REDEMPTION CONTESTS

Imperial Salvation and the Presence of the Dead

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Abstract: This article investigates the role theology plays in generating political action in *las Américas* through research on the School of the Americas Watch. It commends theopolitics as a lens for analyzing the competing projects of US military training and protests against that training, both of which work under the sign of redemption. The materiality of these signs can be apprehended by asking who is saving whom from what, by what means, and for what end. Anthropological analysis of these redemption narratives reveals the regimes of the invisible that animate opposing political projects—redemption for one through imperial formations enabled by the messianic figure of the white, male, heterosexual warrior, and redemption for the other through the agential presence of the dead who haunt empire's wake.

Keywords: empire, messianism, militarism, political theology, redemption, state violence

Off the last exit of I-185 in the pine forests of west Georgia lies the sprawling 182,000-acre US Army base Fort Benning. Founded in the wake of World War I and named after Confederate General Henry Lewis Benning, the military installation serves as one of the premier facilities for training and readiness in the US Army system. Since 1985, Fort Benning has hosted the small but infamous School of the Americas (SOA), which was renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) in 2001. This particular institution, founded in Panama as the Latin American Ground (LAG) School in 1946 and renamed the School of the Americas in 1963, has played a key role in facilitating the ascendance of US military power among its southern neighbors. Whether named LAG, SOA, or WHINSEC, this training facility has functioned as a conduit for the movement of the (mostly) men, munitions, and money that

has enabled the development of relationships of cooperative patronage between the US American and Latin American elites.¹ Students of the school—officers in Latin American militaries—take courses in military tactics, weaponry, and procedures. Through the relationships built at the school, the United States has pursued its economic and security interests. Although often clothed in the language of human rights and economic development, these interests have never been benign. Civilian repression, torture, and death, often obscured by a culture of impunity, have facilitated US influence in Latin America. And military leaders have narrated this neo-imperial project as the ‘work of redemption’.

Annually, from the early 1990s to 2015, thousands of protesters gathered at the fort’s south gate near Columbus, Georgia, in mid-November. These activists—initially drawn from the Central American Solidarity Movement and the Catholic left, but later from Jesuit high schools and universities and the global solidarity and anti-war movements—convened to commemorate the anniversary of the UCA massacre. On 16 November 1989, six Jesuit professors and two women were killed in San Salvador at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) by government forces. These dead catalyzed a movement to remember and act on behalf of the countless others killed by graduates of the SOA/WHINSEC.² Through Freedom of Information Act requests and dogged grassroots research, protesters found an uncanny correlation between training at the school and heinous acts of violence in Latin America. With a long list of infamous alumni, the military training facility provided protesters a concrete target in the complex system of US-Latin American militarism. The School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch), founded in 1990, called for the closure of the school and a fundamental change in US foreign and military policy. The primary political act of the movement was an hours-long ‘liturgical protest’ in which those killed were named and claimed as *¡presente!* This claim, that the dead are present, rests on an affirmation of resurrection that is rendered invisible, not only by the obfuscations of empire, but also by a refusal of theological analysis. Here at the gates of Fort Benning—in the messy mix of traditions, commitments, movements, and people—theology, politics, history, and material culture entangle in a complex constellation of incarnate rituals (see fig. 1).

What sense can we make anthropologically of the contestation at the gates of Fort Benning? Is the annual protest a religious ritual? A political protest? Is the theological language of redemption that describes the work of training soldiers mere epiphenomenal justification? Or does it tell us something more about this project of imperial violence? Does the claim that the dead are present amount to a mere expressive flourish? Or does it manifest some spectral agency? Drawing on my research with the SOA Watch, this article limns the ambivalent role theology plays in constructing political action in *las Américas*. Anthropologists have long known that religions are more than sets of beliefs or even cultural systems (Geertz [1973] 2017); they are systems of knowledge,

FIGURE 1: Crosses in the fence blocking entrance to Fort Benning during the 2013 SOA Watch annual vigil. Photograph © Calvin Kimbrough. Used with permission.

power, and discipline (Asad 1993). But if we take such a historicized approach, how can political anthropologists theorize about the material, political, and cultural work that religious systems do? Anthropologists like Webb Keane (2007) and Manuel Vásquez (2011) have led the discipline to consider the material, embodied, and affective dimensions of religious systems, displacing a reductive focus on texts and belief. This is all to the good. Yet it would be a mistake to think that narratives are first and foremost textual, and that belief is disembodied and merely cognitive.

In the case of military training and protests against it, narratives of redemption, the domain of theology, animate a host of material dynamics and transactions. For the SOA/WHINSEC, redemption is wrought through imperial formations of patronage and impunity, integration and violence. For the SOA Watch protesters at the gate, redemption is found by turning to the debris left in empire's wake: the dead. Attending to the materiality of such political projects, I will argue, requires attending in specific ways to *theology*, a “small and ugly” discipline that, according to Walter Benjamin (2003: 389), “has to keep out of sight.” The problem with theology for anthropologists is its insistent transcendence of materiality. Talk of redemption, what theologians call soteriology, sounds too pie in the sky for a theoretical discipline rooted in the empirical description of human cultures, affects, and bodies. The anthropological task therefore is to make clear the materiality of theology, to tilt the mirror in order

to reveal the forces that pull the strings that move the automaton. By tilting the mirror in the present case, we see that the presence of the dead contests and disrupts the political theological fantasy of colonial progress and economic coordination. Salvation comes not from outside, but from within. The site of sovereign imperial desecration is the very location where emancipatory messianism is revealed. The lens of theopolitics, by which I mean a hermeneutic that attends to the enfleshment and materiality of political and theological projects, enhances anthropological description and theory through attention to the narratives of redemption that animate political projects.³ Theopolitics enables us to apprehend the materiality of regimes of the invisible—the agential workings of the dead—and their political effects.

The article proceeds in three sections. First, I introduce more fully the theopolitical contestation at the gates of Fort Benning. I commend theopolitics as an analytical lens for surfacing narratives of redemption, and for unveiling what, and more importantly who, those narratives reveal and obscure. In the second and third sections, I apply the lens to the case, analyzing the narratives of redemption that are revealed by protest against military training. Contesting the hegemonic story of imperial integration, the counter-narrative of protesters offers a messianism of the dead that refuses their relegation to the periphery as mere collateral damage and insists on their enduring presence. Utilizing a theopolitical lens surfaces material dynamics that would otherwise remain invisible to anthropological analysis. Redemption has never been merely spiritual or transcendent. Theopolitics offers a path to analyze the ways in which theological stories influence, shape, and determine political struggle.

Performing Theopolitical Contestation

I first encountered this movement called together by the SOA Watch in 2005, not as a researcher but as a protester. That year I participated in the SOA Watch's annual vigil at the gates of Fort Benning. Although drawing on a number of political repertoires (Tilly 1986, 2006), the primary action of the social movement was an hours-long liturgical protest in which the assemblage named the thousands killed by graduates of the SOA/WHINSEC and claimed them as *presente!* The litany, a mixture of pre-Colombian ancestralization practices, Latin American leftist street performance, and Roman Catholic canonical liturgies, performed and formed participants in bonds of solidarity with the living and the dead (Lambelet 2019: chap. 2). I found the scene of the November vigil bewildering: it blended religious practices with political demands all within a pluralistic context. It was part camp meeting, part leftist rally, part concert, and part mock funeral all rolled into one. There were white crosses with the names of the disappeared, icons of saints, leftist propaganda advocating an end

to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and tables selling kitsch Central American handiworks. White-haired Veterans for Peace shared meals with young Food Not Bombs anarchists. Jesuit high school students and Central American refugees built puppets with Catholic Workers. This first encounter, confusing and fascinating, birthed a series of questions. What political and theological work is this ritual doing? How do activists negotiate differences of race, gender, nationality, and religion in the movement? What role do the dead play in the tactical deliberation of movement organizers? What role should the dead play in the construction of foreign policy?⁴ For the purposes of this article, I wonder what to make of the competing claims of the SOA/WHINSEC and the protesters, each of whom make sense of their activities through a redemptive frame.

While engaging in participant observation with the SOA Watch in 2015, I witnessed a scene that poignantly captured the theopolitical contest (fig. 2). Since the early 2000s, the Puppetistas, influenced by radical puppetry traditions of the global justice movement, have held an annual pageant following the *¡presente!* litany. The details of the story have changed from year to year to reflect the constantly negotiated tensions between (post-)colonial periphery and center. On this sunny November day, the pageant told a story of repression and resistance in *las Américas*.

The musicians' collective started the spectacle singing the Mexican folk tune turned protest song "De Colores." As the musicians sang, children and adults carrying cornstalks danced in the middle of a large circle in front of the stage. A large papier-mâché monkey entered the scene looking suspicious, but not overly ominous. In the middle of the circle, a group of six indigenous farmers, *campesinos*, planted seeds.

The music shifted to a more sinister tone as musicians beat rain barrels and scraped tin cans. Vultures entered the scene, flying around the *campesinos*. They swooped low over the *campesinos*, forcing them into a small defensive posture. The farmers mounted a powerful resistance, but they couldn't beat back the forces of evil—the monkey and vultures, as well as a woman on stilts dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Then the mosquitoes entered, buzzing loudly with labels on their wings like Rios Montt, Plan Colombia, World Bank, Big Oil, CIA, and SOA. While these mosquitoes harassed the *campesinos*, the monkey stole export crops, mainly bananas.

The mood changed again as musicians began whirling vacuum hoses. A 25-foot-high *calaca*, or skeleton, crawled in and rose up in the smoke of incense, encouraged by the *campesinos*. Participants wiggled their fingers at the *calaca*, who wiggled fingers back. It was this figure representing the dead that faced off against Lady Liberty. After a showdown in which each figure advanced upon and retreated from the other, the *calaca* emerged victorious. Finally, the defeated Liberty was resurrected as the Virgin of Guadalupe, her outer patinated turquoise robe and beacon light removed to reveal the iconic blue and halo of sun. The music again turned upbeat. Together, musicians and the gathered crowds chanted "¡Todos somos Americanos!" (We are all Americans!).⁵

FIGURE 2: Showdown between the *calaca* and Lady Liberty during the 2015 SOA Watch Puppetista pageant. Photograph © Calvin Kimbrough. Used with permission.

An analysis limited to a reductively political or ‘immanent frame’ of reference could obscure the strange, spectral, and confrontational narrative woven through the apocalyptic spectacle of the pageant.⁶ As the editors of this special issue argue, political anthropologists have struggled to adequately describe such regimes of the invisible, especially the agency of the dead (see introduction, this issue). This is not to say that anthropologists have failed to engage the narrative underpinnings of such regimes. For example, Begoña Aretxaga (2000) has explored the phantasmic production of state terrorism. Complementarily, Yael Navaro-Yashin (2009) has considered how sites of ruination evoke particular affects and subjectivities. Rituals like the one described here do not merely reflect reality, but work to constitute social worlds (Tambiah 1981). It is my contention that the performance, the result of what organizers called “cardboard chaos,” offers a way into the cosmological contestation unfolding at the gates of Fort Benning. It performed, somewhat scandalously, a political theology.

Political theology is a scandalous term not only for anthropologists. Those familiar with the phrase will likely recall Carl Schmitt’s ([1985] 2005: 36) infamous declaration that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” While the Nazi counter-revolutionary jurist Schmitt is justly credited with a particular distillation of the term, a brief genealogy may help air out the many and diverse projects that now fall

under the banner of political theology.⁷ In post-war German scholarship, theologians Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Sölle, and Johann Baptist Metz developed what they called the ‘new political theology’ in distinction to Schmitt, whose approach was untenable following the Shoah. In their account, political theology was not “about a metaphysics of the state or an apocalyptic rationale of permanent world war, but rather the political engagement of the church in the world of the poor and Christian commitment to ‘justice, peace and the integrity of creation’” (Moltmann 2013: 4). It was this new political theology, not that of Carl Schmitt, that made its way into prominence in the first generation of scholars in the Americas. In Latin America, Gustavo Gutiérrez ([1973] 1988) developed a ‘theology of liberation’ that turned to the poor as the bearers of salvation. In North America, James Cone ([1969] 1997, 1975) innovated Black liberation theology, and Rosemary Radford Ruether ([1983] 1993) and Mary Daly ([1968] 1985, [1973] 1985) developed feminist theology.⁸ These political theologies, although different in emphasis, shared a common commitment to liberatory political projects and sought to read the work of redemption within historical processes. These theologies were political insofar as they concerned themselves not merely with metaphysical speculation, but with projects of this-worldly, material change.

While the first generation of a renewed political theology in the Americas emerged from these liberationist traditions, recently scholars across disciplines, both left and right, have returned to Schmitt. Leftist political theorists, like William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and Chantal Mouffe, have retrieved Schmitt’s critique of liberal proceduralism without his turn to a dictatorial rejection of democracy. Surprising though these appropriations may be, they reveal the yearning at the heart of even political theorists on the left for an agonistic hope against hope that is not limited to an immanent frame that excludes transcendent referents (Taylor 2007: 542). Across these intersecting traditions, political theology explores questions of sovereignty: the time and location of divine action. It figures transcendent sovereignty in the royal body, in historical material processes, in the will of the people, or in nature. As a field of study, then, political theology examines the foundations of political concepts and how those foundations become incarnate in political bodies. Although some have pretended the opposite, political theology has always been a historical project bound by the cultural embodiment of its practitioners. Thus, there is no—and never has been—one political theological tradition. Rather, there are genealogical strands: imperial, liberationist, Christian, indigenous, and more.

Theopolitics, as introduced in anthropology by Carlota McAllister and Valentina Napolitano (introduction, this issue), focuses anthropological attention on the incarnation of the regimes of the invisible, revealing the apophatic working of the spectral through its material effects. It offers an anthropological approach to the interdisciplinary analysis that gathers around the field of

political theology. It is not theological per se, but it is a lens through which to apprehend anthropological data: data that are material and sensible but would be obscured by failing to attend to that which exceeds and thereby interrupts the political. As such, theopolitics develops a minority tradition of analysis within the plural field of political theology. In the case of this article, I use the lens of theopolitics to make sense of the narratives of redemption that give rise to competing political projects. Theopolitics offers scholars the ability to examine the contesting redemptive narratives that explain, justify, and generate political projects and suggest how those narratives might be told otherwise.

It is with this understanding in mind that I would argue that the Puppetista display narrated above might be described as a kind of theopolitical performance. It tells a story of redemption: of original, created goodness; of fall due to the forces of evil; of salvation by special, transcendent means; and of restoration. This story, in which the resurrection of the dead performs redemptive work—the *calaca* rising spectrally in the smoke of incense while vacuum hoses whirl—stands in stark contrast to the story being told on the other side of the gate, that is, a story of imperial salvation through military might and economic coordination. The regimes of the invisible work here through the agency of the dead, as mobilized by the protestors. The dead expose the political theological underpinnings of military formation and contestations of the same. As such, the protesters, channeling the dead, reveal the purportedly secular processes of military formation as implicated in a theological effort. An ethnography of this event that is grounded in the theopolitical should aim to lay bare the narratives and modalities of political action that animate these theologically and politically distinct redemptive projects.

Imperial Theological Formations

From its founding after World War II, the School of the Americas has operated as a key component in the formation of imperial coordination and control in the Western Hemisphere. The long legacy of the Monroe Doctrine required the simultaneous rejection of European colonial intervention in *las Américas* along with the instantiation of US hemispheric hegemony. This two-step of rejection and instantiation enabled new forms of imperial intervention, extraction, and domination to flourish. Rejecting the old colonialism of Europe, the United States developed its own forms of hegemony based less in direct trusteeship and more in cultural and economic dominance. Importantly, this neo-colonialism emerged from theological roots deep in the US national psyche. From Plymouth Rock to Abraham Lincoln, Billy Graham, and Ronald Reagan, US Americans have seen themselves as having a special destiny in ushering forth the 'Kingdom of God' (Moorhead 1994). Rooted in a political theology of 'American

exceptionalism' (Torpey 2010), architects of the imperial formations of US dominance in the Western Hemisphere have justified these incursions on the basis of humanitarian, civilizing, and domesticating projects.⁹ These projects were enabled by a theological vision of redemption through the relations of force.

Anthropologist Lesley Gill (2004) details the role that the military training facility has played in constructing these imperial formations. The LAG, SOA, and now WHINSEC have facilitated mutually reinforcing dynamics of impunity and patronage—dynamics that gather under a redemptive frame, as I will later show. According to Gill, impunity and patronage work hand in hand. Relations of patronage that allow advancement and access insulate an abiding culture of impunity in which human rights abuses are left unaccounted for. Impunity allows military officers to turn their weapons and techniques against their fellow citizens to quell any resistance to the projects of their patrons. Friendly relations established at the SOA/WHINSEC have provided the foundation for later US influence, allowing the alignment of Latin American aims for advancement and US interests in resource extraction.¹⁰

Military training inculcates relationships of patronage and impunity through a series of disciplinary technologies. While we may make sense of these dynamics without recourse to theopolitics, such recourse offers additional insight into how they work. Gill (2004: 54) asserts that “much like religious dogma, [such training] refers to particular principles and policies about the way things are done.” The training is formation, as Gill suggests, like religious formation in a way of approaching the world. The most obvious disciplinary technology is the coursework itself. Students at the SOA/WHINSEC take classes in Civil-Military Operations, Peace Operations, Democratic Sustainment, and Military Intelligence, as well as training in advanced weaponry. The anodyne titles conceal the actual work of the classes. For example, while according to the school catalogue Civil-Military Operations was designed to train students in “military civic action, the proper role of the military in support of civilian authority, civil defense, disaster relief, and CMO [Civil Military Operations] support to counterdrug activities” (ibid.: 45), Gill argues that in practice the “civic-action projects were intrusive and manipulative efforts to put a benevolent face on the violence and destructiveness of counterinsurgency warfare” (ibid.: 46).

At times, especially before the 1996 revelation of what anti-SOA activists called the “Torture Memos,” training in courses like Military Intelligence included the advocacy of manipulative means of coercion and control: beatings, torture, bounties, imprisonment, execution (Amnesty International 2002; Gill 2004: 49; Priest 1996). While these legally questionable forms of state violence may have been excised from the curriculum following the reformation of the school in 2001, more banal forms of violence endured.¹¹ Consistent with Martha Huggins’s (1998; Huggins et al. 2002) research on ‘violence workers’ in Brazil, the bureaucratic regulation of violence through a process

of professionalization serves to sever relationships between officers and their fellow citizens and nurture relationships of dependence on the training state.

While the classroom and training grounds are the primary locations of formation, since the move to Columbus, Georgia, so is the US context. For many Latin American officers, coming to the SOA/WHINSEC has been a tool for advancement in their home countries. Especially for the command and general staff officers, participation in SOA/WHINSEC training programs has been seen as a reward for past advancement, even as US officers see work at the facility as drudge duty—the differences in desire and positionality here reinforce the client-patron relationship. Regardless of their relative location, the technical aspects of the training are less important than the initiation into a system of bureaucratic order and its attendant relationships of patrimony. Reinforcing the metropole-colony relation, SOA/WHINSEC's official promotions advertise Columbus as a place for Latin Americans to learn about the 'American way of life'. These promotions signal a not-so-subtle celebration of white, middle-class, heteronormative values, and especially a constellation of consumer desires commonly called the 'American dream'.

Although we could understand this formation simply through the lenses of impunity and patronage, it is not insignificant in my view that Gill's informants within the SOA/WHINSEC describe the work of the school as "redemptive." A purely immanent frame can illuminate the rational, bureaucratic nature of state violence inculcated through the military training at the SOA/WHINSEC. Yet such a frame can obscure the redemptive project that undergirds, justifies, and animates these dynamics. Military training is a ritual of formation in imperial patronage that is animated by a political theology of American exceptionalism. One of Gill's primary informants was Colonel Glenn Weidner, a West Point graduate and one-time commandant of the SOA. According to Gill (2004: 52), Weidner argued that the SOA represented "a redemptive effort for the Latin Americans, given the historical flaws in Latin American militaries." Gill expands: "It was a place where virtuous U.S. instructors could impart democratic values to unruly Latin Americans who had a historical proclivity to violence, and who were seemingly unable to control their behavior" (ibid.). Redemption is achieved through the civilizing process of forming students in democratic values and professional bureaucratic ethics as well as giving them a taste of the American way of life. It is possible to dismiss these statements as mere platitudes, but to do so would be to miss their coherence within a 500-year civilizational project (Dussel 2013: 39). The SOA/WHINSEC produces the able-bodied, middle-class, white, heterosexual *homo consumens* as an ideal, and the military project aims to protect him and his interests. It draws the Latin American officer into a patron relation to this savior, and imagines redemption as integration into the metropole, as economic development, as peace through security. The SOA/WHINSEC claims a civilizing mission, making Latin

America safe and stable for the purposes of economic development. Integration into the imperial metropole, thus, is the primary modality of redemption. And such integration requires the obfuscation of the violent and brutal history of US foreign policy as well as the grant of legitimacy to Latin American militaries. A political theology of imperial salvation rooted in American exceptionalism remains right on the surface of Weidner's imagination.

According to this political theology of imperial salvation, redemption comes from integration into the bureaucratic system of rational violence. Theologian and culture critic James Perkinson (2013) argues that this and other forms of universal salvation are a kind of 'Western messianic complex' that in spite of its universal aspirations remains rooted in the cultural imperialism of 'modern Western civilization' or 'our American way of life'. He explains: "The damnable real-life effects of this Western messianic complex—promising one or another version of universal salvation (whether spiritual or political or economic) and encoding an intractable presumption of supremacy—is all too evident in even a cursory survey of modern history" (ibid.: xxviii). This Western messianic complex animates too the formational project of the SOA/WHINSEC.

Gill is certainly right to argue that these imperial formations are built upon the mutually reinforcing dynamics of patronage and impunity. To this analysis I add the insight that this is a redemptive project, that is, a political theological project animated by this imperial fantasy of American exceptionalism. Using theopolitics as an analytical lens enables the recovery of the redemptive narrative that undergirds the project of imperial formation and leads to an evaluative question: what is obscured by this story? Most prominently, the story conceals the dead, like the *calaca* rising from the smoke during the pageant recounted above. The imperial story of redemption obscures the agency of the dead by hiding them out of sight, dismissing them as mere collateral damage.

Resignifying Redemption in the Ruins

One option for those critical of this imperial messianic project would be a simple rejection of the political theology. A critic could turn to human rights as an alternative or to a staunchly secular revolutionary anti-imperialism. Yet these options, too, have their pitfalls. Human rights, although powerful as a legal framework of accountability, has already been co-opted by the SOA/WHINSEC. Secular revolution, while attractive, would undermine some of the best tools for ideological critique, utopian imagination, and liberationist praxis. At the gates of Fort Benning, in the shadow of the metropole and its account of imperial redemption, anti-SOA/WHINSEC protesters have taken a different route. Opposing the imperial political theological fantasy of control and coordination, SOA Watch has performed a different story of redemption. Rather than

founding its theological imagination in American exceptionalism, it has trained its attention on the redemptive presence of the resurrected dead.¹²

On a brisk November morning, we shuffled past a police checkpoint to join congregants carrying umbrellas, crosses, and placards, braving the light drizzle of a not-too-chilly Georgia rain. We walked about a quarter mile to join the mass and together faced a stage assembled before three imposing fences, topped with razor wire. Like ushers, Columbus police lined the street, demarcating the licit boundaries.

Following word, offering, and song, the litany that we'd been waiting for, and dreading, began. After silence from the stage, the crowd hushed. A cantor's lone voice rang out, "Óscar Romero, sixty-two years old." And the congregation responded in lyrical chant "*¡Pre-sen-te!*" The litany continued with the singing of names: first the six Jesuits and two women assassinated at the UCA, then the four North American churchwomen raped and murdered in El Salvador, and then the thousands of others killed and disappeared across Latin America. For each of these victims of the graduates of the notorious US Army training school the congregation affirmed: "*¡Presente!*"

A group of dignitaries, including SOA Watch co-founder Roy Bourgeois, SOA Watch staff members, and other movement luminaries, led a solemn procession around the stage. They carried crosses and iconographic placards with the names of those killed by graduates of the School of the Americas and Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (SOA/WHINSEC). Behind them followed mourners draped in black robes and wearing white death masks. Pallbearers carried mock coffins representing the Latin American dead. And, behind these, hundreds of activists from across the US and beyond slowly walked, carrying crosses marked with the names of the dead.

We joined in the procession, and with each name that the cantors read, we responded, "*¡Presente!*" raising our crosses or fists in unison. Slowly circumambulating the stage, we eventually passed by the gate, and I placed the cross that I'd been carrying into the chain-linked fence. Over the course of several hours, the aluminum fence was transformed into an *ofrenda*, or offering, for the dead. We continued to walk, chanting the names of the dead and claiming them as *¡presente!* for the duration of the action.

This scene, taken from field notes from 2014, represents one year in the annual ritual that anchored SOA Watch activism from the mid-1990s to 2015 (see fig. 3). At the time of the 1989 UCA massacre, the SOA was little known among Central American Solidarity Movement activists. A small cohort of local Georgia activists held weekly vigils at Fort Benning through the 1980s. And even the SOA Watch's co-founder Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest and former missionary to Bolivia, was arrested on the Army base for a series of actions following the assassination of Óscar Romero and the four North American churchwomen in El Salvador in 1980. Yet it was the UCA assassinations that cast new light on the SOA, the first stirrings of the agency of the dead. Journalist Colman McCarthy (1990) was one of the first to draw the connection between the UCA assassinations and US military training, writing in the *Washington Post* that the SOA was

FIGURE 3: Lifting crosses during the *¡presente!* litany at the 2014 SOA Watch annual vigil. Photograph © Calvin Kimbrough. Used with permission.

one of the primary parts of “U.S. complicity in drenching [El Salvador] with the blood of its citizens.” The connections McCarthy identified in his editorial were verified by a Congressional investigation spearheaded by Massachusetts Representative John Joseph (Joe) Moakley (1990). In the late days of the Central American Solidarity Movement, activists recognized that “the story of the slain Jesuits ... had the potential to strengthen activists’ waning commitment. By reviving the politicized notion of resurrection, the Jesuits’ deaths could be used to remind activists that such sacrifices are not in vain as long as resistance continues” (Nepstad 2004: 147).

Activists began their protest with a hunger strike at the gates of Fort Benning. Beginning on Labor Day in 1989, four of their number fasted for 35 days. While this action generated some attention, it was hardly enough to end US training of Salvadoran soldiers. Roy Bourgeois asked his comrades who could stay and keep working. On the anniversary of the UCA massacre, Bourgeois and two others, brothers Charles and Patrick Liteky, held the first of a quarter-century of annual actions. Beginning with a prayer service, they planted a white cross with the names of the slain Jesuits outside the SOA, and proceeded to enter the school and splatter their own blood, mixed with blood collected from the UCA murder scene, on the SOA ‘Hall of Fame’.

These ritual elements—white crosses, prayer, and protest—would provide the material culture for the protest repertoires that would later become a staple

of the movement. The organizing of the SOA Watch evolved and changed over time. After writing letters from jail during their first extended prison term, upon release Bourgeois and the Liteky brothers went on speaking tours to publicize their opposition to the school. Staff member Vicki Imerman, through dogged grassroots research correlating graduation rolls with human rights and Truth Commission reports, strengthened the body of evidence that demonstrated the connection between SOA training and violence against civilians. Bourgeois produced a film, *School of Assassins*, which was screened in church fellowship halls and campus life centers across the United States. All of this early publicity fed and was fed by civil disobedience and symbolic actions annually at the gates of Fort Benning.

Starting in 1997, the SOA Watch began to use a Central American Solidarity Movement (CASM) repertoire, the *¡presente!* litany detailed above. Washington, DC-based CASM activist John Wright Rios initially developed the litany. A Catholic liturgist, Wright Rios reported that the idea for the litany came to him during a protest on the steps of the US Capitol. There Wright Rios heard a group of Salvadorans shouting the names of those who had been killed by military forces and responding “*¡Presente!*” Having just led a Catholic litany of the dead, which is a staid and somber liturgy, the contrasting experience generated the idea that he could develop a litany of the dead for the martyrs of Latin America. Wright Rios set the call-and-response to an Afro-Colombian cumbia rhythm and melody, and the litany was picked up across the CASM. As such, the *¡presente!* litany draws on a transnational *mezcla*, or mixture, of sources: the imagery of *día de los muertos* (day of the dead), the protest repertoires of the Latin American left, and canonical “Litanies of Saints” of the Roman Catholic Church. The affirmation that the dead are present is at once an invocation of the Christian creedal hope for and belief in the resurrection as well as an example of the indigenous practices of what Patricia McAnany (2014) has aptly called ‘ancestralization’ (see also Viveiros de Castro 2015). The cry *¡presente!* (present) crosses the line of south and north, of Christian and indigenous.

The ritual process of the annual vigil of the SOA Watch reveals a narrative of redemption, one that works against the grain of the imperial redemption project. Both the military formation and the protests against it are rooted in grand stories about sin and salvation.¹³ In order to analyze these stories and their material effects, we might ask, who is saving whom from what, by what means, and for what end? For the military formation at Fort Benning, the virtuous white, male, heterosexual US Army trainer is saving the backward, brown Latin American officer from his unruly and violent passions through military training and the disciplining of his desires in order to form him for the end of American exceptionalism. Contrast this redemption narrative with that of the protesters. Rather than looking to the mythic norm as messiah, the SOA Watch has trained its attention on those ground up by the gears of economic progress and military

domination—the dead. This generates an alternative rendering of the actor who is saving. On this account, the dead act as agents on the moral and political imaginations of the movement. Through the annual ritual process of the *¡presente!* litany, the activists invoke and claim the agential presence of the dead.

Of course, the stability of this ‘presence’ is a fundamental problem for Christianity, and for anthropological treatments of it (Engelke 2007). While this presence underdetermines the political decisions that activists make following from this invocation, it does fundamentally shape those decisions (Lambelet 2019: 48–50). The dead inform activists’ tactical choices: they serve as exemplars as activists discern what to do in their own time and place, and they call the living into new relationships of accountability and solidarity. While the dead act in disparate ways, the six Jesuits murdered in the UCA in 1989 play a particularly influential role in shaping the actions of protesters. It was Ignacio Ellacuría, one of those murdered Jesuits, who identified the redemptive role of the “crucified people.” By this term, Ellacuría (2013: 208) meant “that collective body that, being the majority of humanity, owes its situation of crucifixion to a social order organized and maintained by a minority that exercises its dominion through a series of factors, which, taken together and given their concrete impact within history, must be regarded as sin.” The crucified people, according to Ellacuría, are the principle of salvation: a people who, in their death, proclaim judgment on systems of death and, in their resurrection, enable redemption. By remembering Ellacuría as one of the crucified people, by expanding the attention to include the workers, peasants, organizers, children, and others killed in Latin America, SOA Watch protesters testify that the dead are bearers of salvation. Bringing Ellacuría’s theology into contact with the enduring witness of the SOA Watch, we might say that the crucified people are those who are *presentes*. The God of the crucified people is saving through the power of resurrection.

In addition to the agent and recipient of redemption, the SOA Watch again flips the salvation script by resignifying the aims and means of redemption. Whereas the military training of the SOA/WHINSEC aims for peace through security by instantiating relationships of patronage and impunity, the protest liturgy of the SOA Watch aims for peace through memory and justice by instantiating relationships of solidarity and accountability. The relationships of accountability formed through the *¡presente!* litany have required the hard work of solidarity across differences of race, religion, nationality, and citizenship. Over a quarter-century of protests, newcomers have brought novel ideas and approaches to the work of social change. What began as a largely white, largely Catholic movement changed with the influx of the global justice and anti-war movements in the early 2000s and the immigrants’ rights movement later in the decade. These relationships have taken root through the liturgical practice that names the dead as present. As organizer Hendrick Voss has noted, “The word

¡presente! is used in the ritual at the gates of Fort Benning, Georgia, when we remember those who have suffered and have been martyred by graduates of the School of the Americas. We say their names and evoke their spirits, and their testimonies are before us when we respond, ‘*¡presente!* You are here with us, we do not forget and your death was not in vain’” (Ruiz 2013: 150). Relationships of solidarity forged through accountability enabled the movement to grow and change over time. In some moments, practices of solidarity have reinforced rather than resisted post-colonial relationships of patronage. Yet through years of challenging organizing, pluralism became a strength rather than a weakness, as the movement mobilized different constituencies and then worked within the movement to mainstream anti-oppression frameworks. Redemption here comes not through integration into the metropole, but from dispersed and plural relationships of accountability and solidarity in a transnational movement.

Finally, in its goal and aim, the SOA Watch has articulated hopes for a world in which the dead are remembered and the living can flourish. By keeping the dead at the center of their attention, by refusing to allow the dead to be mere collateral damage in the progress of history, the SOA Watch activists seek redemption in the ruins themselves. Salvation comes through solidarity with these crucified people, not from an imperial political theological fantasy of development. The dead judge the pretensions of this fantasy by telling the lie on the neo-colonial project of racial capitalism, revealing not progress but, with Walter Benjamin’s (2003) ‘angel of history’, an ever-rising pile of dead bodies. The dead who are *presentes* not only judge; they cultivate hopes that extend beyond an immanent frame. These hopes outstrip the capacities of humans, who cannot resurrect the dead by their own power. But cultivating such hopes enables radical political action: piecemeal and revolutionary.

Conclusion

I have argued that theopolitics can be an indispensable tool for anthropological analysis, especially when applied to the competing political projects of US military training and protests against that training. The redemption narratives that structure these political projects are first and foremost performative scripts, not texts or beliefs. They are constituted by material objects—white crosses, death masks, weapons, and flags—and sensible rituals—protest chants, training courses, and pilgrimages. These repertoires of action are embedded in interpretive frames, narratives that help us understand their meaning. Theopolitics aims to identify how these material objects and sensible rituals draw from invisible narratives to render their politics intelligible. Attending to redemption narratives, therefore, both illuminates the dynamics of power and position and grants analytical purchase on the materiality of the dead. Neglecting these

spectral modalities of political action because of their theological expression would obscure a descriptive account of the contest at the gates of Fort Benning. Theologians and anthropologists may diverge regarding what to do with this description. Theologians will want to know whether the narrative is true, and may make constructive arguments to critique and amend such narratives. Anthropologists, on the other hand, will want to investigate the comparative effects of these narratives. While these disciplinary paths may diverge, the field of political theology and the analytical lens of theopolitics provide a fecund point of intersection, as this article and this special issue demonstrate.

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Notes

1. From its founding in Panama to its renaming in 2001, the School of the Americas trained over 60,000 military personnel (Gill 2004: 6). Since its name change, the SOA/WHINSEC has trained over 22,000 more as of 2017 (US Army 2017).
2. In the rest of the article, I refer to the Army institution in question as the SOA/WHINSEC, following protesters' insistence that although the School of the

Americas closed and was renamed in 2001, the WHINSEC carries on the same institutional legacy.

3. For more on theopolitics, see the introduction to this special issue.
4. For more on each of these questions, see Lambelet (2019).
5. Drawn from unpublished field notes, 22 November 2015.
6. As moral philosopher Charles Taylor (2007: 542) defines it, an immanent frame belies a closed world system that is sensibly apprehensible through forms of “instrumental rationality.” An immanent frame contrasts with and displaces a “supernatural” or “transcendent” one.
7. In this genealogy I am indebted to Francis Schüssler Fiorenza’s (2013) essay “Prospects for Political Theology in the Face of Contemporary Challenges.” For a programmatic proposal for the current field of political theology, see Vincent Lloyd and David True’s (2016) “What Political Theology Could Be.”
8. For an intellectual history of this first generation of liberation theologies, see Lilian Calles Barger’s (2018) *The World Come of Age*.
9. With Ann Laura Stoler (2008: 193), I agree that these dynamics are best named as imperial formations, rather than empire per se, as they are constant processes of becoming.
10. As Cecelia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez (2005) argue, the tactics of terror are rational calculations situated within a bureaucratically organized system of power that serves to protect the economic and political interests of Latin American elite and their US patrons.
11. There is debate among both protesters and scholars about the extent of the reform of the training following the SOA’s closure and rebranding as WHINSEC (Blakeley 2006: 1444). I have no reason to doubt that the training has changed. What seems consistent, however, are the patterns of impunity and patronage that enable the imperial project.
12. The following is adapted from unpublished field notes generated while conducting participant observation (23 November 2014).
13. In theological terms, these stories rely on a theological anthropology, a soteriology, and an eschatology—an account of the human, of the means of salvation, and of the end, respectively.

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