The collection and dissemination of testimonies that document routine acts of violence, harassment and intimidation against civilian populations under occupation are part of the agenda of anti-occupation groups in Israel and elsewhere. Indeed, as Givoni (2008) has argued in her study of the French organization “Physicians Without Borders,” witnessing has become an intrinsic technique and a shared code of contemporary humanitarian action. As a transnational yet locally embedded cultural configuration, witnessing has become a way of responding to states of emergency, crises and ongoing conditions of human suffering around the globe. It is conceptualized as involving three basic components, which are differently and delicately balanced in every given case: (1) presence in a socially distant scene of suffering, while siding with victimized “others”; (2) documentation and reporting grounded in an empirical epistemology associated with the seeking of evidence; (3) the use of fearless speech, that is, speech that involves risk-taking as it challenges hegemonic positions and power relations by voicing critique, condemnation, or demands for intervention (Foucault, 2001).

Within this framework, I address the testimonial projects of two among many of the dissident groups operating in Israel today in a loosely organized fashion—the veterans’ group known as “Breaking the Silence” (Shovrim Shtika, here BTS), which was established in 2004 for the purpose of collecting and disseminating soldiers’ testimonies about their experiences as part of the Israeli occupation regime in the Palestinian occupied territories (Katriel, 2009),¹ and the women’s group known as “Checkpoint Watch” (Machsom Watch, here CPW), which was established in 2001 for the purpose of monitoring soldiers’ treatment of Palestinian civilians at the many checkpoints dotting these same territories (Ginsburg, 2009; Kaufman, 2008; Kirstein Keshet, 2006; Mansbach, 2007).²
Members of both these activist groups construct their activism as a form of witnessing, but each of them manifests its own distinctive configuration of presence, documentation, and fearless speech. Each, in turn, develops its own particular blend of present-oriented activism and future-oriented memory work by combining witnessing practices that are anchored in its members’ particular positioning vis-à-vis the occupation regime. Specifically, in this chapter I focus on these groups’ use of photography exhibitions as cultural arenas and visual resources in and through which they have chosen to voice their dissent. Defiant of mainstream media coverage and official military parlance, they use their members’ witnessing stance to problematize and condemn societal silences and denials concerning the day-to-day reality of the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories.

The two groups considered in this study share a basic view that holds the Israeli establishment, especially its military branch, rather than individual soldiers, responsible for the decades-long oppression of the Palestinian population in the occupied territories. They also share the goal of forcing the reluctant Israeli public to confront the nature and the human costs of the Israeli military control over three million Palestinians in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. The daily reality of life under occupation that remains largely hidden from the Israeli public is witnessed at close range by the soldiers upholding it and by the women activists, who have made it their task to monitor and report human rights violations at the checkpoints. While both these groups of eyewitnesses can claim direct knowledge of the disruptions and suffering the occupation policies and practices bring into the Palestinians’ lives, they differ considerably in the nature of their presence at the site of occupation and in their positioning with respect to the reality to which they testify.

Breaking the Silence members perform their witnessing as perpetrator-observers in the scene of occupation. Their presence in this scene is institutionally mandated by their soldiering role, and epitomizes the Israeli matrix of control over the Palestinian population in the territories. These control measures include a labyrinth of ever-changing rules and regulations, ongoing curfews, checkpoints, house searches, street patrols, and so on. The soldier-activists shift from the position of fully enmeshed participants to that of perpetrator-observers as they assume their witnessing role. This shift is often predicated on self-distancing moves resulting from experiences of “moral shock” (Jasper, 1997) in response to incidents of harassment of Palestinian civilians. Being jolted out of their unreflective stance as perpetrators, they turn themselves