for myself. Could I get into college in one piece? Then everything would be better because college was presented as this Valhalla of bohemian sophistication. It was a struggle for me to survive with my mind intact. There were some smoking craters left by copious indulgence and many trips to the far side.

Q: Any of what my generation might describe as “serious politics?”

Varon: Yes. I do not want to be too long-winded on this, but I grew up in the immediate shadow and afterglow of the sixties. As a kid I was uncommonly obsessed with anything and everything sixties. I absolutely venerated protestors as I learned about them — Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin. They were accessible as these furry, clownish white guys. I also learned eventually about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. *Doonesbury* was hugely important. Once upon a time that was a

major cultural institution. It started as a cartoon in the Yale newspaper, and it tells the story of the sixties through Joanie Caucus, the divorced women's liber, through Zonker Harris, the burnout, through Mike Doonesbury, the everyman in over his head.

I had this incredibly active fantasy world populated by figures from the sixties. Who needs Superman and Lex Luthor and the Legion of Doom when you have Richard Nixon and Abbie Hoffman and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King? Reality seemed so much more dramatic and ethically charged than the superhero world. From a very young age I was conscious of the existence of struggle, conscious of the existence of issues of right and wrong, and I tried to stake out positions in my literally childish way that at that time I felt defined me. Me and my friends would have big debates over whether if called to the draft you would fight. This was a big issue for boys. This was the pivotal issue. All my friends would say, "Of course I would fight. Duty, kill the commies." I would say that I would not fight. Without knowing it, we were working out complex notions of masculinity. I was always really impressed by the courage to say no. I was obsessed with Kent State. I wrote a book report about the cover-up of Kent State. I saw the movie *Hair*, which came out when I was maybe in sixth grade, and I learned the lyrics forward and backward. I had a friend whose mother was working for NOW, National Organization for Women, and then ERA [Equal Rights Advocates] was a huge thing. When I was probably eleven, she chaperoned me to my first demonstration in Washington.

In the mid-seventies you still had mass mobilizations as an after-image of the sixties. There would be labor, gays and lesbians to some extent, the women's movement and vestiges of black power. They were these carnivals of the progressive family coming together. Jesse Jackson

would speak. Oratory was still hugely important. This is not long after [John F.] Kennedy and Martin Luther King, so people would listen with rapt attention to his twenty minute soliloquy. By the end of it you were in a fever of passion for justice. And you still had the countercultural element of people on unicycles and Bread and Puppet theater and headbands and marijuana. I loved all aspects of it — the serious aspects and the carnival dimension. By the time I was ending high school I was already going to demonstrations in Washington, which were a fairly regular occurrence.

I had not yet attached myself to an issue, but I was terribly curious and would have long debates with my friends, essentially about the welfare state and AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] and Head Start. Reagan was coming onto the scene with this whole draconian, “Let's destroy the Great Society, let's destroy the New Deal.” I was old enough to know that that represented something big and meaningful.

I should say that I missed the importance of Watergate in my story. I am the quintessential Watergate baby. I came of age or came into awareness in and through Watergate, which my parents were absolutely obsessed with. One summer we went on a vacation and they bought a little seven-inch black and white portable television to watch the hearings on the beach and probably half the families were listening on the radio or watching these little TVs. My parents had a library with *All The Presidents Men*, *The Best and the Brightest*, and this was the sacred portion of the book shelf. It was not religious books or the family Bible. It was the Watergate books. The message was that there was this horrible thing called the Vietnam War, there was this awful man named Richard Nixon, and then somehow America saved itself from total ruin

because a couple of intrepid journalists and this whole inquisitive process had brought America back from the brink of total corruption.

In the wake of Nixon the good guys were in power. The liberal establishment had been re-established. It was the most diverse Congress since Reconstruction. You had Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug and all these movement people trickling into positions of power, and the message from my parents was “the world is basically all right.” There was a brief window where I was permitted to feel that way, and then boom, Ronald Reagan gets elected. It felt like the world went dark. Game on. It became a fierce eight year struggle that had so many dimensions, from preventing war in Nicaragua and another American military misadventure, to defending the parts of the welfare state that were worth defending, to holding the line on issues of race. By that point I was in college and threw myself into activism in a serious way.

Q: Why Brown?

Varon: It had a tremendous reputation for being the school for rebel activists.

Q: Amy Carter and all that kind of stuff.

Varon: She was a friend of mine. I was part of the Amy Carter class. At different points different Ivies are hot, as you well know, being from among them. That was the apex of Brown. The year I was admitted it was the most competitive school in the country. I think one in eleven applicants got in. Harvard was one in nine. We bandied this about. You had the von Bülow daughter and

Ringo Starr's daughter, and Amy Carter, of course. A lot of celebrity children. It was known for activism. The year before I came, students had performed a citizen's arrest of a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] recruiter because you can do a citizen's arrest if there is evidence of a felony being committed. It was kind of a stunt, but also very serious. This guy Jason Salzman had sponsored an initiative for the health services to stock cyanide pills, so in the event of a nuclear war the students could commit suicide en masse as a protest against nuclear lunacy. This was a big, big deal. I remember seeing Jason and other Brown activists on *Donahue*, which was A-list media. I remember seeing them on *Nightline*. It seemed like a kind of place for me. I applied to Oberlin also, which was a hippie school. Swarthmore, where my sister went, was a little bit more serious. I did not get in to Yale. I am still bitter. [laughs] My parents were alumni from Penn, but Brown seemed the right place for me.

I remember the day my mom told me I got in. I had tripped on acid very heavily the night before and my brain was sort of re-assembling itself. She brought this massive envelope up to my bedroom and said, "Look Jere. You got into Brown!" I said, "Mom, go away, I don't care." That is a vignette that explains who I was — committed, connected, and at some level detached.

Brown was the hot school and it turned out to be perfect for me because it was intensely activist. It was like a little polis. We had our *New York Times*, which was the *Brown Daily Herald*. We had the administration, which was the government. We had different constituencies —

Q: [Vartan] Gregorian was the president.

Varon: No. He came at the tail end. This guy Howard Swearer —

Q: Oh, right. Yes.

Varon: A kind of establishment liberal who, had [Michael] Dukakis won —

Q: I knew of him from the Ford Foundation.

Varon: Right. We considered him a liberal creep. He was on the board of the weapons company Raytheon and talked a good game about humanism and education and so forth. We had this critique that Brown was part of the military-industrial-educational complex deeply mired in the profound corruptions of American society, not at all unlike the critique of the Columbia students here in 1968. To an extent that we both were and were not aware of, we were sustaining in a new pitch — a new register with a new voice — some of the same struggles from the sixties. There was, to some extent, an unchanging quality to campus life. College for me was all about reading Camus and Sartre and the Frankfurt School, playing music, smoking pot, and then protesting —

Q: We are talking about 1985 —

Varon: We are talking 1985 to 1989. There were some very, very big struggles. One that stands out was divestment — to get your university to divest from companies that did business in apartheid South Africa, like Coca-Cola. That was my first and third years. There were two big campaigns to throw CIA recruiters off campus and I was heavily involved in both. For divestment I actually was charged with disrupting a major university function when we took over

the meeting of the board of trustees somewhat haphazardly. I went on trial with twenty other students in my junior year, with Amy Carter. I could have been suspended or expelled from school. That was my first experience with what you would have to call civil disobedience. It was a big moment of showdown with institutional authority where the power of argument won the day. We essentially got acquitted. It was this very elaborate thirteen-hour trial where by the end the prosecution apologized —

Q: Civil trial or was it in the university?

Varon: University trial. There were no civil charges brought against us. Part of our argument was that this is essentially a kangaroo court because you have no rights or normal due process. The Deans were the prosecutors and they were all trained lawyers. We could not have counsel present. We could not cross-examine witnesses. We could not testify as witnesses. The only testimony we could give was some basic explanation of motive. We could call character witnesses who would testify that we were good girls and boys. Amy was part of this while she was on trial with Abbie Hoffman for a big CIA protest at UMass [University of Massachusetts]. She would float in and out of our meetings. We met all the time, every day, probably six days a week for what seemed an eternity in preparation for this trial. Funny story — at one point Amy said, “If we bring in character witnesses maybe my dad could help.”

We asked, “Who did you have in mind?”

She said, “I don't know, Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson.”

We laughed and said, “Amy, if we need your help we will come calling.”

The other big thing was the CIA. That was my big issue, which links up with all of the Guantánamo stuff. In my senior year I became the leader of our “CIA off campus” movement. It was called PACIA — People Against the CIA. The previous one was called CIAO — CIA Off Campus. Bye-bye. Kind of cute. That was the knock-down, drag-out fight to convince the campus community that the CIA's presence would be illegitimate because as an essentially criminal organization, there should be no place for them in a community that honors the humanist truth that we profess and learn.

Q: This was a local student group? Any contact with larger groups at all? Outside groups? Any sectarian debates?

Varon: Not really.

Q: All that was gone.

Varon: Right. It was gone. It came back with ISO [International Socialist Organization], but it was this glorious period where the sectarian minions had really drifted to the margins. They had forgotten how to opportunistically attach themselves to other groups. We had some of that at the fringes, but it was really un-ideological. A kind of ignorance about ideology was helpful. What would happen was that kids who were morally bothered by something wrong in the world would

show up at whatever meeting and say, “I want to do something,” and lend their skill, talent, love, compassion, and energy to doing something of consequence.

The university felt like a microcosm. The administration, for all intents and purposes, was the government. We always argued that they were doing the bidding of institutions of state and of American corporate capital — especially around divestment — but also the CIA. Barnaby Keeney, one of Brown's presidents, had actually been the head of the CIA and took a two year leave of absence to rejoin. Yale and other WASP-y schools were major recruiting grounds for the CIA. It was deeply implicated in that history.

In my senior year the big thing was, will they or won't they recruit on campus? We had figured out from our divestment bust that if you get charged by the university you have no rights and the penalties can be severe. If you get expelled, you forfeit thousands and thousands of dollars of tuition — much more than a civil penalty. We brought people from the University of Vermont who called themselves, I think, The Green Mountain Boys and Girls, and the idea was that they would occupy our building, and then if they had a building occupation we would go to Vermont and occupy their building. We had worked out this system, so there was a network. There was anti-CIA work all over America. At Brown, it was probably one of the most prominent struggles. In the end, we sort of won and sort of lost. Some of the interviewees decided not to go through with the interview because they were convinced of our arguments. The university held the interviews at a secret off campus location — I think a hotel. They said we had done this horrible anti-democratic thing because if we force organizations away from campus, how can we hold them democratically accountable? — this sort of bullshit liberal argument. In the midst of that I

debated the CIA in front of one thousand people. I invited Phil Agee, who was an enemy of the state, to come to campus. I met Ralph McGehee, a CIA ideological defector who had written a book called *Deadly Deceits, My 25 Years in the CIA*. To cut a long story short, it is the most heavily-censored book —

Q: We do not do that in oral history.

Varon: Okay. It was the most heavily-censored book in American history where maybe a third of it was redacted. At the time anything a CIA agent said publicly had to have written approval from the office of the DCI [Director of Central Intelligence]. He wanted to write a memoir, and the condition was that in order to include anything in the book, even about his own personal life, he had to find independent verification of the fact he wanted to assert. If he wanted to write that the CIA had relations with its sister organization — the Thai security, whatever division — he had to find some newspaper saying that that was true. In this bizarre existential scenario, this guy had to document his own life to be able to go public with it. It sounds like something out of Kafka. In the course of documenting his book, he had collected a ton of information on the CIA and then wanted to make a massive annotated database of every piece of information in the entire world in the English language about the CIA. He hired me the summer of my junior or senior year to be a researcher.

I would go to his house in Herndon, Virginia — not far from the CIA — and sit in his basement and read through *CounterSpy* and *CovertAction* and the *Nation* and the *Village Voice* and some foreign English language newspapers, annotating information and then putting it into categories

like “Black Ops,” “Psy Ops,” “Assassinations,” “Death Squads,” “Black Budget,” “the manipulation of academia,” and “the manipulation of media.” The database had one hundred or so of these categories that schematized how the national security machinery operated. And I was in the house of this CIA guy who was afraid that he would be assassinated, that his house would be burned down, and that his pension would be denied. He was harassed routinely in Virginia. He would have drinks poured on him in restaurants, he would be bumped off flights for no apparent reason, and his phone was tapped. Once he left to get lunch and the phone rang. I picked it up and there was nobody on the other line. The phone rang again, I picked it up, and again, “click.” When McGehee returned from lunch I said, “What’s up?” He said, “They were listening. I was doing an interview earlier today on the phone and they did not like what I was saying. They are just calling to let me know that they are listening.”

One day I drove home from his house after reading about a guy under Operation Phoenix taking a VC [Viet Cong] suspect, putting him on the ground, putting a wooden dowel in his ear and pushing it into his brain with his boot and killing him. I am already quivering in my car. I picked up a hitchhiker, who told me a few minutes later that he had just been installing windows in the CIA — this in Northern Virginia. I am sure it was a coincidence, but I was frightened. That was my moment like in *All The Presidents Men* when [Bob] Woodward is in the parking garage and he thinks the government is behind him, and he runs and runs and hears the sound of his own breath. I was shaking holding the steering wheel.

The upshot was that I got an insider's account of the wickedness of the extrajudicial, extra-constitutional, secret government machine — this incredibly rich, incredibly powerful, incredibly

venal institution destroying the world and destroying American democracy. That was a formative experience, the “Summer of My CIA Soldier.” I am very grateful to Mr. McGehee. He was an honorable patriot. He would not tell me anything he could not tell me, but he would say, “I know something about the coup in Indonesia that killed six hundred thousand people. I cannot tell you what.” Since then, I almost always assume that the “real” story is worse than we even imagine.

Then I met Agee and I would attach myself to people who were dangerous, as far as the government was concerned. That is not civil disobedience, but it is another threshold. I asked McGehee at one point, “Will I have a file?”

He said, “If you were bad before, now you are really bad.”

This guy knew what he talked about. The master disks of his database were in a safe deposit box and he sprinkled a little powder around them so he could detect if anyone moved them. I said, “The CIA cannot get into safe deposit boxes, can they?”

He said, “Are you kidding me? They can do anything they want. The law?”

The national security state has always been among things to be upset at — probably consistently the thing I have been most upset at. With all the torture stuff, I feel a little bit like, “Ah, my dear friends the CIA — they are back!” Their central involvement in the torture program does not surprise me.

Q: The next question is, why history?

Varon: My mother was an amateur historian who also lived in fantasy, and her great heroine was Queen Elizabeth. My sister's name is Elizabeth Regina Varon.

Q: Queen Elizabeth the second or the first?

Varon: The second. No, I mean the first — the one from the age of Shakespeare.

Q: Okay.

Varon: Yes. There was something regal about my mother. She loved tales of princes and kings and strong, fierce women. She had a brilliant German Abitur education, so she knew thrice as much as well-educated Americans. She had a master's degree. She always had an orientation towards history. I fell into it by accident. In college I took a lot of critical theory out of the religious studies department — not deconstruction and Foucault, which was all the rage. I studied the Frankfurt School and existentialist humanism, like Camus. At one point I added up how many classes I had taken in history and it was the majority. I figured I would become a history major. I ended up studying intellectual history with Dominick LaCapra at Cornell, so it was all theory all the time.

Q: What about at Brown?

Varon: At Brown I took history classes. The best was American intellectual history and European intellectual history. [William G.] McLoughlin was a brilliant guy — a New Deal Democrat and World War II vet who went to Harvard on the GI Bill. A great American story. He was the faculty patron of so many of our activist causes. He would actually come to our meetings, even at night. We would pass the basket, throw in twenty-five cents. He would put in twenty dollars. That was like one hundred dollars in today's money. Mary Gluck was another great professor. She was a Hungarian American who taught Nietzsche and Heidegger and Bergson and all that stuff. I was not that committed to the discipline and the reconstruction of the past for the past's sake. My adviser was a bomb thrower who made a career bashing the mainstream methods of —

Q: Who was that?

Varon: Dominick LaCapra.

Q: Oh right. This was at Cornell.

Varon: This is at Cornell. At Brown I had a broadly humanist education and was not terribly identified with my department. I did not write a thesis because my mother got breast cancer in my junior year when I would have had to prepare. I was so involved in politics. I have come around to history. I ended up doing a dissertation on the Red Army Faction [RAF] that had a large empirical dimension.

Q: When you were at Brown, why did you decide to go to Cornell graduate school in history? By that point you must have then made a commitment to the discipline.

Varon: Not really, because my attraction was to LaCapra. I applied to the HisCon [History of Consciousness] program at [University of California at] Santa Cruz, the Humanity Center at Johns Hopkins, and the Critical Theory Program at [UC] Irvine.

Q: It was clear that you had gone to do more education. You were not going to go out into the job market.

Varon: No. The last school I applied to was American studies at Yale. The only place I applied to that was a traditional history program was Cornell. LaCapra was such an iconoclast outside of the mainstream of the discipline that the pull was not really to history, per se. After college I worked as an intern at the *Nation*, which was fascinating. Where do college radicals go? They intern at the *Nation*.

At that time young people had not reconnected with the labor movement. It was very hard to do something in civil society that was NGO-ish [nongovernmental organization] or non-profitish. The whole non-profit explosion happened afterwards. The dream of becoming a career activist quickly dissipated. I got heavily involved in the protest of the first Gulf War. It was not exactly a happy time after college. All the drug stuff did catch up with me and I realized I did not know myself. I had weak self-esteem even though I was very precocious. I would fearlessly engage the government but could barely tie my shoes or write a check. I did not emerge all that functionally

competent, and I was somewhat sheltered and protected from the big bad world by my mother, who could not defend the big bad world. I went to graduate school kind of by default. I figured at a certain point that the only thing I had been consistently good at my whole life was school, even though I hated school. I went back for more.

Q: How did you find out about LaCapra?

Varon: I had a friend at Brown who ended up studying with him. He was an Indian and a militant Marxist who at the time venerated the Naxalite movement. I will not use his name. He talked up Cornell and we were going to rekindle our friendship at Cornell, but he left unexpectedly just before I entered. I started my grad program in 1991 or 1992 at Cornell. At the time, the most recent thing I did politically was protesting the first Gulf War.

Q: At the *Nation* you made contact with Victor [Navasky]?

Varon: He was still the editor then and I was the intern of [Christopher] Hitchens when he was still writing there, which was fascinating. He was basically removing himself from *The Nation* family. He had come out against abortion while he was leaving his pregnant wife, and he had a mistress, "Cal" Blue, who wrote screenplays in LA [Los Angeles]. At least superficially, she was the epitome of the buxom California babe, so people were down on him personally. Then he became obsessed with European communism, and predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall something like two weeks before it happened. [Zbigniew] Brzezinski and Hitchens said it was coming down. The guy is incorrigibly brilliant, no matter how much booze he pours on his fine

head, or however much he loves being a provocateur. He is really smart. That was a neat environment to be a part of. You date your time at the *Nation* based on what was happening politically, and I guess that was for me the U.S. invasion of Panama. It was also right on the eve of the elections in Nicaragua where [Violeta] Chamorro beat the Sandinistas. There was a turning there. I was in heaven at the *Nation*. It was a lot of fun.

Q: Living in New York?

Varon: Living in New York. Returning to New York. I had lived there a couple of years. I was living with this family on the Upper East Side who my parents knew from before. That was kind of a disaster. I would spend my time there only to sleep and then just threw myself in —

Q: Why was it a disaster?

Varon: For a set of personal reasons not having to do with me, but having to do with the family. The family deserves one's sense of mercy. I was soaking in the progressive literary culture of New York. It was a different constellation back then. The *Village Voice* still mattered in deep way before it got gutted. Nat Hentoff was active with the *Voice*, and [Alexander C.] Cockburn sort of ruled the roost. He ideologically defined the *Nation*. Victor sort of cultivated Katrina [vanden Heuvel] who back then we saw as a liberal from this very prominent vanden Heuvel family. It was still much more far left, and also a kind of a cry in the wilderness. Something that people do not understand today is that there was almost no public Left in the 1980s. I guess the first Michael Moore movie came out in 1989. There were no prominent left-wing public

intellectuals. Michael Kinsley on *Crossfire* was as good as it got. The word liberal, let alone Left, was banished for almost a generation. You had the *Village Voice*, you had the *Nation*, and that was almost it. Colman McCarthy had a pacifist column in the *Washington Post*, and you had some liberal establishment guys who were almost okay. You would cling to and cherish the handful of institutions that articulated a counter-narrative to the Reagan juggernaut, and I was part of that in a small way.

Q: You went to Cornell to study with LaCapra. Did you end up studying with LaCapra?

Varon: Yes, I did.

Q: How do you assess that experience?

Varon: Amazing. He is a titanicly smart human being. I regard him as one of the hundred most important humanists of his generation. Not Derrida or Foucault, but just a notch below. He is an insanely brilliant man whose brain is on overdrive. He eats, drinks and sleeps theory. He is always on, but very hard to get to know. Sometimes we would call him “the lizard king” — this was Jim Morrison’s nickname, so it wasn’t an insult — because he was obsessed with the Southwest and he would wear leather jackets and bolos and Native American jewelry. He looked like a handsome-ish Sartre. He had this southwest Hopi regalia, and he would just talk about Derrida and Heidegger endlessly. I feel deeply privileged to have studied at the feet of a true master. The relationship had a kind of formality somewhat rare even at the time, but which has dissipated as boundaries completely dissolve in our culture.

I looked at him with a certain amount of reverence. He gave me total intellectual freedom. The message was do what you want to do, do it well, and eventually it will be acknowledged and rewarded. My dissertation was something of a risk because it was about Europe and America, and our profession is very much broken down on geographic lines. You study Europe *or* America. The history was so recent that some people did not even consider it history. It was very left-wing, and perhaps too hot to handle or a little toxic ideologically.

At the time the Weathermen were an addendum to a footnote to an asterisk of history that most people had never heard of, or that folks in the sixties misremembered. Weren't they in Chicago in 1968? Didn't they kidnap Patty Hearst? You realized how little people remember. Weathermania had not hit yet. Me and the filmmaker Sam Green, who made a brilliant movie called *Weather Underground*, were at the vanguard at resurrecting public interest in this group that had almost completely disappeared to the shadows. LaCapra gave me his blessings and liked the fact that my book is empirically rich, but also pretty deeply engaged analytically. I read the Weathermen through Marcuse in a sense, and threw in bits of Derrida and Foucault. I am proud of it most for its attempt to blend history and theory, which was LaCapra's obsession. After I left, students have told me he would hold up this book as an approximation of this golden mean that he had been arguing for twenty or thirty years between theory and empirical research. He deeply liked me and let me know, and I deeply liked him and let him know. It is a relationship in my life that just worked. A lot of relationships with authority figures did not work.

Q: I am intrigued by where you, yourself, say that the book — the Foucault I can understand, the Derrida I am a little confused about. What particular aspects there do you find in your —

Varon: That was sort of en passant. I have a long thing engaging Baudrillard around the question of who or what are the masses? What is the silent majority? With Derrida, there is a brief deconstructive notion that one side says “night” and you say “day.” That is a very primitive form of negation that retains the binary structure and reinforces a structural mechanism without truly contesting it because it remains committed to a process of simple negation. It was inflected with bits of Derrida, but very selectively. Marcuse was a more important thing, and I did have a long Baudrillardian meditation. In some loose sense, I wanted to deconstruct the idea of the masses and talk about how in democracy everybody claims the allegiance of the masses. In no way can it be empirically verified — it can only be symbolically represented. All democratic politics is essentially a semiotic war to convince people that you stand for a majoritarian or even consensus position. It is all essentially a war of representation. I read the antiwar movement and mass protest through that lens. Nixon's invocation of the silent majority is a rhetorical gesture by which he claims the masses. I talked a little bit about the folly of the democratic process as people standing on behalf of an unrepresentable entity. Baudrillard looks at the structure of this entire discourse to take some distance from it. But that is that.

Q: How did you relate to the other people in the Cornell department? You must have had to take regular seminars with other faculty.

Varon: They were very decent people. At that point it was what I call —

Q: They were not as interested in theory as LaCapra.

Varon: No, but he insisted that I take so many classes with him. I majored in LaCapra. Every semester I had to take at least one class with him. Larry Moore was a very nice guy. Michael Steinberg was a fellow who did European high culture. I did not get resistance because LaCapra insulated me from the discursive demands of the mainstream of the profession. There was a real convergence of people in the humanities, anthropology, political science — which they called government there — English, comparative literature, and history, at Cornell around issues of discourse and power and knowledge. This was what I call high postmodernism.

Jonathan Culler was there. Cornell, along with Duke and maybe Berkeley, was one of the great epicenters for the production of postmodern discourse. I had my own postmodern infatuation, but as this interview conveys, I am an activist at heart. Perhaps my favorite slogan as it pertains to knowledge is the maxim that if you really want to understand something, try to change it. There is book learning and then there is the special kind of learning that you do when you actually try to change a structure. I write about people who tried to change things. Sometimes in my Weathermen interviews I would say this maxim and ask them, “What did you learn about America or the world having tried to change both of them?” They would be intrigued by the question and puzzle their way through an answer. I like theory, but not as an end in itself. I made an explicit decision to use theory to illuminate history, not use history as a case study to introduce some little wrinkle in theory that the University of Minnesota Press would publish in

some slim, overpriced volume that people wearing black would read in the student lounge at the University of Chicago.

Q: When you did the interviews for the dissertation, who in particular did you relate to or find useful or interesting?

Varon: I found all of them useful and interesting. My all-time favorite is this guy Robin Palmer who is this glorious kook. He died recently. He became very strange late in life, arguably clinically a little bit senile. He was always, perhaps, a little bit touched in the head. He lived in Ithaca. There was a point at which the Weatherman seemed almost completely impenetrable to historical research. This was a deeply illegal organization. It dawned on me early in the project that I was writing the history of an underground organization that by definition tried to be invisible. How am I going to do this? I heard on the by and by that Robin Palmer lived in Ithaca and that he had been associated with the Weatherman somehow. I gave him a call and he said he was willing to talk to me. He said he would take me inside the Weather Machine. I literally jumped up and down with joy when I put down the phone because I thought now I will get the story.

After the first twenty minutes of repartee before we started our first interview, he said, "I will open my life to you like an open book, but it is a painful life. I am a veteran of a 'war at home' that is not acknowledged. I was in Attica, I was shot at, I have been beaten and I have been arrested twenty times. I blew my mind and I did not have children. There is a lot of pain and a lot of hurt. I am suffering post-traumatic stress. You have to understand this about me and I will tell

you the whole story, but I need your sensitivity and your commitment to integrity as well.” He did not quite phrase it that way, but that was the gist. As he said, in his essence he was a Weatherman and in his quintessence he was a yippee. At some level he knew we were not going to see state power. This is all in the register of the absurd. He had this detached sense of bemusement about even his own life, which amounted to a kind of martyrdom.

The guy brought a bomb in a briefcase into the Criminal Courts building at the height of the Panther 21 trial and blew up the Criminal Courts building. He was captured *in flagrante* with petrol bombs, simultaneously bombing six sites in New York City, including a law office that Richard Nixon was affiliated with, a building at NYU [New York University], and Citibank, which was then called Marine Midland. He was sentenced to seven years in prison, did four years in Attica, was part of the rebellion, and was tortured while naked. Sam Melville died in this, in his arms in fact. Basically, this was a struggle unto death for him. Even so, he had this humorous sense of “Of course this cannot work.” I always appreciated the honesty of that perspective. He was not dogmatic. He called his dog Correct Line, so he made fun of all this stuff. He was this prankster who would do these crazy, yippee stunts. He ran naked with the head of a severed pig and put it in front John Kenneth Galbraith at some big Democratic Party shindig on Halloween of 1968, just before the election.

With [Bill] Ayers and Rob Roth and all the rest, there was a sense of protection about the public memory of who they were and what they did. There was still this slightly weird sense that there was an organization — not of course an active armed struggle group but a network of radicals. When I met Scott Braley, he said, “Come to Telegraph Road and I will meet you.” I am there and

then a car pulls up and he says, "Get in." Then we went to some safe cafe, and there was still a little bit of that sense that you were stepping into this thing that in some vague way still exists. If they needed to disappear again they had made arrangements and people could hide them in Canada or someplace out of the way. The network is still useful. Scott did amazing work helping to defend the "San Francisco 8." These are 1960s-era radicals who were prosecuted a few years ago on trumped up charges for stuff going back forty years. A lot of people helped with their defense, and the prosecution collapsed.

With Robin there was none of that sense of mystery about what this was. He was very human. I liked all of them. Ayers is a very smart guy, and I met him before the public gave a damn. I met Bernardine [Dohrn] before she became public enemy number two. She was very candid in our interview, but at her office it was all hush-hush. It was almost like these people had secret lives. All of them were incredible.

Q: Then you went after the job market.

Varon: Yes.

Q: Were you marketable as an activist, as a historian, as a theoretician?

Varon: Yes and no. Probably the biggest liability —

Q: You then come up against the profession in a sense.

Varon: In a way. Partly everybody comes up against the profession because of the raw math of supply and demand. There are a lot of broken dreams in academia. The road to the professoriate is littered with the corpses.

Q: I get the impression that you were trained in a way that would be decidedly different from the way in which Columbia graduate students are now trained for the profession in the sense that they give papers, they publish, they know the lingo of the profession, and they scouted out the profession. So far in your story you have not told me anything that would resonate with that whole kind of attitude toward the profession.

Varon: Right. Cornell was not so pre-professional in that sense, but it was a vested part of academia. I had certain feathers in my cap. I do not mean for this to be braggadocio, but the first paper that I wrote for grad school was published in *New German Critique* in 1993. I published a second one in *New German Critique* before I left.

Q: So you were doing all that stuff.

Varon: Yes. The biggest liability was probably the German-America thing because I was not credible as an Americanist and I was barely plausible as a Germanist. Intellectual history was then considered a methodology and not a subfield onto itself. In the entire time that I have been out of grad school I have probably seen twelve jobs in intellectual history as such, partly because it got outsourced to other departments — English did Derrida, German studies did Kafka and

Heidegger. Intellectual history lost the sense of its vocation. The mainstream of the profession incorporated a lot of theory and became reflexively self-aware. LaCapra always, at some level, set up a straw man — who is the stupid historian who believes that history is just the facts? There were limits to his critique, however insightful. The linguistic turn affected the field as a whole. I had difficulty, but as it turns out, it was not that difficult. I met my first wife at Cornell. She was a hot commodity on the job market. She went to Macalester College in Minnesota and then she got a job at [University of California] Santa Barbara, so I taught a class on the Holocaust at the University of Minnesota and taught in the writing program at Santa Barbara. That is what you do with spouses, right?

Q: I was just wondering what that connection was.

Varon: Yes.

Q: At Minnesota was Rudy Vecoli still there?

Varon: I don't know.

Q: You don't know.

Varon: No, but I met Dick Flacks in Santa Barbara, and that was lovely. I developed patrons along the way. They felt sorry for me as the trailing spouse. While Juliet and I were in the midst of divorcing —

Q: What is her last name?

Varon: Williams. She is a professor at UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles] now.

This brings us into the personal universe. I got a one year appointment at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis because the theme was utopia and violence. I was perfect for that.

Q: Who was the director then?

Varon: At the time the director was Omer Bartov and Matt Matsuda. Omer is now at Brown. I went on the job market and I was up for a job at Amherst and came in the third runner-up. I was really ready to give up. It had not been that long, but it is very hard to convince a recently minted Ph.D. from Cornell, Yale, Harvard that this is an okay narrative. You do not believe it is going to work out. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* did a profile of me in an article about accomplished, published, well-trained people from Ivy League schools who could not get jobs. I became a little poster boy for how much the job market sucks. After coming back from this demoralizing Amherst experience I read that this place I had never heard of called Drew [University] had a one year position in intellectual history, which shocked me. I called them and two days later I did an interview on campus. This program was a kind of idea appreciation, great books program for retired surgeons with money that had become kind of trendy insofar as it was a program that studied the canon of intellectual history and tried to blend it with literature and culture. They reminted it as this groovy, interdisciplinary whatever. I was perfect for them. By that point, LaCapra and Martin Jay were far and away the two biggest people in European

intellectual history. For their purposes I was wonderful. It became a tenure track job at Drew, and then by some miracle I was recently hired by The New School, in U.S. history.

Q: When you went to Drew was there any leftovers of the older religious traditions over there?

Varon: It had been a Methodist seminary and you still had a very active divinity school in a secular religious studies program. A lot of those people were terrific. It was a nationally-ranked program with some leading scholars doing feminist deconstructive readings of the Bible, and liberation theology. That seemed a bit of a world unto itself. Drew is a parochial, sleepy, suburban college that is good to very good, in relative terms, but educational standards have slipped so dramatically throughout the country that it was okay to good. I hid my politics from them. Right before I started at Drew, I had been part of a wicked and terrible arrest in Philadelphia at the National Convention in 2000.

Q: What happened there?

Varon: This is a story unto itself, a bit. To cut a very long story short —

Q: Why do you keep saying that?

Varon: I keep saying it because, first of all, this is a traumatic story. There is no other way to describe it. In four-part harmony it could last an hour, but set aside that caveat. The globalization movement — we called it then the anti-globalization movement, then it became the global justice

movement, and now the cool thing is to call it globalization. Seattle was 1999. The big first World Bank protest was shortly after that. I missed Seattle, but I got involved with the World Bank thing. My dad working for the World Bank was fascinating because he is on the other side of the divide. It was complicated politically and oedipally as well. I hooked up with the Direct Action Network [DAN] in New York. Brooke Lehman was a big part of it. David Graeber was part of it. He is a leading anarchist, philosopher and theorist, and a brilliant anthropologist who had made a study of the anti-globalization movement. The big thing then was to hold these massive, disruptive protests, Seattle style. We had identified Philadelphia and the Republican National Convention as an appropriate target for a major mobilization, and we came up with this elaborate plan to basically —

Q: Were you in on the planning of this?

Varon: Not centrally, but I was in on the planning. The planning included many reconnaissance trips to Philadelphia, none of which I was on, and all kinds of semi-illicit tactical stuff about lockdowns and banner drops. The idea was to make semi-coordinated, anarchic, glorious mayhem in the streets of Philadelphia on the first day of the convention. Two thousand to three thousand people — maybe one thousand people, let's say — were committed to participating in direct action, and that is a lot of people. The idea was to choke off main arteries of the city by having traffic blockades where people would chain themselves together underneath PVC pipe, called “lock boxes.” There was a plan for anarchist soccer and all kinds of puppets and theatre. The idea was to bring downtown Philadelphia and the convention site to a halt for a day in full Technicolor with the media of the world upon us. The specific issue that had been identified as

the target of our protest was the prison-industrial complex. This was partly an effort to compensate for the white orientation of Seattle, so we wanted to pick an issue that was systemic, but disproportionately affected African Americans and which tied together poverty, state power, neoliberalism, and the drug war. Apparently there were bitter debates about that as being the focus, because the globalization people thought that focus was too domestic and too particular. There was a lot of racial tension. DAN was mostly a white organization, but we had some people of color in the coalition. There was a group called SLAM, the Student Liberation Action Movement, at Hunter [College], and it was made up of middle class, lower middle class, and upper working class kids of color. They were a part of it.

I was in the midst of this divorce from Juliet and not exactly feeling on top of the world. I wanted to get away from my own anguish and to throw myself into something that was bigger than myself. This woman Gilda Zwerman — do you know her? — actually wrote an essay called “The Identity Vulnerable Activist” that explained recruitment into the Weathermen and groups like it.

Q: Gilda—?

Varon: Gilda Zwerman. It is a pretty interesting sociological essay that says that when people adopt, say, being a revolutionary as a —

Q: Z-W—?

Varon: Z-W-E-R-M-A-N. She became good friends with Kathy Boudin in jail. She had this notion that if you are going through some difficult episode in life — a break-up, difficulty with your parents — you are vulnerable, and rather than recompose through a therapeutic process, you shop for a total identity through total commitment to a cause or a group. I think I was vulnerable in that sense. I wanted to participate in this movement whose original moment in Seattle I had missed, and the radicalism of what by now felt like my youth had returned. It was younger and more pierced and more anarchist than hippie. There had been a cultural shift, but there was enough continuity that it felt recognizable to me. I became part of this plan that organizationally was incredibly complex. All these people descended on Philadelphia. We checked into the convergence center, which was some Quaker office. Philadelphia has tons of Quakers who are real veteran heroes of the struggle.

We dispersed to a variety of locations, formed into affinity groups, and got our orders. It was slightly paramilitary as to what we were going to do in what location. I affiliated with an affinity group that was largely people of color, and that was very deliberate for me and a point of pride that this, in some sense, is on behalf of the people that they are representing in their own communities. I wanted to be attached to that. We used aliases because we thought for security purposes it would be good if nobody knew anybody's name. This heavy-set guy was Slim and one guy was Sparky. I was Sumac because I have a dear friend who is an expatriate Iranian activist, and sumac is a beloved spice in Iran. It was in honor of my friend that I chose Sumac. I was dispatched to the so-called puppet warehouse. I don't know if you have heard about the puppet house. This was famous within a little generation of activists. That began twenty-four to thirty-six hours of nonstop meeting and planning. People were fabricating all kinds of props.

There was a guy who we thought was a union carpenter helping us erect puppets and statues and fake prison cells. We wanted props to dramatize the prison-industrial complex.

This affinity group that I was a part of was going to sit in at Market Street, or wherever, and then we were going to chain our hands together, have carabineers, and put lock boxes over our hands. We were told to wear a diaper because you could be there many, many hours as the police patiently tried to cut you apart. I felt intrigued and excited and terrified at the same time. I was not sleeping. I was staying with the parents of my soon-to-be ex-wife in their attic room. That was all bizarre. She was from Philadelphia. Her dad was a professor at Penn. I was older than these kids, almost twice as old as some of them. I had no idea exactly what I was getting myself into. As part of the planning at one point we needed to see what a lock box was like, so I went out with some guy in an unmarked van. He pulled a lock box out of this big garbage bag. There were African American guys on bicycles talking into walkie-talkies, and I thought, “Gee, I wonder if they are under-covers?”

This puppet house was owned by these gay guys and it was in the middle of an unbelievably wretched, terrible ghetto, like what the South Bronx is iconically depicted as. It was like Nowheresville — broken glass, bombed-out buildings where you would see evidence that somebody was actually living there. If you just walked around, that was demonstrable, material evidence of why we were protesting. This was a truly godforsaken place, beyond ghetto — a complete and total wasteland, at least to an outsider. This was a surreal setting. You have all these furry radicals in this puppet house planning to make mayhem in Technicolor at zero hour, which was I guess two o'clock on a Wednesday. We were nervously discussing logistics and

tactics and then dispatching teams to go to the city. At maybe one o'clock we hear the sound of helicopters overhead, and then we hear people on the roof, and then we hear sirens outside. They had pulled out all the stops. There were people on the roofs with drawn machine guns. The SWAT team came. As we looked through the peephole of this giant warehouse we saw all of the top brass of the Philadelphia police department with rows of medals on their chests. There were four school buses ready to take us away. People were standing with the plastic cuffs ready to arrest us. There were media cameras. This was a massive show of force, and we were the prize. Allegedly we were planning acts of terrorism, which was of course nonsense. The authorities said that we were going to throw ball bearings so that the horses would trip. We were going to use wires to lop off the heads of horses. We were going to beat police with the PVC pipes. We were going to do deeply illegal, violent and felonious things.

Q: These are their fantasies.

Varon: This was their fantasy. They had already fabricated the narrative about who we were and what we were going to do. The city had taken out a multimillion dollar insurance policy preparing for lawsuits over the deprivation of our civil liberties. They had emptied the jails in preparation for arresting us. It was a great day to be a criminal. The jails were literally empty. They were not enforcing drug laws and prostitution laws and whatever else. John Street, an African American Democratic mayor, was the head of Philadelphia. These were the Republicans meeting in the city — God knows what deal they made with the mayor. I think the idea was to get the riff-raff off the streets and have this narrative about how we are the barbarians sacking this great city, which the police saved.

It became clear that the jig was up — they have us. There is nothing we can do. We are completely surrounded. My main thinking was that I wanted to get downtown to be part of the arrest that we had planned. What if I just walked away? I will just walk by the police, I thought. Why not? That was not to be. At one point they threw open the sliding doors, and there we are, and there the police are, and we are chanting and singing, “This is what democracy looks like,” and all of the slogans of that movement and moment. Then I thought, “Okay, I guess this is the action. This is the moment of confrontation. This is the slaughter to which I as a lamb will go. This is the civil disobedience.”

Then I got arrested and that was when the saga began. I do not want to belabor this story, but it began with us being on buses that were probably 120 to 140 degrees inside. I love saunas, so I know how to measure heat. This was in August and it was about 92 degrees outside. It was witheringly, blisteringly hot on the buses. You were sweating like a faucet, hand-cuffed with forty pretty scared people. I had slept one hour. I did not really know these people. We kept driving around the city. Twenty minutes became thirty minutes and thirty minutes became an hour and an hour became two and then four, six. Then you started to breakdown physically and think, “This cannot be healthy to go this long in this much heat without water,” and that you could you have some serious medical condition. The wheels of worry are turning over in your head. We had this big African-American guy named Slim who I believe was a diabetic. He went into a horrible dehydration on the bus.

We desperately needed water. These were school buses, so they were baking. The windows were made of thick plastic and there was maybe a one-inch crack at the top of them and no ventilation fan. We would scream “Water, water, water!” to a fever pitch, pounding our feet while all these armed policemen are wondering if they should give us water or not. At one point some woman comes up screaming, “This guy is going to pass out, he is not doing well.” A policeman comes back and, the guy is really not doing well. He is sweating profusely and his eyes are rolling in his head. At one point he passes out, and we do not know if he has had some kind of seizure or if he has simply fainted. The police want to pull him off the bus for medical attention, and we want to hold onto him, because we do not trust the police at all at this point. There is this tug of war in which the police and we are holding onto this three hundred pound African American guy who has just collapsed. Then a police officer raises his fist towards a seventeen-year-old girl and says, “Get the fuck off him, you goddamn bitch!”

They pull the guy away and they pull him off the bus. His pants are at his knees, and he is lying on the ground like a slab of meat, unconscious, half-naked while we are sitting cuffed on a bus after this policeman has almost assaulted a teenager. People recoil in horror. Probably half the bus is in tears. Some people are physically shaking. There is no leadership and no process. We are thinking, “What do we do? Something really fucking horrible has just happened. This is power.” We decided to go around and everybody share for thirty seconds where they are at. Some people could not speak. People were talking through tears. I got up and I said, “I study German history. I have studied the Holocaust, and I have studied Nazism. I do not use metaphors lightly, but this is fascism.” I remember what I said, verbatim.

I was sitting next to this guy who turned out to be very beautiful. He became a dear friend of mine — Mark Engler, who was at Harvard and involved in all kinds of civil disobedience. Now he is an author with Nation Books. He is a very smart guy. To wipe the sweat off of our brows we would rub our heads against the shoulders of our bus mates. At some level it became very physical. We would communicate not through words. Maybe seven hours later, we finally arrived at a police station. There were some police who were sympathetic to the fact that we needed water. They found empty water bottles in some garbage can, filled them with a hose, and brought them. We were in cuffs, and they would pour us water like we were invalids. Some people found a way to cut the cuffs or use a paper clip to remove them. Then it started to rain, and this was like holy water to us that cooled down the bus. It felt like *Schindler's List* when Schindler pours water over the cattle cars. The situations are of course not remotely comparable, but you seize on images and metaphors in the moment to help you make sense of what is going on. I also remember that there was no way to get the water except from these little slits at the top of the windows, where it was trickling in. People would hold their arms up and then have the water dribble from their fingers down to their elbows and trickle off their elbows, and people would drink the water dripping from people's elbows — from these Christ-like figures standing in a cross — like little birds getting water to live. It was very poignant and touching.

Then we get out of the buses and we think, “Okay, that nightmare is over, thank God.” We get to have the cuffs taken off, we can stretch our legs, we can move around, and they are giving us water. Then the nightmare began, if you can believe it. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] all immediately wrote reports about our treatment, with stuff about the buses and Slim and also the jails. The parents were freaking out.

My mother is this German-American and she does not exactly know what I am up to. We get thrown into jail in this prison called the Roundhouse. Cells for two became cells for six or seven people. A lot of kids were doing jail solidarity where they would not give their name to make it hard to process them and to jam up the courts and slow down the machinery of criminal justice. I desperately wanted out. I was like name, rank, serial number, mother's maiden name — I will tell you this stuff. I want the hell out.

Our captivity was quite brutal. Most people were refusing to eat. There was a prior deal where we were supposed to have access to our lawyers. They reneged on the deal, so there were no lawyers. Police would come by — undercover pulled off the streets — and tell us to give our names and cooperate or be thrown into general population, and we were threatened with rape. “There are some big, black motherfuckers who are going to like your white ass” — that kind of thing. Very crude. They had these very street-wise, tough African American undercover trying to scare us. It was this completely disorganized system where you could not tell if it was deliberate cruelty or incompetence. My insight that pertains to these guys is it was both —

Q: These guys meaning —?

Varon: The Guantánamo detainees. The way that it works is to blur the line between deliberate perniciousness and lack of organization, so you do not know why you are being treated the way you are. Is it cruelty? Is it incompetence? Some of the jailers were animals who treated us like animals, and when you are treated like an animal you become an animal, and the whole thing escalates. I saw within the fifty-four hours of my captivity how easily you can internalize the

degradation that you are subject to. I could not sleep, so by the end of this I had been up for almost three days.

I was eating. The food was white bread with cheese product, and they told us that it was carefully designed by a nutritionist to be offensive to no religious faith. There were a lot of vegans and the joke was that there is no milk in the “cheese” so they might as well eat it. There was fruit juice that said it contains zero percent fruit juice — it’s these little absurdities that you remember. It felt very Foucauldian insofar as this was micro power. It also felt medieval and barbaric — steel and concrete. They would go into cells and extract people who did not want to give their name and say, “We have your paperwork, we are going to take you.” They would pull somebody out in violent fashion doing jail solidarity, even though there was a person who wanted to get processed right next to them. We think this was a deliberate attempt to try to break us. People became so hostile to the jailers that if the orderlies tried to give us food there would be so much invective hurled at them and food hurled at them that they would get a quarter of the way down the hall and turn around. I did not know when it was going to end. People say you can endure anything if you know what is going to happen. It is the unknown is really where the terror comes from. At a point, people started resisting by flushing the toilet so that the water flooded and throwing all their food into the gully. There were ninety-six people in cells like this so you could not see one another. I had smuggled in —

Q: In a line?

Varon: All in a line, and then a blank wall. There was a police station here and a police station there, at either end of this long hall that we could not see down. There were apparently three or four of these halls in the Roundhouse. I had a watch similar to this one with a metal back so I could hold it out the cell and it would reflect so I could see down the hallway. Then things went from bad to worse to worse. At one point somebody threw something and it smashed out the light, so half of the hall was in darkness. Darkness does something to people — it raises tension, raises fear. There is water, urine, feces, spittle, and food in this gully through which abusive police —

Q: In front of the cells.

Varon: Yes, police walking back and forth, telling us that we are no-good terroristic monsters. I remember one guy, like in his forties, was “hog tied” for some reason. That’s where you cuff a person’s wrist to their opposite ankle so they are in this painful ball. They did it at one end of the hall and told him to go back into his cell, which was at the opposite end. We heard and watched this poor fellow slowly drag himself through the slop. It took him like five minutes. It was just terribly sad and disturbing, and I could hardly believe it was happening.

There were a couple of points where people completely lost it. Sweaty, tired, hungry, frightened guys started pounding on the metal benches and hanging off the bars like apes screaming at the top of their lungs. There were a couple of moments of mass collective psychosis where you had ninety-six people in cells for thirty or twenty screaming at the top of their lungs. There did come a point where I said, “I am in hell. This is hell. I have to accept the bizarreness of this situation

and not try to fight it and go with it and somehow convince myself that I will be okay.” I will wind this story up shortly.

This is Philadelphia, and the cop killer, public enemy number one is Mumia Abu-Jamal. There was this whole Mumia dimension to our protest. At one point some guy started saying, “Brick by brick, wall by wall, we’re gon-na free Mu-mi-a Abu-Ja-mal” in this rhythmic way. This caught on. For maybe five minutes you had almost a hundred people screaming at the top of their lungs in the bowels of the Philadelphia prison system, that brick by brick, wall by wall, they are going to free Mumia. This is provocation. This takes guts. I give the kids credit. They did not back down.

I begged my way out as best I could. I was one of the first people to be processed. I was grabbed by a public defender who said, “In thirty seconds you are going to go before a judge. Who are you?” I said I was a professor. “Tell them you are a professor.” By that point it was the weekend and they called in judges just to process us. In this makeshift courtroom there is a piece of tape, and the lawyer says, “Stand on that piece of tape.” The judge says, “You have six misdemeanors.” Bail was set at ten thousand dollars. I said, “I am a professor.” So the judge says, “Five thousand dollars,” bam, pounds his gavel, and that was the hearing. It lasted maybe twenty seconds. The lawyer then said to me, “Okay, five thousand dollars, you need to post ten percent of this, in cash. If you don’t, they are going to ship you off to general population and you might be in prison for a week. You have two hours to get the money, and you have one phone call. Consider this the most important phone call you have ever made in your life.”

I call my mom and before I can say anything, she says, “You are in jail in Philadelphia. I have been talking to other parents. We are worried sick. I am not thrilled with your behavior, but right now my job is to get you out. Somebody will be there with the money.” Two people actually came — the family of my then wife and a distant Quaker friend — and I got out of prison. Bless them. People were terrified. John Sellers was a Ruckus Society head, and he had a million dollar bail. He was charged with twenty-three crimes, including fourteen misdemeanors, or something like that. His mother was in tears in the streets of Philadelphia. There were impromptu press conferences everywhere. There were probably fifty people who had serious felony charges with the highest bails set at five hundred thousand dollars, a million dollars — the highest bails in history of America for crimes that had not even been committed.

The whole thing was this coordinated preemptive strike to shut us down, break our will, draw a line, and say, “There is not going to be any Seattle here.” The same damn thing happened in Florida at the Free Trade Convention. There were mass arrests in New York at the 2004 convention. Our lawyers told us the point was to get information about you. “The Feds are developing an international watch list of undesirables that is going to be shared with Interpol and European agencies. This is basically to get you off the streets and on the list. They do not believe that the charges are actually going to stick. This is essentially a security intelligence operation.” Remember the “union” carpenter in the warehouse? He was FBI. This all came out in the press.

If you added up all the prison time if I was convicted of everything for which I was charged, it was five to fifteen years, so I was nervous. I had not done anything, mind you, and that is part of what made it so strange. I lawyered up with a private lawyer. Other people had independent

lawyers, but most had public defenders. The people who were charged with heavy crimes had independent lawyers. There were three people called the Timoney Three who allegedly threw a bicycle on and injured [John F.] Timoney, who was the police chief of Philadelphia. They were charged with aggravated assault against a police officer, or some such, for which they easily could have gone to prison for ten years. That took four years to litigate, and they were eventually acquitted. As it turns out, I and a lot of other people got essentially minor citations. It was a joke.

The puppet house became famous within the sectors of the movement. I got caught up in this partly intentionally, partly by accident. One funny thing is that when they seized the puppet house, which was a “crime scene,” they said, “We found one lock box” and this was reported in the press. This was the lock box that I had gotten off of the van so we could get a sense of how to use them. When I held it up everybody joked, “Do not pass it around, we don’t want to leave fingerprints on it, ha-ha-ha. Just hold it up so everybody can see.” I had my prints on this thing, so initially I thought, “Oh my God, I am going to be the poster boy for an attempt to decapitate police horses.” It all eventually went away, but it was a hell of an experience that showed me how brutal power can be, and how frightening it is when you are beyond the law. In prison it was clear there was nothing to protect you. As a middle class white person, you walk around with the sense that if somebody attacks you, you can say, “Please help me, Mr. Policeman.” And now the policeman is the attacker and they have totally frozen the judicial system. Minorities and immigrants live this way all the time. We were acutely conscious of that, but for the first time I felt it. The terror of captivity, which I have always felt, was burnished into me in a new way. For fifty-four hours I experienced, in some small way, excessively punitive, physically and psychologically brutal, lawless detention. That is the precursor to my Guantánamo activism and

the worthiness of so many minutes on the story. I felt a personal, intuitive sense of connection to what I then learned my government was doing to people en masse, who were a thousand times more vulnerable than me.

Q: Do you want to take a break?

Varon: I am fine. If you want to, that is fine, but I do not feel worked up to the point where I cannot go on.

Q: Usually we tell people an hour and a half, two hours and they will take a break.

Varon: It is completely up to you.

Q: We could go on forever. I can understand now why — a couple of things. First of all, I think it was an important story to give in terms of what we are going to be talking about. Secondly, I can understand now why you did not want to tell people at Drew too much about it.

Varon: There is a natural pause here. Why don't I sip some of my coffee? I do not mind plowing through, but if you want to take a break, let me know. You are a pro. I feel like I am in very good hands.

Q: Why did you leave Drew?

Varon: I got a job at The New School. There was no falling out with Drew. I was just thrilled to have been recruited by The New School. They did a national search and they are so snooty they did not like any of the candidates. There were at least a couple hundred applications for this job in twentieth century U.S. history, and none evidently had the *je ne sais quoi* that The New School wanted, which was mostly theoretical engagement, a kind of left of center orientation.

Q: Now this is the history department at —

Varon: Committee on Historical Studies. I fit their imagination of what their own profile is.

Q: Who did the hiring?

Varon: Oz Frankel, an Israeli guy who I feel indebted to in a profound way.

Q: When did you first hook up with Witness Against Torture? How did that all come about? Is [Michael S.] Foley connected to this?

Varon: Foley is.

Q: Why don't we go back to the journal [*The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture*]?

Varon: Sure.

Q: Where you and John [McMillian] and Foley — and the journal. How did that all come about?

Varon: A friend of ours who was working at Routledge at the time said that somebody at Routledge was keen on some young scholars doing a journal about the sixties. I think the Grand Poobah of Routledge — a child of the sixties — thought this would be a neat idea. We were the people to do it. We talked about it for a long time, and it seemed like a lot of work. Eventually, a few summers ago, I drafted the necessary documents to get this approved. There is an interesting vetting process for journals.

Q: Did they come and contact you? Lots of people were doing things about of the sixties at that point in time.

Varon: There was a contact at Rutgers through this guy Dave McBride and this woman named Tamson Morley. Her name sounds like out of a Bond movie or something. This very sophisticated British woman would call us from London. They wanted a journal with moxie — something that was academic, but also had crossover appeal to activists, artists, public intellectuals, and so forth. We wanted to do something that would raise the profile of an entire field and be a medium for people doing research and people who are otherwise curious about the sixties to share the best of their thinking. We conceive of it as a community institution. In some sense it is kind of publicly owned. It is something that we edit and it is a lot of work — not all of it fully satisfying — but something we are pretty proud of. Over and above my *Weathermen* book, what it has done is that it has positioned me as a person perceived as essentially a leader in

this subfield insofar as I am trying to open up space for a conversation. I do not know if I would have gotten the job at The New School without the journal. They have very high standards, and you can demonstrably say you are a leader in your field if you found its defining journal. So, hallelujah.

Q: Where had you met John and Michael?

Varon: John I knew from years ago through a study of the sixties. He did a book called *The New Left Revisited*, in which I wrote an essay. He was still a grad school student and then he became my best friend. He knew Foley and Foley wrote a major work on draft resistance [*Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance during the Vietnam War*]. So I am the violence guy, Foley is the draft resistance guy. John just did a book on underground press [*Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*], so he is the underground press guy. There are several Vietnam guys and gals and several Malcolm X guys and gals. Each of us represents expertise on a piece of this, but we are all broadly interested in the sixties.

Q: Has the journal been a success?

Varon: From an editorial standpoint, yes. In terms of actually getting readership, I am not sure. I do not think it is the fault of the journal. The economic model is to have libraries subscribe to it. It is prohibitively expensive, as you know, for an individual subscriber. Our publisher explained to us that they want people to fall in love with it, realize it is too much money, and then pester

their library to subscribe to it. Libraries are ditching journal subscriptions in droves because it is five hundred dollars or something like that. It is not something that people purchase and consume as a magazine, which is how we conceive it — something with a beginning, middle, and end, and a certain constellation of elements. Instead, all of it is cannibalized and exists in the digital research world to be accessed for fifteen dollars an article if you are not part of a subscribing library. It is trapped in a publishing model that is disintegrating, because now the expectation is that everything is instant, easily accessible, and free. The journal is a holdover of a pay-for-text model that the world is moving beyond. The next frontier of our dialogue with the publisher is to get them to rethink distribution.

At an editorial level it is quite good. We do not get as many articles from blue chip authors as we would like. They will still publish in the *AHR* [*American Historical Review*] and the *JAH* [*Journal of American History*]. We have done some things about which we are really proud, and among them is an interview with Dan and Frida Berrigan that Mike conducted that is precious. I basically co-wrote a piece with Peter Coyote on LSD on the occasion of the death of Albert Hofmann. We have done some sort of special features that have moxie.

Q: Aside from the stance within a discipline, has it built a political network in any sense?

Varon: No.

Q: Has it defined a sensibility about the sixties in any more sense?

Varon: The only editorial statement we wrote was the founding editorial statement that I essentially authored. That gives a lot of sensibility with respect to the sixties — how we approach this generationally. Since then we have not done anything beyond the contents itself to define an attitude towards the sixties.

Q: I ask the question because I was involved in establishing a journal, but we had a pretty specific agenda. We wanted to change the nature of what oral history was all about, and we pursued that rather diligently.

Varon: There is self-selection in terms of who studies the sixties. A lot of people are part of academia, but do not see themselves fully as a part of academia. As we say, they have the twinkle in the eye or the gleam in the eye. There is a hint of mischief about them. They are in some strong way committed to social justice and they are drawn to the sixties because of the power of inspirational example and they want to understand mechanisms of power and social change for all of the right reasons. It is a journal with an ethical mandate, and it is de facto left of center, insofar as many people publish in it basically sympathetic analyses of various social movements. It attracts people who have a sense that their academic work serves some higher — if highly mediated — sense of social justice. We are particularly proud when there are grad students or very young faculty who publish their first serious piece with us. We take them through the editorial process. We do a lot of line editing. We are like the *New Yorker* editors. I do actual editing. Nobody edits this way anymore in academia. I will spend twenty hours editing a piece, suggesting changes to nearly every bloody sentence.

Q: Is it peer reviewed?

Varon: Yes, it is peer reviewed, but we do a lot of hands on work. I inherited editing from my mother, who was a genius when it came to language. We try to bring people into the fold of the profession in a new way and into the fold of what we are about. We call ourselves in the journal the Karma Bums, like a play on *The Dharma Bums*. Sometimes we give uncommon degrees of attention and care to the intellectual product of other people. It is a way to humanize the profession and not have it be wonky and treat knowledge as a widget. A lot of academia is mechanical. This is not mechanical for us. It is about language, it is about ideas, and it is about struggle. Enough people have gotten the sense that we are trying to do things with a little bit more humanity, with a little bit more respect, and with a high set of standards. We fuck up plenty, so there has to be some term that is the obverse of the Karma Bums, but a lot of it does seem karmic. Every time we go the extra mile, it is returned to us somehow.

Q: In the earliest days of *Marxist Perspectives*, they used to argue that they had a section called “From the Other Side.” Is there any inclination to publish from the other side?

Varon: That would actually be a lovely idea. We did a wonderful — this is one of our best things. We had activists from the sixties or people who had studied the sixties or various pundits reflect on the meaning of the election of [Barack H.] Obama in relation to the sixties. We had a couple of conservative pundits and this guy Seth Moulton, an Iraq war vet who actually was going to Harvard — a kind of a soldier-scholar. We also had people who are skeptical about the sixties. That was as close to the other side as we got. Some of the conservatives’ contributions

were the best. They were saying, “This is the audacity of hype. Obama texted his way into the White House.” A lot of the things that liberals now believe about Obama — like he does not stand for anything — the conservatives were saying all along. Maybe they were on to something. There are a lot of things we would love to do, but again, if it is not consumed in magazine-like fashion, it is a little hard to get that excited about being innovative with it. But we will still try to do innovative things.

Q: You will continue with it?

Varon: Not indefinitely. It should not be forever — I would say after maybe ten years. We are approaching five. It will be great to go out on top — a breakup that is amicable. Then in a way the legend will only grow if it died an early death, when it was still young, and then people will say, “Oh, that journal,” you know?

Q: Been there, done that. Yes.

Varon: Right. Jimmy Dean. Or maybe we can pass it off and cultivate a younger generation of editors. We kind of love the idea that there should be a way to go out on top. I love sports, and how many athletes end their careers before they go into terrible decline. Jim Brown went out on top, Barry Sanders. There is a small handful. In academia you do a lot of things out of a sense of habit.

Q: When did you first make connection to Witness Against Torture?

Varon: The only thing I will say before answering your question is that in the middle of all this is a heavy involvement with Billionaires for Bush.

Q: Right, yes.

Varon: I met my glorious second wife Alice Meaker, now Alice Varon, in the context of Billionaires for Bush.

Q: Let's talk about that for a few minutes. I remember seeing you in the tux.

Varon: Right. Billionaires for Bush is a fairly brilliant group that was the brainchild of a guy named Andrew Boyd. He has been called the Abbie Hoffman of his generation. He is brilliant at using social media and the web to create new kinds of activist forums. The basic premise of Billionaires for Bush is that the Republican Party is a party of, by, and for the rich, that it talks about social issues and values, but it is completely owned by Wall Street. Its policies are inimical to the interests of average Americans, but they hoodwink average Americans into voting for them. It is sort of like *What's the Matter with Kansas?* It is an almost identical set of premises. The idea was to use irony, wit, humor, sex appeal, production values, and spectacle to put out this message in a way that would resonate with the public and the media in ways traditional forms of angry, indignant, righteous, furry left-over sixties style activism would not. We had this aesthetic that was about top hats and tiaras and ball gowns and stunning dresses, and heavy doses of irony whereby we would say the opposite of what we believed.

The idea was that to report on us you would have to basically reveal our message. The name itself, Billionaires for Bush, embeds the critique. The logo is an “elephant bank” with the Republican logo on it with dollars going into it. Our logo and our name itself captures our core idea. We had funny names like Phil T. Rich, Iona Biggayacht, Alexis Anna Rolls, Daddy Warbucks. I was Merchant F. Arms, a sort of shadowy, apolitical arms trader — the dark side of impossible wealth. We would create these personae that represented different iterations of mega richness and use a robber baron, Monopoly-type aesthetic to indict a new generation of plutocrats. Some of it was ingenious and brilliant. At an early demonstration there was big fundraiser where Karl Rove was allegedly going to appear. I had heard that I should go to this demonstration. I was still in my furry radical phase and I would play a drum. I went to this demonstration, and on the one side there are all these angry environmentalists talking about climate change. On the other side there are all these people in top hats and tiaras and ball gowns standing behind a velvet rope. The police had separated us. I saw this woman, Alice — who is now my wife, who I knew from before — looking absolutely stunning in a silver strapless dress, and I wanted to talk with her and flirt with her. She said, “Go away Jeremy, you are ruining it.” I did not know what I was ruining. Then a limousine pulls up and this Karl Rove figure gets out. I think it is Karl Rove and I run up to him and I shake my drum stick in his face and say, “You are ruining America!” Then all the billionairesses come out, kiss him, give him garlands, and put pearls around his neck. The *New York Times* is snapping pictures, CNN is snapping pictures. It was actually the son of Rip Torn who is a dead ringer for Karl Rove. The Billionaires had hired this guy to be an ersatz Rove and pull off this stunt. It made like page nine of the *New York*

Times. Eventually they were on to the trick. That was where I met this group, and then I became more and more involved.

Somebody is doing a brilliant ethnography about it. It is part of the political history of the early 2000s. During the Republican convention here, there was this question of, would the demonstrators be allowed to protest on the Great Lawn? Diana Ross had sung there, Simon and Garfunkel too, but [Michael R.] Bloomberg would not allow a protest because it would allegedly destroy the grass. This was all litigated. They were not allowed to use the lawn, so three hundred thousand protesters marched through narrow streets, and apparently it was miserable. The Billionaires decided that we are going to have a croquet match on the Great Lawn. So maybe a hundred of us were there playing croquet, talking about the little people and how we do not pay taxes, and how George Bush is our guy and we have given him whatever it takes to get reelected. There were probably three media persons for every one of us, from Japan, from Germany, from Sweden, from the Middle East. The idea is sort of a force multiplier. We probably got coequal coverage to three hundred thousand people in the street. This is the genius of Andrew Boyd — to understand the media mechanism and in some sense outsmart it.

We had professional-level singers who would sing in four-part harmony. We had some beautiful women, my wife Alice among them, who were front and center, and handsome guys including a guy who had done modeling. Richard Avedon did a portrait of us. It was using glamour and sex appeal and celebrity sort of as pathways to make a serious political point. On the one hand it was sort of purposeful jest, but it also had a kind of sardonic quality where we were trying to dramatize a profound decadence of *fin de millennium* or beginning-of-the-new-millennium

American culture. Some of our parties felt like Weimar, in my imagination, edgy and out of control. Like a symptom of a sick society in a state of profound decline with aching disparities of rich and poor and this almost medieval sense of dissolution of structure and commitment to the public good. So there was an element of playful jest, but it also had a very sharp edge to it. Some of our satires of consumerism were absolutely fierce.

Q: I would imagine there is a thin line there between the satirical and what could be seen as an endorsement of that whole style. It is a thin line —

Varon: It was a little mind-bending, because you would use your persona name. I do not know the real names of half the people in it. It is the second instance where aliases became important, and it became a kind of power trip. It was somewhat hierarchical — it was not horizontal, anarchic anti-globalization-style organizing. It had a structure. We would talk about it as the brand. We had media professionals working on it. How do we protect the brand? How do we position the brand messaging? In many ways we would take back elements of corporate culture and mobilize them towards activist ends. Some of the leaders went on ego trips, to use the terms of the sixties. They are in the *New York Times* one day and they are on CNN the next day, and Richard Avedon is taking their picture the next day. They got off on being this crazed plutocrat. I would not say at any point we, ourselves, became ideologically confused. Our audience may have been at points, but we did lose a little bit of a sense of connection to the people on whose behalf we were ostensibly speaking.

After the election ended we had a sort of post mortem and it was all about the Billionaires — how great the Billionaires were and we gave prizes and awards and tiaras and bottles of champagne. I thought, look, a lot of people are going to suffer in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantánamo, and wherever else because Bush got reelected. The celebration did not feel right. Yes, the organization was good, but a kind of organizational mania can take over where you care more about the group than the movement — the Weathermen, the PL [Progressive Labor Party], probably the Wobblies. This is everybody. It can become dangerous. Alice was centrally involved, and at some level she and I pulled back because we realized it was a means to an end. For some people like semi-employed actors and East Village drifters, this became their life. When the music stopped, they did not want to leave the party. They are all terrific people. The circumstances were just very sad, losing the election. It was pretty amazing for what it was, and a tremendous amount of fun. It was part of a crusade to defeat Bush, so we were singular, but connected to a massive voter —

Q: You at least felt that way.

Varon: Yes. The group ultimately understood it as well. We had a constituency that liked our style. People would drift in and out of different groups and activism. It was not completely a culture unto itself, but it could feel that way at times. I probably most appreciated the cultural program. We had a professional song writer, Cliff Tasner, who is in LA and is the real deal. He wrote absolutely brilliant songs. We had a performance group called The Follies, and we had this thing called Dick Cheney's Christmas Spectacular, in which I would drum. There was this whole

cultural program that was sort of lampooning conspicuous consumption and corporate hegemony.

A huge question was, “Where are you going to be on election night, 2004?” Billionaires had been essentially defunct since 2001, but my heart is with these people, and I wanted to celebrate, hopefully, a democratic victory with them. We were doing some kind of performance where there was a Sarah Palin character. I was playing drums in it and doing one of our shows that are incredibly funny political satire with music. I have a little baby —

Q: 2004 — Sarah Palin?

Varon: No, 2008. I am sorry, I was off by four years. This is 2008. The Billionaires decided to have an election-night party, even though the group had been practically defunct since 2005. Me and Alice had a baby boy name Arlo — namesake of Arlo Guthrie, son of Woody Guthrie. We do the play and I am drumming. The early election returns look good. This is eight to nine p.m., and then all of the returns really come in and we were fixed on the television screen. The play ended with the Billionaires first singing “This Land is Your Land,” and they sang it, as they always did, “This land is my land, this land is my land, from Davos, Switzerland to the Cayman Islands.” Joking that, “this land is made for me and me,” how it is all the possession of the rich. Then this beautiful and smart woman who was the head of our follies troop said that the whole point of our group is to stop having to sing these lyrics and to reconnect with the true spirit and the real words of the song. I think for only the second time in the history of the group they broke with the irony and then started to sing, ‘This land is our land’ — the real lyrics with the forgotten

verse about private property without irony in this beautiful gospel of electoral ecstasy. Towards the end of it my little son, Arlo, wanders up into stage and is held in the arms of our Sarah Palin character as they are singing this land is your land, this land is my land. Me and my wife are crying and a lot of people are crying. This is a beautiful moment.

Then Obama wins, and then we all go nuts. We went to Union Square where probably five thousand spontaneously gather, sing “God Bless America” without irony, hoots and hollers of Michelle [Obama], Barack, blessings for the children. The hip-hop kids, Latino and African-American youth for the first time feeling that they are a part of the great American rainbow, that this country represents them. It was a powerful, unbelievable, cathartic moment. We were running and dancing in the streets. We wandered home at three in the morning.

The funny thing was that when I entered the subway, there was this homeless African American guy just muttering, “You all are a bunch of goddamn fools, ain't nothing gonna change, what are you talking about? New president — it ain't gonna make a goddamn bit of difference. You think I'm going to get a house because this motherfucker Obama is in office? What the hell, you all are a bunch of fools, you're a bunch of goddamn fools. The system ain't gonna change.” It was like this prophetic voice from the blind man in some sort of Greek tragedy. I thought, “Maybe I should be really happy or maybe this cat is right.” It was chilling and I have thought a lot about that guy over the last several years. The cat was right.

Q: How did you make contact?

Varon: I watched the TV with horror during the Bush years, and was thunderstruck and apoplectic to learn what I learned — Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo. I remember years of being incredibly angry at my television and wanting to do something, but not knowing what to do. What I learned about the incarceration of the RAF members in Germany clued me into this issue. They claimed they were tortured, in “antiseptic” and mostly psychological ways. My arrest experience clued me into this issue. It just seemed completely and totally beyond the pale, like America has to stand for something — innocent until proven guilty, the inviolability of the human body, the rule of law. All of this crumbled away, and quickly. It was a very confusing time for people as the edifice of our society seemed to be thrown into question in perhaps unprecedented ways.

One day I got an email off some progressive listserv about the press conference of the delegation that went to Guantánamo in 2005. I thought, “Wow, this is the most incredible thing I have ever heard. These people actually went? Who are these pilgrims? This is unbelievable. It is remarkable. I want to know these people. I have to meet these people.” One of them was Frida Berrigan. Coincidentally, I had been to the trial years before that her father, Phil, was at for spilling blood on A-10 Warthogs that fired depleted uranium bullets in the first Gulf War. This was his last imprisonment. He was sentenced to something like seven or eleven years in prison. Through a variety of circumstances I was at the Catonsville courthouse. It was the same Catonsville courthouse where he got sentenced back in the 1960s and I first met Frida there.

Q: Why were you there?

Varon: I had met a guy, Paul Mayer, who was a close associate of the Berrigans, who was the officiant of the wedding of my ex-wife's brother. He just seemed like this sort of holy man — he recited during the service Chief Seattle, Berrigan, Gandhi. I came up to him afterwards and said, “You did something in the sixties, didn't you?”

He said, “Oh yes, I did.” Then he said it would have been the Catonsville Ten if he was not in Latin America at the time. He later said, “You should go to the trial and see who these people are.” He had disaffiliated somewhat. He thought they were a little too insular and self-righteous. He said, “You should go,” so I went to Catonsville. I saw Frida, and I saw her father get sentenced to like ten years. Ramsey Clark was the defense attorney during the court hearing. Phil turned his back on the judge. He would not acknowledge earthly authority, which was in a state of breach with divine mandate. Then the courtroom got cleared because people started singing some Christian peace song.

Then they had this liturgy that re-enacted a Plowshares action. It was like a seventh grade play where one kid is the broccoli and the other kid is the wolf. They had big missiles and they had these papier-mâché hammers beating the missiles. It was like a demented Sunday school play. Then they had a little pot luck at the church where everyone was gathered, and you meet this earnest woman from the Midwest saying, “Yes, the macaroni salad is good, and Betty is doing seven years in Leavenworth.” It was like Ned Flanders from the Simpsons — this trickly, American, Christian Sunday school culture — meeting über radical politics. It was strange, but these people seemed deeply committed. So I knew Frida via that.

Q: This was a piece of theatre that they put on at the courthouse?

Varon: Not at the courthouse, at a church the day before sentencing. I went to the last day of the trial. They let me be part of the witness to a piece of it, when Phil turned his back. This was years ago. During the performance at the church, the family — like the Kennedy family during the funeral — was off to the side, looking grim but determined. This was a sacred day for them — the day before the sentencing of Brother Phil, Father Phil — with Dan, the spiritual lodestar of their movement. He died of liver cancer in 2007. They gave him a furlough for medical reasons. He was in prison during 9/11 and had to be put in segregation because people were so jacked up in a patriotic way that they feared for his physical safety. That is Frida's story.

So I heard about these people, and I thought, “Oh my God.” I wanted to do something and then I eventually found out that they were doing a demonstration at the UN. The UN had come out with a report saying conditions at Guantánamo were tantamount to torture. They refused to visit because the U.S. said that the UN folks could not have unmediated access to the prisoners. John Bolton was the U.S. representative, and he was a real creep. We had a demonstration at the UN mission. I came with my drum. They had a big cage.

Q: You mentioned drum a couple of times. Are you a drummer?

Varon: De facto. I am a movement drummer. I will bring my drum — sometimes it is hard work because you have to beat that damn thing for two or three hours and vary the rhythm. The power

of music — this I get from the Grateful Dead. The power of music to affect emotion is not to be —

Q: Is it just a gimmick or are you a serious drummer?

Varon: I am a serious guitar and banjo player and have an innate sense of rhythm. I am a fairly serious. I have never formally learned how to play the drums, but I am quite good. That is a common role for me — to show up and someone realizes, “Oh man, this guy can keep the beat, so you stand here and you lead us and we want to march at this pace and so forth.”

It was raining and there was this big cage in which they had a prisoner. There was this furry guy with the Christian cross, and he says, “You are the drummer. Okay, you lead us. I’ll maneuver the cage.” There were two hundred people snaking through Manhattan. There were lots of police around. As we were marching, my eyes lock on Matt, and I thought, “He really knows what he is doing.” Then his eyes lock on me and he thinks, “I do not know this guy, but he has been around the block a couple of times.” We had this silent communication, and in different ways still do.

This was Matt Daloisio. If we have a leader, it’s him. I think of him as Saint Matt. He is one of the most amazing people I have ever met. When I connected with the group there was an arrest of maybe twenty people there, among them Dan Berrigan who was very old by that point, probably about eighty-seven — really like a twig. He stood there solemnly listening to all the speeches in this kind of meditative repose and got arrested at this incredibly advanced age. That was when I got an inkling of who and what Witness Against Torture was. It was people who I wanted to know, affiliate with, be with and do stuff with.

Q: Had you had any knowledge of the Catholic Worker prior to that?

Varon: Zero.

Q: Zero?

Varon: Even though —

Q: You had not heard of it at all?

Varon: No. In a vague way — like how non-alcoholics hear about AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]. Now it is everywhere. You hear about it, but it does not mean anything to you unless you need it. Clearly that earlier Frida Berrigan, Warthog, Catonsville thing — that was the Catholic Worker, but it was never explained to me in those terms. I knew the Berrigans and the Catonsville Nine as part of the sixties story. I really had no idea who Dorothy Day was. I did not appreciate how deeply religiously motivated these folks were until I met with them.

Q: Quite a surprise, no?

Varon: Yes, at a variety of levels. I had always been thoroughly secular and generally saw religion as being on the wrong side of the social justice divide, while understanding the importance of faith to Martin Luther King. Jesse Jackson was big for my generation, and he is a

preacher, among other things. Al Sharpton is an important advocate of good causes and is a man of faith. Despite the radical strain of African American Protestantism, and despite my love of Paul Tillich, the Nazi-era Protestant theologian I studied in college very seriously, and despite knowing in principle about liberation theology, and the nuns and the Jesuits in South America, I still was skeptical towards religion. These guys, in a way that became quickly apparent, felt called to this witness as Christians. They felt that it was a matter of religious duty and fidelity to a conception of the sacred for them to speak out. As Matt will say, "Jesus was tortured." He was the original victim of torture within the Judeo-Christian mythology. Their willingness to be arrested is a form of martyrdom with a sacred cast to it.

The important thing for me is that these people were actually doing something. There is a lot of talk, and talk is very cheap. I tried to hook up with World Can't Wait because they said they wanted to do Guantánamo stuff, but at the time it seemed they never actually did anything. I was desperate to put on the jumpsuit and stand in Times Square and nothing ever came of this plan they had. These people [Witness] were actually doing stuff. The religion was secondary for me. Also, I did understand that the War on Terror is framed in terms of a war on Islam. Here Christians are crossing barriers of faith, and white people are crossing barriers of race, and Westerners are crossing barriers of culture to reach out, out of a sense of universality and human fellowship, to honor the humanity of the distant, suffering, abused, degraded, abjected other. That always seemed significant to me. If reconciliation and fellowship is how you fight terror, this is an instance of it — not the George Bush version or even the Barack Obama version. This is a living instance of making common cause around notions of universal human rights and the rule of law.

Q: As someone from outside of that tradition, what did witnessing mean to you before you met these folks? Witnessing is all over the place.

Varon: It is all over the place. I was familiar in a soft way with the language of bearing witness, which is part of lexicon of the left. I remember that from college and before. I did a lot of study of the Holocaust with LeCapra. There are witness studies scholars — what does it mean to witness, what is the position of the witness? It usually has to do with the witness as a victim of some kind of traumatic experience. Then the witness of the witness and then the —

Q: Yes, the interviewer is the second witness.

Varon: Is the secondary witness who experiences secondary trauma. All that stuff seemed highly abstract and theoretical, and then Frida explained to me what witnessing meant to her. At one point I brought my Witness pals to Drew to have an interfaith dialogue about torture and justice. Frida said that witness is a form of transformative revelation where you behold something, and then that act of beholding comes with an obligation to change your conduct. Guantánamo was not supposed to be seen. It is a legal black hole, far away, you cannot get there, we cannot know the prisoners' names, you do not know what is going on inside. They have these ridiculous tours for congresspeople and journalists, but it is pure propaganda. 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 physically went to Guantánamo to behold the place. 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.

She emphasized the point that witness comes with obligation to then try to further reveal and fight against the injustice that you have seen. I like this notion of witnesses as transformative revelation. I want to write an academic essay on this. I would love to interview Berrigan and understand the history of witness and Christian tradition and so forth. Maybe that is her own understanding, but it works for me. I think our name — like Billionaires for Bush — is very evocative. The website for Witness Against Torture is www.witnesstorture.com. What does that mean, to witness torture? That is terrible. We have seen the Abu Ghraib photographs. We have all witnessed torture. The question is, what does that mean? It means whatever you make it mean. For us, what we have made it mean is fighting to end torture by forcing other people to witness torture by the spectacle of people in jumpsuits, by penetrating symbolically important space, by identifying and marking and testifying to the existence of the crime. We also try to engage people and institutions that have enormous amounts of power to dismantle this venal criminal machinery that has destroyed lives and in many ways has destroyed the constitutional fabric of our own society.

I found it not terribly difficult to slip into their concept. One thing worth mentioning is that the Berrigans have this sense of being prophets and telling humanity the waywardness of its ways. For years the nuclear issue was the most important. Now, environmental ruin is our image of apocalyptic species self-ruin. They did not care too much about the specific efficacy of their conduct, because what they wanted to do was issue a sacred warning that if we do not heal

ourselves as a species and a planet we are going to destroy life. Frida and some of the others socialized in that mindset had inherited it to a degree. We saw a special screening of Alex Gibney's movie *Taxi to the Dark Side* for advocates and afterwards we had lunch at a Greek diner. I was asking Frida, "What is the end game? What are we trying to change? Are we trying to change policy? What about Congress?" She said that power never listened anyhow, "It is not really about changing the people in power. We are not going to change them. I do not care what the institutions" — and I said, "Really? Don't you want to free prisoners and win court cases and defeat the Military Commissions Act?" She had, it seemed to me, this cosmic cynicism about the fallibility of earthly justice and this commitment to some sort of divine conception of righteousness without much mediation between the two. I said, "I am not in it just to witness and not have that witness make a difference." We made some funny bargain that she would come around to my way of thinking if I could do them a favor. I said, "What favor?" She said, "Design us a play. Design us a guerrilla theater piece." I agreed, started scribbling notes on a napkin at the restaurant, and then within a few days I had assembled that Theater Against Torture piece. I do not know if you read it in our book. It is elaborate and it is hard to follow stage directions just reading the play. I think the play was incredibly powerful. That was the first time that I contributed in a direct way to the organization.

Q: Hold on for a minute. You sent me an email about your involvement. You have categories of involvement — Cornell, actions, media work, dramaturgy, et cetera. I wanted to follow that not only because it is handy, but because it is your categorization and it is the way in which you presented it to me. We do not have to follow exactly those things, but we can start with, say,

media work or action or Cornell — whichever one you want to start with. Let's keep those categories.

Varon: In terms of Cornell, within every activist group there is a division of labor. Every group has a brain trust that reads the newspaper, does study and then tries to come up with a salient up-to-the minute analysis. Being an academic and text junkie, I — probably more than anybody else in the group — have made a point of trying to master some of the detail. As you well know from talking to the lawyers, the devil and the angel is in the detail. What was *Boumediene* [*Boumediene v. Bush*, 2008] and what is habeas corpus? Can we trust the recidivism figures? We are very careful to build our actions on a command of the facts and our understanding of the political meaning of the facts. I will kind of assemble the facts. We are definitely grateful to CCR [Center for Constitutional Rights] and Mark Denbeaux and the ACLU, and I have developed relationships with people in all of these outfits. I will preliminarily process my take on where I think the issue is at for the group, and then we will try to build what we do around that.

Q: These are at meetings or —?

Varon: These are at meetings and private emails with Matt and Frida and Foley to some extent, though he is now in England. Matt, Frida and I are in some sense the ideological leadership. There are lots of other great folks in the group, whose history fighting for justice is twice as long and brave as mine. We do all this with a very strong sense of humility and egolessness. That is part of this tradition as well. It is absolutely beautiful because ego can be powerfully destructive, and I know that from twenty years of activism.

As you know, I have corresponded extensively with the Justice Department. Any time we need to write something and it needs to sound good and nicely composed and richly layered, I am the guy because I have generic writing skills. That is not to say that other people are not good — Frida writes a lot of our stuff as well. We trade drafts and everything feels like communal property, including language. She will come up with a phrase that I will use, and I will come up with a phrase that she will use. There is this circulation of words and the ideas that they embody which become public possessions, owned by everybody, mobilized by everybody as the need may arise. In that sense it feels very communal. Some of these people live communally, many of them in Catholic Worker houses. This is a different concept of communal. That is one role that I play. Then there is the media work. There was training for human rights organizations and advocates by media professionals that I went to maybe three years ago and met people from Amnesty and ACLU.

Q: Was it an organization that put this on?

Varon: Yes, some foundation sponsored this thing. The people probably got paid three thousand or four thousand dollars for a two-day seminar. There was stuff on new media and old media and the power of video and so forth. They trained us in the basics of how to write a press release and shake the media tree. I have this dear friend, Jon Rosen — this is a long story, but he was an undergraduate of mine at Rutgers, an absolute wunderkind political genius who ended up forming his own political consulting firm representing all kinds of progressive causes. He did the [Eric] Schneiderman campaign and worked for ACORN [Association of Community

Organizations for Reform Now] and labor unions all across America. He is a wizard, and he gave me basically a free training that he could have charged one thousand dollars for.

He is very practical in his approach, and he stressed that to us. Journalists are busy people. It is not like some smart editor looks at the world and says, “This is important, we are going to write a story about this today.” Everything that they cover is because somebody said, “You should cover this.” If the government says this is important, we are having a press conference, the media will be there. The government has unique power. Everything else is layers of consultants and media professionals and PR [public relations] people trying to get on the radar of the major media organizations so that you cover their thing. It is like a Darwinian struggle for attention, a very cynical game, but that is how it is played. It is the politics and business of getting noticed. My friend Jon taught me how to approach a journalist — simple, straightforward, write the story for them in ways that they do not even know it. Your press release should read like the opening paragraph of a news story. It is all about getting it covered and giving them the frames and the language by which they can make what you are trying to do sensible. Do not have a thousand different fonts and headlines and have it look like some weirdo wrote it. Keep it short, keep it simple, keep it concise. If you do not call them with a follow-up call, you cannot assume that they read it. It is all about cultivating relationships. I started to do this and our whole outfit got pretty good at it. We had some major media hits. For one of our trials we had a page one metro story in the *Washington Post*, and every staffer — and Cheney, [Donald] Rumsfeld and all those goons — everybody in D.C. reads Page One Metro. We had an A-11 and A-17 *New York Times* picture or story, BBC, Al Jazeera, CNN, Pacifica all the time. We had a few real triumphs, like a version of this picture was in —

Q: Is it the Fairey picture?

Varon: Yes, the Shepard Fairey. That is a whole other story. This is my friend Mike Foley. I am in the picture that appeared in the *New York Times*.

Q: We are now looking at the cover of *Witness Against Torture*.

Varon: Right. We got good at this and got some major placements of our pictures and stories. I alerted Jon to these and he said, "Look, this is the kind of coverage that people pay some PR firm ten thousand dollars to generate. It is not rocket science. You can do this yourself, and you did it." He taught us how to do this well. Frida, a couple other people and I are the media people. Getting media is important to us. If the media does not cover it at some level it does not happen. Not all activism has to be media-focused, but we definitely want to reach the people in Washington. We want people in Washington to know that Americans are bothered in a deep way, and that there is a community of people who are willing to take pretty significant risks because they believe in certain fundamental truths. We want people around the world to know that not all Americans are corrupt goons. It is really important that this stuff makes it into the Arab world and into Europe, and people can say not all Americans are like that, and that there is a resistance.

I am sure Matt has talked about this, but probably the most inspiring thing is how we have had affirmation of the value of our work from around the world. A former detainee's wife wrote to us

and participated in one of our ten-day fasts. Lawyers conveyed the original protest by the delegation of Americans to the detainees. It is in the book we published. That has happened repeatedly. We have heard from the inside. People have written letters to us. After our last protest apparently there were twenty or thirty letters. These were seized by the U.S. Navy. Maybe one day they will be released. We have reached the families of detainees and ex-detainees. Yes, at some level we want to make a spectacle of our own activism to let the government know that there is serious dissent from what they are doing and then to let potential allies and sympathizers know that somebody out there is doing stuff. The other piece of this that I got really into is our theatrical presentation —

Q: Let's stay with media for a moment. I was struck by a reading of the short article that you have on cultural memory and comparing the RAF [Red Army Faction] to prisoners of Guantánamo in terms of the language of terrorism. Obviously your work in the media has to be somehow geared to undermining those conceptions of terrorism. How do you go about doing that? On the one hand it seems like an impossible kind of problematic that you set forth. On the other hand you are struggling against that.

Varon: Right. Our strategy has changed as more and more of the Guantánamo saga has become known. The study by Denbeaux looking at the CSRTs [Combatant Status Review Tribunals] especially drove home the point that a lot of the people there are substantially, if not wholly, in the wrong place at the wrong time and truly wrongfully captured. Then an ex-commander at Guantánamo says, “We got the wrong guys.” [Lawrence B.] Wilkerson has signed an affidavit

saying that Bush and Cheney knew that they got the wrong guys. He was the chief of staff of Colin Powell when he was the Secretary of State.

The narrative that America is holding innocent men has some echo in publicly available information. Part of our point is to say that, in the first instance, most of the people at Guantánamo are not terrorists. Of the early population, perhaps only a tiny percentage were involved in hostile acts toward the U.S., and some at such a low level it hardly warrants extended imprisonment. They brought so-called “high value detainees” there only in 2006 to coerce passage of the Military Commissions Act, people like Khalid Sheik Mohammed, which burned in people’s minds all over again Cheney’s big lie that Guantánamo holds only “the worst of the worst.” Another hugely important point, and this was important earlier on, is that there has to be a legitimate juridical process in the first instance to determine who is who. The paradigmatic expression of that for a while was the right of habeas corpus — that they have a right to challenge their detention before some kind of competent tribunal. Then this was litigated. It was part of the *Rasul* [*Rasul v. Bush*, 2004] decision. This is what *Boumediene* affirmed. For a long time our main point was you cannot be held in captivity without confronting your accuser, confronting the evidence, and being permitted to make the case that you were wrongfully detained. This is the essence of the Magna Carta and often described as the fundamental bulwark against tyranny. There is all kinds of liberal democratic rhetoric about how this is the cornerstone of a truly civilized and democratic society, so the tyranny of wrongful detention and the denial of habeas corpus was a big part of our message.

What we tried to do is embed our argument in the action itself. Our two signature actions were getting arrested en masse, and instead of giving our own names, giving the names of the detainees on whose behalf we were arrested. You give the detainee name to the police officer, it enters into the court docket as Mohammed Al whatever, and 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. We basically won that one. That victory has been eroded substantially, but for about two years that was the main focus of our activism. We had a mass arrest at the Federal District Court where, if the detained men were brought to the federal system, their cases would be heard. We had a mass arrest at the Supreme Court in 2007 basically trying to make the same point. That arrest is kind of interesting in its particulars.

A few months earlier, we were at the Supreme Court when the *Boumediene* decision was argued, and this was a pretty amazing day. It was December 5 and the case was being argued at nine a.m. Mike Foley and I were both teaching in New York, and we thought we needed to be down there because there is going to be media at the Supreme Court. I picked him up on Eleventh Avenue at nine thirty at night. My dad lives in the D.C. area. We drove down and arrived at two in the morning. December 5 was a freezing, cold day — strange for D.C. Mike and I get there, we wear our jumpsuits, and we have various signs. Matt and Frida had gone to Jonah House, which is where the Berrigan camp is, and they had gotten caught in traffic, so the rest of our team was not there. So it was me, Mike and three other people, and we thought we better do something. We shivered and froze and we held up signs. Click — this becomes a picture on page seventeen of the *New York Times* the following day accompanying a story about this — big. Then we see

Michael Ratner emerge from the building at maybe eleven, minutes after he argued in court one of the most important court cases of his generation. He has confessed to us that he started to cry when he saw us. He said to us on the steps of the court, “As a lawyer it all feels very abstract, you talk about your client and this and that procedure and precedent — it can feel so disconnected from people. I am so glad that you are here representing the people that we are representing. It makes it all feel human and real.”

We said, “No, Michael, what we are doing makes no difference if there are not people in the legal trench like you. You are our hero. But for a couple of lawyers we would have fascism.”

He said, “No, it is you guys in the street. Legal power means nothing without people power.”

I look like a giant insect, in my jumpsuit and with my hood pulled just over my eyes. He is in a three-piece suit, and we are looking at each other saying, “You the man!” “No, you the man!” “No, you the man!” Then we stopped and there was this moment of recognition of, “Wow, both are necessary.”

People always ask you what works, and from a historical perspective it seems that nothing works and everything works. It is a combination of elements, inside and outside. We are this dignified outside presence that through arrests enters into the machinery. The point is that we try to dictate the terms by which we're represented and handled as best as we can. When you get arrested you give over a piece of your freedom, but you do not give over all of it. Comportment, self-understanding, a sense of affinity, and a sense of dignity are all armor against a system that is

going to define you and chew you up and give you a number and mistreat you. That sense of controlling the meaning and controlling the message extends to just about everything that we do.

This was my design. There was a press conference for the beginning of our trial from the Supreme Court arrest, in which he occupied the lobby and actually shut down the building. The police said that was the only time they can remember that ever happening. *Boumediene* was decided in our favor, and right after the trial — cosmic convergence? Did we have any direct effect? Probably not, but in the matrix of multiple causes we would like to feel that it made some difference. We wanted to kick off the trial with something powerful. We decided that we would go to the scene of the crime — the Supreme Court. Each of the defendants would hold the name of the detainee that they had when they went into prison that day. Eighty were arrested and I think thirty-one went to trial. They solemnly march from the Supreme Court to the courthouse where they are being tried, and then sit kneeling with their hoods on as Frida and Matt and a couple of other human rights advocates give brilliant speeches about why we are here and what we have done. Frida's was her finest hour. Matt says, “We are conscious that in five months we have gone further in the legal system than these people have gone in seven years” or however long it had been. Then a couple of people testify about who their detainee was. The thing concludes with them one by one taking off their hoods and then laying the name of the detainee at something we called the altar of justice — a little monument with a blow up of the Constitution, and signs saying “Magna Carta, Geneva Conventions, habeas corpus” and so forth. The men’s names are now in front of the altar of justice.

The folks on trial have by now de-hooded. They are no longer detainees — they are American citizens. Then they walk one by one away from the “altar of justice” and hold this enormous “Close Guantánamo” banner. 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. All kinds of media were there. My father, my son and my wife were there. They told me that reporters were crying seeing this. This is a press conference, but it is theater, and people are crying. It is a spectacle. The story of our trial a few days later became the Page One thing that Peter Finn wrote. He is their main Guantánamo national security reporter.

The other thing about media that my friend Jon said was, “Look, at some level you guys are the story. Pick out five compelling people and try to get local press.” We would wrap people in apple pie and the flag. Christine Gaunt — literally a third-generation hog farmer from Des Moines, Iowa — was the subject of a Des Moines Register piece. The piece was all about how this average American came to Washington because she does not like torture and got arrested at the Supreme Court. She was moved by all the placards and singing about justice and tyranny and the glory of American law and legal tradition. We would tell the local reporter, “This is a local hero you want to do a story on.” We have six or eight of these around the country. Ideally they would be in congressional districts where there is somebody on the fence about this, that or the other thing. This is what Jon imparted — how to make what you do, and occasionally who you are, news. We do not want to make ourselves a story in a crass way, but in some sense our advocacy moved us to enter the public realm in this way and the connections we have tried to make symbolically to the detainees are compelling to people.

Q: I was kind of impressed in the reading in *Witness Against Torture* that there are actions outside of New York. There is mention of Chicago and mention of some college towns, obviously. It is more national in scope than I thought it would be.

Varon: Quite honestly I do not know — we will get little reports if someone got arrested in Chicago or if somebody walked in a jumpsuit in Olympia, Washington. There are people who are fired up who are mostly connected with Catholic Worker houses around the country. I pay glancing attention to that. It is centered in New York and Washington. There are some very good people in Washington who really know the court system and the monuments and all twenty-seven police divisions that might arrest you. Art Laffin comes to mind. These are real veterans of the struggle — dear friends of the Berrigans, holy men and women. I would love to say more about the national actions, but I really do not know.

Q: How important is the dramaturgy?

Varon: I think it is hugely important. To me it is a —

Q: It is such a tradition with the Catholic Church.

Varon: Yes.

Q: The whole organization of the mass is drama.

Varon: Right. There is a sense of a conscious connection to that. I love politics, but I love art. The aesthetic production of the sixties and the political theater from the era have always been moving and important to me. In a way, it is all a form of communication. People grow dull to facts and figures. The idea is to dramatize a critique and dramatize a message. It is a way to sort of shock the conscience and make people feel. I got a sense of the power of performance and high production values from the Billionaires for Bush, not the shaggy left that does everything half-assed. Rehearse things, plan them to a T, and always come off with a sense of dignity and professionalism and you can wind up with wondrous results. Initially, the main actor for our theater piece was Michael Cates, who for many years was a member of the Blue Man Group, so he was an accomplished thespian. Our political theater piece, Theater Against Torture, was really well done. We would have hours-long rehearsals to get all the elements right and we never really blew it.

Our signature aesthetic is having hooded people in solemn procession march through various spaces. I do not know if you watched any of the video, but even in video, it is incredibly arresting to have these sad, hooded figures pass by this or that monument or that on some crisp Washington day. We have discovered that seeing somebody in a hood affects people in particular ways. They tend not to taunt you. A solemnity comes over them. Even if they disagree with you, there is some weird respect that is accorded. With that, there is a little bit of a danger that you can blur the line between you and the detainee. This is the problem of secondary witness. We are not the victim. This whole “We are all German Jews” that the French *Enragés* said in 1968 — at some level, no, you are not. That is the whole point. We never want to blur that line. We will un-

costume when we want to affirm our role as sympathetic citizen. We wear the regalia when we want to be these haunting avatars of this abused population. I think we have a reputation in the movement for doing things really well. It is partly Matt, who was born at age forty. He is one of those guys who has never been irresponsible a day in his life. If something has to happen at three seconds before three, Matt will do it. I am another person who can bottom line something and has an almost sacred sense of completing the task I sign up for.

Q: Did you know he was interviewed by Elizabeth [C. Grefrath] here, and he mentions that the group has an aversion to technology?

Varon: I would not say that is quite true. We have this guy David Meieran and then this fellow Mike Benedetti who do our website and are good at all that. When I went to this human rights training it was interesting because there is the professional human rights organizations — bless them. But there is a sense in which that work becomes an end in itself. There is this whole media/technological apparatus that is the *sine qua non* of any advocacy organization or non-profit. They all have their Twitter, their YouTube channel, their Facebook page, their campaign page, their like and dislike button, and their donate button. At a certain point it becomes formulaic. I am much more into old media, like get the *New York Times* to report on you. The whole thing now is to create your own media, which we do a lot of. There is this whole left-wing blogosphere through which our things circulate. Maybe it is a generational thing, but for me, when Wolf Blitzer notices you, then you matter. The point is that a lot of the technology has become so routinized, I do not know how much it ultimately contributes. We are interested more in quality of engagement than volume of engagement. That is a problem because we are a small

group and we made the most sense when we were attached to a large movement. For a while the large movement was the mobilization of the Left to defeat [John S.] McCain and elect Obama.

Now that Obama is in office everybody has gone away, except us, the ACLU, CCR, Amnesty International and a few others. There is this No More Guantánamos group. World Can't Wait has stepped up and done wonderful work. A couple of new people have entered the scene, but it is a finite group of people. We have never been an established human rights organization. The downside is we do not have the resources and the cache and the connections and the funding that they have, but the upside is that we are free to follow only the dictates of our conscience and what makes most sense at the time. We are not answerable to anybody in a narrow sense. We do not have donors. We do not have to run a campaign. We do not have to ghostwrite the press releases of our executive director. We are acutely conscious that that gives us a latitude to be confrontational rhetorically or physically that other organizations do not have. It is totally a symbiotic relationship. I like and respect Ateqah Khaki at the ACLU and Leili Kashani of CCR. CCR is the most militant of all of the legal collectives. We have tried to fashion ourselves as a grassroots, direct action human rights organization which, as a species of activism, barely exists without this sense of sacred mission and rootedness and Dorothy Day and so forth.

Q: You are using the ecumenical language of spirit. What does that mean? You use that in your — has worked a craft, a kind of ecumenical language of spirit.

Varon: Going back to the conversation that I had with Frida at the Greek deli, one thing that I have been very intent on doing is to not be tone deaf when it comes to real politics and power

and legislation and representatives and court cases. Matt has very graciously thanked me for bringing that dimension into it in the name of greater efficacy. Something that the group has always had was this pre-figurative commitment to trying to understand human fellowship and comity in an enlightened and emancipated way. Another important part is to celebrate the power of human connection. The tangible victories have been really small, as you well know, so when we hear on the by and by that the day of a detainee was a little less bad because he was aware that somebody was trying to do something, that means a lot to us. I guess it was two Januarys ago that we saw this amazing movie called *Outside the Law* by Andy Worthington. Then we had a press conference at the National Press Club where Omar Deghayes and [Lakhdar] Boumediene were Skyped in. That was the beginning of a new level of connection to the detainees themselves. That is a kind of intangible, spiritual victory for us against the regime of cynicism, suspicion, and hatred that defines the War on Terror.

Another neat thing is a couple of Januarys ago, we made a connection with some group of Afghani children who lived in the mountains and are part of a pacifist organization opposing the American intervention. On Martin Luther King's birthday, which is January 15, these kids up in the mountains of Afghanistan wrote parts of Martin Luther King speeches in English — almost like Bob Dylan in the famous video — on flash cards talking about the power of love to conquer hate and so on. They sent us a little video montage. There were little children's drawings of war planes bombing — the stuff that kids do to represent a world of war. Then a face with tears coming down his eyes holds up a little sign saying Witness Against Torture. I was floored.

I have talked about this with Matt, and it was at that point that we tried to understand Witness Against Torture not as an organization, but, again, as a practice and as something that nobody owns but anybody can do. This is an Afghan kid all the way around the world witnessing against torture, suffering what we do not suffer, not even in our imagination. That, I think, is some indication of what we mean by the ecumenical language of spirit. We would love it if this notion of Witness Against Torture became more widely proliferated. Andy Worthington has become a powerful ally. The English scene has some sense — he knows Clive Stafford [Smith], Reprieve, Deghayes — of what we do and they have commented on some of our stuff. This is the latest. I brought this.

Q: This is a flyer.

Varon: This is a flyer.

Q: Witness Against Torture. It is not addressed to any particular action.

Varon: We are going to use this shortly in D.C. Partly what we want to do is trouble the conscience, especially the conscience of government employees, some of whom are probably sick at heart and want to do something, want to speak out, want to say no, but are too afraid or do not know how or are confused about the facts. We have had this whole tango with the Justice Department. They have treated us very rudely, but there are people on the inside we know who are not hostile to us. We are imagining an action where it is eight thirty a.m. at the Justice Department and then at the other Federal buildings we have maybe two people in jumpsuits and

two people in suits with the dog tags that all government employees have. The people in suits would be hooded, so the employees and the detainees are hooded and the notion is in some ways the jailer himself is un-free.

Then we would flyer the workforce with fliers on orange paper, and then have somebody solemnly read this thing. I do not want to read the whole thing, but it begins, “If you or your parents, child, spouse were kidnapped, terrorized, falsely accused, would you call this torture? Demand freedom and stop at nothing for justice? Would you want the world to know your name, defend your honor, set you free? As you're reading this the United States is holding innocent men, sons, fathers, human beings at Guantánamo,” and so forth. The final stanza says, “The President, Military, Congress, Justice Department — the government is the jailer. You are the government. You can say no. Not in my name, not in my America. You can help free an innocent man, prosecute torture, defend the rule of law, reunite a broken family, win America's honor, your own, and make sure this never happens again. Will you?”

This is a direct appeal to the conscience of an employee. A student of mine at Parsons did this drawing, which is really quite brilliant.

Q: We will attach it to the transcript.

Varon: Okay, please. I have a better, slightly updated version.

Q: Add whatever you want to when you get the transcript.

Varon: Sure. This is a cocktail — a communal effort. It is so visually arresting that I imagine some employees will tack this to their desk and start talking. We try to create buzz. Frida once said when they were there at Guantánamo that their presence was the buzz on the base. We can be the buzz in the building. At times we have penetrated and re-purposed public space. This gets into *détournement*, spectacle, and situationism and so forth.

Matt probably talked about this, but on January 22, the day that Guantánamo was supposed to close, we dispatched a team to the Capitol and half of them held signs saying “broken laws, broken lives, broken promises.” Or “broken promises, broken laws, broken lives.” We think about the messaging. There was a lot of debate. What is the moment? The promise has been broken, lives have been destroyed, and laws have been broken. Okay — broken laws, lies, promises. They stood on the outside, and on the inside a group went to the rotunda at the very spot where dead presidents and Rosa Parks have lain in state and then broke off from a tour and then put a death shroud with the name of the three guys who died in 2006 — CCR is representing the families of one of the guys — sprinkled orange rose petals or orange flower petals on the shrouds, and got arrested. One of the members of the group was blind.

The police took copious photographs that they turned over to us in discovery. I have the police photographs on my hard drive. To put the death shroud of detainees possibly murdered by the U.S. government at the epicenter of a building officially called the Temple of Liberty — that is what the rotunda is called — that is pretty friggin’ powerful. A photo through CCR made it to the father of one of these dead guys. He thanked us. Does it feel like enough? Of course not.

Objectively, is it enough? Of course not. Did we run up against limits of resources and time and energy? Of course. Are we happy with where things are not? No. We have been sort of destroyed by this juggernaut that is far more powerful than any of us imagined. But still, we have tried to do something.

Q: You mentioned in passing something about things falling off after the election of Obama. Have they?

Varon: It has been a disaster, frankly. January 11 is our big day because that is when Guantánamo opened in 2002. We always do something in D.C., or have since 2006. The January 11 after his election, before his inauguration, we went to D.C. again. For the first time we decided not to do an arrest action because we did not think it was appropriate. We had a demonstration in Dupont Circle. Some guy from Chile who was a master of doing political puppets — a real campesino — did all these wonderful puppets for us. This was like Bread and Puppet theater — imagine Carnival or something like that. He had a puppet representing justice , another representing the rule of law. At points they would become hooded and then at points we would take the hoods off, and then we would play “Guantanamera” on a trumpet — which sounds like Guantánamo — and dance and cheer when these things become real again and boom, they would be hooded again in sort of military fashion. We had this whole ceremony around that.

I should say that we did our play. It is hard to talk through the description of something visual, but the play shows the transformation of a human being into a detainee. We symbolically waterboard the detainee character. It ends with people chanting, a la Greek chorus, “One year —

never charged, two years — never charged, three years — never charged, four years — never charged,” and it keeps getting longer. It ends with the ring of a bell and somebody holds up a sign saying “Forever?” with a question mark at the end. It is this chilling narrative of the Guantánamo story saying that it has as yet no end, that it is this miserable, indefinite detention of innocent people. Then we decided to change the play after Obama’s election. What happens in the play is that this poor forlorn man is getting abused, and other detainees are on stage too. People rush out from the audience and give them a sign saying “habeas corpus” or give them a sign saying “human rights,” and the jailer would steal the signs and tear them up. Then one is given to the central detainee.

For this performance, we decided to have a tug of war between the jailer and the detainee holding the “human rights” sign — back and forth and back and forth in cartoon-like, theatrical fashion. In the end of it the jailer loses grip and does a backward somersault as he tumbles away, and the detainee triumphantly holds up the sign saying “human rights.” This was our brand new ending to the play, and I was doing the drumming for it. At the moment when the jailer falls away, three hundred people started to spontaneously applaud. We had never performed it like this and I had no idea that this would happen, but this seemed like the symbolic moment of triumph. I burst into tears when I heard the applause. I guess there is crying in politics, because there are lots of tears in my story. We have been doing this play and struggling very hard for years, and for the first time it felt like victory was in our grasp. After the guy holds up the sign, a group came out with a banner circling him, like you would cover up your eleven-year-old daughter at the beach if she was changing out of her bathing suit, and he takes off the hood and he takes off the jumpsuit and he is turned into a man again. Then the banner disappears behind

him and it says “Close Guantánamo: The 100 Days Campaign.” We had dramatized the turning of a man into a detainee and back into a human being. That was the optimism of that moment.

Matt said we should be in Washington for the full hundred days to support the president in fulfilling his promise. Matt moved with his three-year-old son to D.C., living like a college student in this house owned by this Buddhist woman. People would come in from different parts of the country for a week — the Des Moines crowd, the this crowd, the that crowd — and then coordinate activities through the week. They had a daily vigil at the White House, and we debated if that was necessary. At one point we thought we should retire the “Close Guantánamo” banner because it was not relevant. Most of us had the expectation that he would follow through on at least some of this. Some people were very cynical, and then this returns to the image of that homeless guy on election night, that no, things are not going to change. Some people in our group feel, I think, that governments are always evil. There is that element in the group, too. I was cautiously optimistic, and — if you can believe it — on the right-wing of the group because I still have some basic faith in politicians. I was a true believer in Obama, and a lot of people never were.

Then we started to see it all slipping away. Other people can tell you the details, but for me the first big sign was when, again, they put out the detainee recidivism figures that Denbeaux had shredded, and which suggests, gee, maybe we cannot safely release people. I knew a reporter at *McClatchy* who had done some work on this. I wrote him and said, “What the hell? How can the Pentagon be putting out something inimical to the stated policy?” Something is off here. Either the branches are not in coordination or there is push back. This was the first sign and it was

maybe day thirty. Then, inch by inch, piece by piece, the criminal infrastructure of the Bush detention regime got shored up through the engineering of a new administration. They have resolutely failed to keep essentially every promise that they made. It has been a withering and depressing lesson in the incorrigible nature of power and how much politics trumps principle. We know that they Obama's inner circle knew that we were out there. We heard this from a good source that Matt maybe talked about with the interview. I am not at liberty to say who it was

Q: No. It was just the first part of it.

Varon: He will probably say who it was, but it was somebody centrally involved in all of this, and they knew that we were watching them — vigilance is the perfect word. We also had this attempt to engage the Justice Department. We got as far as a meeting with the director of the Office of Intergovernmental and Public Liaison.

Q: Yes, Roberta —

Varon: Portia Roberson. To cut a long story short, the meeting was the day after we got acquitted in our trial for the shroud at the Capitol. It was dismissed on technicalities, but more than just technicalities. Then a delegation of us, including a torture survivor from the Philippines, the political director the CCR, and Leili from CCR, ten of us met with this woman who Representative [John] Conyers probably told to meet with us. We do legislative visits as well. Conyers himself met with us, bizarrely. She is an African-American woman who had been a prosecutor from Michigan. He is an African-American guy with a legal background from

Michigan. Maybe he helped us get this appointment in this new office. That is my guess at least. She was good enough to meet with us and we had a very soulful conversation where we made our points.

At the eleventh hour, we brought with us the father of Fahad Hashmi. Do you know who Fahad Hashmi is? He is this Brooklyn College student who got accused of aiding and abetting Al-Qaeda and was held in a horribly punitive detention for several years. He took a plea deal for fifteen years. He is now at the Supermax in Florence, Colorado. His father is this educated, dignified Pakistani man, who was absolutely beside himself because the government was driving his son mad through this ridiculous level-to-infinity security regime. They had denied the appeal of the family to visit with him for several years. There are clinical signs of psychosis with this guy. His teacher Jeanne Theoharris has become a one-woman crusader for justice for this guy. We brought the father into this meeting with the Justice Department and I do not think it was vetted very carefully.

Our guess is that she showed the meeting list after the fact to some higher-up and they said, “Are you fucking out of your mind to bring the father of a terrorist to meet with the Obama DOJ [Department of Justice]? If Fox News gets wind, I mean Rush Limbaugh, they will have a —.” This is how they think. They are more concerned with not pissing off Sean Hannity than pleasing CCR and the ACLU. Vince Warren, the director of CCR, went to that famous meeting at the White House early on where Obama told him and the ACLU of a plan for indefinite detention. They basically said, “Are you out of your mind?” I talked to somebody at a major, pretty mainstream human rights organization and asked them, “Do you have any in with the

administration?" They said, "No, they think that they are the Democrats, they are the good guys, and we should worship at their feet."

Q: It is pretty clear that that is what the attitude is there.

Varon: Right. Nobody had any real access, so this is as far as we got engaging the Justice Department. There has been this long effort to reengage them. Portia Roberson still tells us that she would love to facilitate dialogue and they have been open and honest and, how come we are not pleased?

Last January 11 we came to Washington, and our central strategic demand was to have another meeting with DOJ, as they had promised us. We were outside the Justice Department every day for eleven days starting on January 11 itself. Maybe a hundred of us were there. We physically blockaded all the exits of the Justice Department to try to lock down the building. We closed off the garage so employees could not leave. We were not arrested, mysteriously. There were paddy wagons. There were plans to arrest us. Some guy was starting to process us. A higher-up from Homeland Security came out and said, "Do not arrest these people." There is some lawyer who is favorable to us in the Justice Department who is the son of a friend. It might be apocryphal but we do not think so. He heard that the order came directly from the White House not to arrest us. This was just days before they announced the resumption of the military commissions, which was the death knell for the whole idea of closing Guantánamo. I think they did not want any bad press at that moment.

So we became a problem to be managed, even though we have repeatedly argued that we believed in and tried to advance every promise that the president himself made. And lest they think that they have not spit the bit on this, we give them in our letters to DOJ the twenty reasons they have basically been Bush 2.0. We have a laser-like command of the facts, from habeas to the Bagram business, to recidivism, to military commissions to all of the appeals of habeas petitions, to stymieing every effort to have meaningful accountability in civil or criminal court. We document all of this. They have on file our critique. The last letter to DOJ was basically our moment of saying “Fuck you.” It was “Fuck you” in Jeremy-speak. Matt said, “Write something angry.” Matt tells me what to do and I say, “Okay Matt, here is something angry.” We basically said, “This is who you are, you know who we are. You know what we believe. We have tried to meet with you in every conceivable fashion, we have conducted ourselves with dignity and respect for your office. You have treated us with cynicism and contempt. We would love it if you would meet with us. We have zero faith that this is going to happen. You are completely deaf to our pleas.” On and on and on and on. We basically said that we were not even going to pretend anymore that this is anything other than a charade to give the illusion of concern with what the public thinks.

Then I wrote her ten days later and I said, “Any chance of having a meeting?” She says, “Dear Mr. Varon, I am still trying to arrange the kind of meeting that you want.” I think part of her is embarrassed by the conduct of DOJ. She is an African-American woman in this newly established office with an African-American attorney general. The whole staff was African-American. It was very Obama, in a good way. This woman probably came in with all the idealism of a civil servant participating in this historic administration. She has no power. My

guess is that everything got turned over to higher-ups — the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and the political people who worry about “optics” and whoever else studies all of this. It just feels so fucking pathetic at some level. We are doing nothing but standing up for bedrock American principles and trying to force a tepid administration to fulfill its own promises, and they walked away from all of it and slammed the door in our face.

Q: But working in this more instrumental way is tangential to Witness Against Torture.

Varon: No.

Q: It is not the heart and soul of what you do.

Varon: It is an important part of what we do. It is not tangential.

Q: It could fade away, but the organization would not.

Varon: What could fade away?

Q: The attempt to work through the White House or to meet with the Justice Department.

Varon: That particular initiative with DOJ could fade away and we have almost let go of it. In that sense you are right, but we are not willing to abandon institutional engagement.

Q: I guess that is what my question is.

Varon: No. The most simple reason is that as we speak, as the flyer says says, innocent men, someone's father, human beings are at Guantánamo. If we go spiritual and say this is all about soul connection and this abstract concept of witness and raising consciousness and educating the public, and do not actually try to get them out of prison, we have allowed the central evil to persist. At one point the head of Code Pink, Medea Benjamin, called us the "conscience of the movement." On the one hand that is flattering, but we do not want to be anybody's conscience. We want to get the innocent people out. We want the rule of law restored. We want Cheney tried for war crimes. In a weird sense, for me — and I think Matt agrees — our morality is instrumental, because this is on behalf of people who are suffering degradation, cruelty, and abuse. We owe it to them to use every available channel within the limits of our concept and our community for the circumstances of their lives to meaningfully change.

Matt and Frida have become two of my best friends. This group is so important to me, but I once said to Matt that I would trade all of it — I would never have another conversation with you or Frida, never go to your parent's house on Lake George or go to a Phish concert with you or break bread with Carmen, another great Witness guy, if one innocent man could get set free. It is not about us, and whatever the power of our own gesture, we are shrewd enough to measure it against the result. It might be that the walls are so impenetrable that this becomes like the Plowshares Movement — people with hammers pounding on missile silos and testifying against the evil the nuclear Armageddon and you go to prison for seventeen years. It is tempting. Matt

and I talked about this recently. It appears as though all avenues are blocked, but we have learned that every time it seems completely hopeless there is still a little bit of hope.

We never have hit a point where it feels completely hopeless. The lawyers are so important because they know these people and they have this professional responsibility that becomes a sense of personal crusade to help their clients, even if they lost their habeas cases. We take our cues from that, to some extent.

There is the cosmic and then there is the grind of all of this. My role has been to remind the group of the micro moves of the grind. I do not know everything, obviously. There are people who know much more than me. Andy Worthington is the oracle. He knows more than the lawyers. There are the lawyers and then there are the professional advocates. World Can't Wait has done some good work. There is No More Guantánamo, which you probably know about.

Q: No.

Varon: They tried to pass resolutions in towns and principalities.

Q: Oh right.

Varon: There are a handful of people, and then there is us. I joke with my wife all the time — and this is not braggadocio — but aside from the people who are professionally involved in this, me and Matt Daloisio and Frida and a handful of others in the group are the people in America

who care most about all this — who follow the twists and turns with the greatest level of detail. There is Glenn Greenwald, but his career is writing about this. Out of 320 million countrymen, basically nobody gives a damn. At least it feels that way. If you tell a liberal about this they will say that this is horrible, but in terms of really giving a damn, it is down to a handful. I joke with Alice that this is ridiculous. One hundred years from now Guantánamo will be in textbooks. This is a major piece of American history, and little old me, with no legal background or professional connection to the issue, and a small circle of others are the ones holding onto the issue. I have told this to my father too, who is still terrified by my civil disobedience, which I do infrequently. But he understands the stakes, and respects this commitment of mine. It is certainly not only us, but in terms of John Q. Public citizens who seek change on this, we are probably the most durable and visible organization.

There are lots of academics doing good work on torture, but academic study only goes so far. The last part of this is how the left punditocracy has abandoned this issue, like Rachel Maddow, whom I respect deeply. She has rightly made gay marriage a hobby horse. She has made access to abortion and the protection of abortion doctors a major issue. In the last three years she has had Jonathan Turley, who is fantastic and her go-to guy on Constitutional issues, on maybe once or twice. What if she pounded away her hot hammer for weeks and weeks to keep this story alive? She has not done that, and [Keith T.] Olbermann dropped it, and Lawrence O'Donnell does not talk about it. If they do not keep it alive it disappears, and Guantánamo just becomes an item in news stories tallying which of his promises Obama did or did not keep. The administration made the decision that they can politically get away with not closing Guantánamo. We know from our source that they did secret polling to determine that no,

Democrats would not jump ship from Obama if Gitmo stayed open. I recently heard Joe Trippi, the erstwhile campaign manager of [Howard B.] Dean who started this whole progressive Netroots thing, saying, “We are not going to get punished for the failure to close Guantánamo electorally.” When did you become part of this “we”? I thought you were this insurgent left Democrat. Now Matt says we should talk to Lindsey Graham, who is a Republican, but can he really be worse than most Democrats on this?. We are going to try because Congress is a real obstacle now. When the Supreme Court decided not to take the Uighur case, that sucked, because it means that there will remain no legal mechanism to enforce habeas decisions. At first I did not realize how badly it sucked.

Q: Yes, that was a crucial moment.

Varon: We do not know where this is going, but we have to keep telling the story, which is what the flyer does in five stanzas. We have to assume that there are people of conscience who want some movement on this, and we have to try to take advantage in every way we can of openings in the public conversation. [Sean] Hannity and Lynne Cheney are horrible. They just lie. Hannity is horrible. He has some of the 9/11 Families in his pocket. He manipulates them. 9/11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrow, who believe in real justice and the rule of law — those guys are wonderful. They are another major organization I admire, who do not think we have to destroy the Constitution to stay safe. We can stop now. It has been long. I could keep going, but I do not want to —

Q: No, I have reached the end of what I want to talk about.

Varon: Terrific.

Q: You will get a transcript and you can add anything you want to it. Or if you feel if there is something you want to talk again —

Varon: You do not think we need a second session, do you?

Q: When you look at this transcript, you decide.

Varon: Okay. You are very good at this. You got at the essence of things. From the standpoint of posterity a little bit more of a timeline — the group did this, the group did that — could be a little useful. A lot of it is documented in our materials.

Q: Yes. You have to realize that a lot of this stuff is documented.

Varon: Absolutely. I have tried to stay away from the detail of certain kinds of policy things. All I would say is that it is very deeply satisfying to be part of something that sort of transcends yourself. The group transcends me, all the other advocates transcend the group and then finally, the principles transcend all of it. The best distilled explanation for why I do this is because I thought that certain things were inviolable — very basic schoolboy stuff — innocent until proven guilty, you do not torture people, you cannot detain a person indefinitely without having them be able to contest the evidence. The metaphor I use is the Joni Mitchell line — “Don’t it always

seem to go that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone," right? These pillars of American democracy were taken away, and only then did I realize how important they are. It has seemed absolutely too much to bear. We are moving to a point where that damage will have been institutionally made permanent.

I know enough about history to know that there was the same discourse after Vietnam — the civic order had disintegrated, this is a genocidal war, two and a half million Vietnamese killed, a corrupt president who is essentially a usurper. There have been many moments of cynicism and demoralization, but I think an astute analysis could indicate that there is a new level of disrepair with the continued operation of a national security apparatus that is fundamentally corrupt and anti-democratic. This piece of the problem ultimately connects back to what America is economically, politically, and militarily in the world. The last point is that we have asked ourselves why Guantánamo did not close. To some extent, they mismanaged good intentions and the politics got in the way. But my macro thesis is that a harsh detention regime at some level is a structural requirement given the profile of American power in the world. If you have these kinds of resources, demands —

Q: Tease that out for me.

Varon: Look, if you need oil on that scale, if you need to pacify populations, if you need resource extraction from the Third World, if you need access to markets, if you need global economic dominance you are going to need, at some level, military power to enforce that. If you are going to be fighting far-flung wars against a shadowy, particulated, transnational,

postmodern enemy, you are embracing a mode of conflict that is going to chew people up in systems of detention, interrogation and degradation. The extra-legal space is a requirement of empire. My new thinking is that when Obama became president, he signed onto and signed up for all this. Our initial hope was that a more moral president could make empire function in a less immoral way. Now I think that there is a kind of inextricable power of empire itself that gives leaders a very narrow range of action. Cruelty and degradation may be a necessary part of the apparatus.

We can have limited gains around some particulars, but if the behemoth remains and its global ambitions remain, then war and misery and lawless detention and drone strikes are going to be part of it. This is the American story since the end of World War II. It used to be jailing unionists and massacring peasants by proxy. Now it is drone strikes and Bagram prison. I do not need to educate you about this history. There are amazing continuities of empire. I often wonder how, if we are political radicals, we fight for these modest goals and stand up for the rule of law.

Radicals would laugh at some of our rhetoric and say, "What do you mean, American honor?" But we have to believe in these things. If we give up on them then it feels like anyone can give up on them. They are real only if you believe they can be real. We feel like we have to hold on to them and provide the power of example that certain things are precious. Done.

Q: Thank you.

Varon: Sure.

Abu-Jamal, Mumia	46
Abzug, Bella S.	10
Agee, Philip B.	16, 18
Avedon, Richard	59, 60
Ayers, William C.	29, 30
Bartov, Omer	33
Baudrillard, Jean	26
Benedetti, Michael	85
Benjamin, Medea	99
Berrigan, Daniel	53, 66, 67, 71
Berrigan, Frida	53, 64, 65, 66, 68, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 76, 79, 81, 86, 99, 100
Berrigan, Philip	64, 65, 66
Blitzer, Wolf I.	85
Bloomberg, Michael R.	59
Blue, Carol	22

Bolton, John R.	66
Boudin, Kathy	37
Boumediene, Lakhdar	87
Boyd, Andrew	57, 59
Braley, Scott	29
Brown, James N.	56
Brzezinski, Zbigniew K.	22
Bush, George W.	59, 64, 69, 78, 94, 97
Camus, Albert	12, 19
Carter, Amy L.	10, 11, 13, 14
Carter, James E., Jr.	13
Cates, Michael	84
Chamorro, Violeta B.	23
Cheney, Lynne A.	102
Cheney, Richard B.	61, 78, 99
Chisolm, Shirley A.	10
Clark, W. Ramsey	65

Cockburn, Alexander C.	23
Conyers, John, Jr.	94
Coyote, Peter	53
Culler, Jonathan	27
Daloisio, Matthew	67, 69, 73, 76, 79, 81, 85, 87, 88, 90, 93, 94, 97, 99, 100, 102
Day, Dorothy	68, 86
Dean, Howard B., III	102
Deghayes, Omar	87, 88
Denbeaux, Mark P.	73, 77, 93
Derrida, Jacques	24, 25, 26, 31
Dohrn, Bernardine R.	30
Dukakis, Michael S.	12
Dylan, Bob	7, 87
Engler, Mark	42
Fairey, F. Shepard	76
Finn, Peter	82

Flacks, Dick	32
Foley, Michael S.	50, 52, 53, 73, 76, 79
Foucault, Michel	19, 24, 25, 26
Frankel, Oz	50
Galbraith, John Kenneth	29
Garfunkel, Art	59
Gaunt, Christine	82
Gibney, Alex	72
Gluck, Mary	20
Graeber, David R.	35
Graham, Lindsey O.	102
Green, Sam	25
Greenwald, Glenn	101
Grefrath, Elizabeth C.	85
Gregorian, Vartan	11
Guthrie, Arlo D.	62
Guthrie, Woody	7, 62

Hannity, Sean	95, 102
Hashmi, Syed Fahad	95
Hearst, Patricia C.	25
Heidegger, Martin	24, 32
Hentoff, Nathan I.	23
Hitchens, Christopher E.	22
Hoffman, Abbie H.	7, 13, 57
Hofmann, Albert	53
Jackson, Jesse L., Sr.	8, 13, 68
Jay, Martin	33
Kafka, Franz	16, 31
Kant, Immanuel	3
Kashani, Leili	86, 94
Keeney, Barnaby C.	15
Kennedy, John F.	9
Khaki, Ateqah	86
King, Coretta Scott	13

King, Martin Luther, Jr.	7, 68, 87
Kinsley, Michael	24
LaCapra, Dominick	19, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 32, 33, 70
Laffin, Art	83
Lehman, Brooke	35
Lennon, John W.	4
Limbaugh, Rush H., III	95
Luther, Martin	3
Maddow, Rachel A.	101
Marcuse, Herbert	25
Matsuda, Matt K.	33
Mayer, Paul	65
McBride, David	51
McCain, John S., III	86
McCarthy, Colman	24
McGehee, Ralph W.	16, 18
McLoughlin, William G.	20

McMillian, John	51, 52
Meieran, David	85
Melville, Samuel J.	29
Mitchell, Joni	103
Mohammed, Khalid Sheik	78
Moore, Michael F.	23
Moore, R. Laurence	27
Morley, Tamson	51
Moulton, Seth	55
Navasky, Victor S.	22, 23
Nixon, Richard M.	8, 9, 10, 26, 29
Obama, Barack H.	55, 56, 63, 69, 86, 91, 93, 95, 97, 102, 105
Obama, Michelle L.	63
O'Donnell, Lawrence F., Jr.	101
Olbermann, Keith T.	101
Palin, Sarah L.	62, 63
Palmer, Robin	28, 30

Parks, Rosa L.	90
Powell, Colin L.	78
Ratner, Michael	80
Reagan, Ronald W.	6, 9, 10, 24
Roberson, Portia	94, 96, 97
Rosen, Jonathan	74, 76, 82
Ross, Diana E.	59
Roth, Robert	29
Rove, Karl C.	58
Ruben, Jerry	7
Rumsfeld, Donald H.	75
Salzman, Jason	11
Sanders, Barry D.	56
Sarabungchung, Voravut Ord	4
Sartre, Jean-Paul	12, 24
Schneiderman, Eric T.	74
Sellers, John	47

Sharpton, Alfred C., Jr.	69
Simon, Paul	59
Smith, Clive Stafford	88
Starkey, Lee P.	11
Steinberg, Michael P.	27
Street, John F.	39
Swearer, Howard R.	11
Tasner, Clifford J.	61
Theoharris, Jeanne	95
Tillich, Paul J.	69
Timoney, John F.	48
Torn, Elmore R., Jr.	58
Trippi, Joe	102
Turley, Jonathan	101
vanden Heuvel, Katrina	23
Varon, Alice	57, 58, 59, 61, 62, 63, 82, 101
Varon, Elizabeth R.	4, 5, 11, 19

Vecoli, Rudolph J.	32
Warren, Vince	95
Wilkerson, Lawrence B.	77
Williams, Juliet A.	32, 33, 36, 38
Woodward, Robert U.	17
Worthington, Andy	87, 88, 100
X, Malcolm	7
Zwerman, Gilda	36