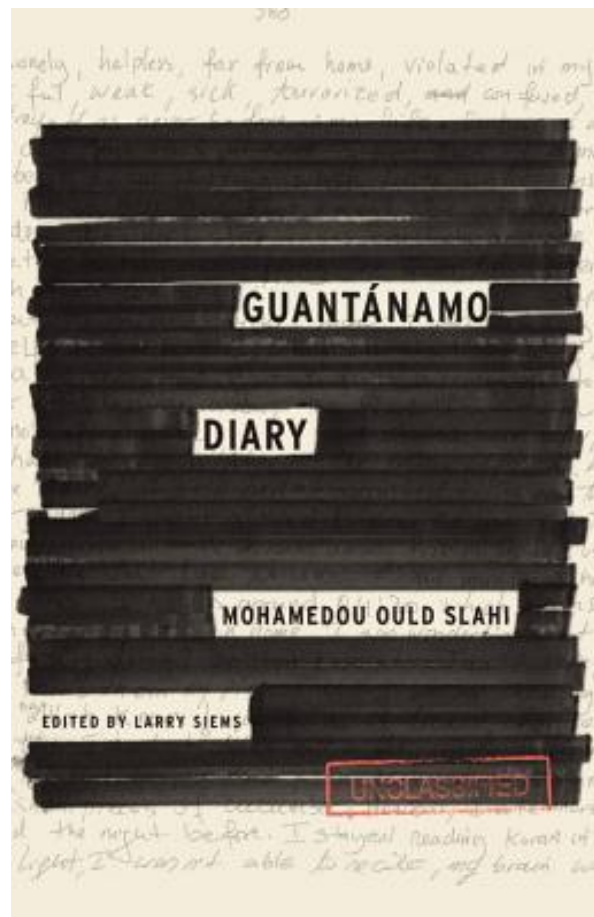


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* in the Human Rights and Literature Classroom

by Alexandra Schultheis Moore



The interdisciplinary field of human rights and literary studies has a broad historical and theoretical scope that carries significant pedagogical challenges. First, there is the challenge of teaching human rights as at once a dynamic juridical framework, one whose principles and effectiveness are subject to strenuous debate, and as salutary cultural discourse with widespread appeal. Second, we must understand violations in the *longue durée* of their geopolitical and historical contexts rather than see them as short, exceptional events. And, third, teaching human rights in the literature classroom may require fundamentally shifting student expectations. Students often come to the material with the assumption that literature is ennobling—that it will raise awareness of human rights abuses and generate sympathy for persons (real or imagined) who suffer those abuses. Thus, it can come as a surprise when we turn to literature and literary analysis for other purposes: not to foreclose exposure to the emotional weight of suffering and the perpetration of violence where it is represented, but to understand the narratability, limitations, and imaginative possibility of human rights stories. What kinds of stories and violations



GUANTANAMO PRISONERS COURTESY OF THE GUANTANAMO MEMORY PROJECT

legal legibility related? Toward what ends does the literary logic—its form, structure, suppositions, and voice—seem to be working? To answer these questions, we analyze the formal strategies, production, and circulation of literary and other human rights discourses for the ways they help to shape the cultural imaginary in relation to legal instruments. In this essay I focus on how a literary approach to Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* (2015)—the only account of Guantánamo from a current detainee—might address these pedagogical challenges and, in doing so, inspire both active reading and critical thinking. Reading the book in its larger legal and political context unveils the ideologies that promote torture in the name of state security. And, it offers a rebuttal to those ideologies through a critical analysis of the distribution of legal personhood and literary subjectivity in the context of Guantánamo.

Whereas the study of human rights typically falls under the purview of philosophers, legal scholars, political scientists, and historians, literary scholars have much to contribute. As Peter Brooks argues, “What the

interpretative humanities have to offer the public sphere is ultimately and basically a lesson in how to read—with the nuance, complexity, and responsibility that we practice most of the time in our classrooms” (Brooks 2008, 35). He turns for evidence of the stakes of responsible reading to the Torture Memos generated within the George W. Bush administration, which ultimately condoned the use of torture and illegal detention in what was called the “global war on terror.” Tracing the labyrinthine logic employed by then Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee and Deputy Assistant Attorney General John C. Yoo in their 1 August 2002 memorandum, Brooks demonstrates how the administration justified the abrogation of international law (specifically the Third Geneva Convention and the Convention Against Torture) through irresponsible, poor reading of common usages and definitions of words such as “severe” (as in “severe pain”) and “prolong” (“prolonged mental harm”), among others (Brooks 2008, 36). Brooks concludes his short essay with the charge to scholars and teachers in the humanities to “promote and enforce responsible reading” (38). Whereas enforcement belongs in the public sphere, when we hold public officials responsible for the words, logic, and forms of discourse they employ, the promotion of responsible reading can also take place in the classroom. What might responsible reading of Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* entail and how does it relate to elucidating the promise and contradictions of human rights as well as to fostering students’ ability to think, write, and speak critically and creatively? I begin with a brief overview of the book and the class contexts, and then discuss the ways in which a literary approach might address key questions about the manipulation of legal personhood used to advance state priorities over human rights and Slahi’s response to that manipulation. Whereas the Bush administration promoted a polarized, “with us or against us” (Bush 2001) ideology in the name of American values and at the expense of international law after the attacks of September 11, Slahi rejects that false opposition and the subject positions it recognizes. Instead of representing himself as an abject victim, liberal subject, or terrorist/enemy combatant, Slahi employs elements of dialogic structure—addressing the Dear Reader with questions and comments about whether his story is comprehensible—to underscore human dignity and its subject positions as relational and mutually constitutive. To the extent that he succeeds in engaging the reader, Slahi establishes himself as at once an individual and transnational subject whose claim to human rights is staged in conversation with, rather than in opposition to, his readers.

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Guantánamo Diary is the published form of a 122,000-word manuscript that Slahi handwrote in English, his fourth

language, in 2005. Deemed classified information, the manuscript was only released after nearly seven years of legal wrangling and significant redactions. Author and human rights activist Larry Siems edited the redacted manuscript for publication by streamlining the prose for clarity as well as by offering a formidable response to the redactions through footnotes drawn from publicly available information about Slahi's case. In the published text, Siems has retained the redactions whose black bars regularly and often extensively interrupt Slahi's narrative, either wittingly or unwittingly telling their own story of the state's fears and priorities in the process. The result is a layering of Slahi's story, the government's redactions, and the editor's footnotes, which together lay bare the ideological foundations that sustained Slahi's torture and continued detention. Detailing his experiences from January 2000 to 2005, the story begins with his "extraordinary rendition" from his home in Mauritania to Jordan, Afghanistan, and finally Guantánamo; circles back to his two and half years in Mauritania (after study abroad and work in Germany and Canada) prior to his kidnapping; and then concludes with the escalation of torture under the "special interrogation" techniques authorized by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the compounded, quotidian violence he continues to suffer even after his formal interrogations have ended. This nonlinear structure is complicated by the uncanny experience of reading about events that have passed, yet persist beyond the limits of the book and into the reading present as its author remains in the same cell in Camp Echo in which he wrote in 2005. Adding layers of context, the central narrative is situated within multiple paratextual frames, including scans of Slahi's handwritten manuscript (the complete handwritten, redacted text is available on the book's website, www.guantanamodiary.com), a timeline, notes on the text, and an editor's introduction and acknowledgments as well as a final author's note. Thus the reader enters the story as a participant in a complex and ongoing drama. As Siems writes toward the end of his introduction:

Thirteen years ago, Mohamedou left his home in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and drove to the headquarters of his national police for questioning. He has not returned. For our collective sense of story and of justice, we must have a clearer understanding of why this has not happened yet, and what will happen next. (xlix)

Slahi is one of Guantánamo's "forever prisoners"—held in Indefinite Law-of-War Detention and not Recommended for Transfer ("The Guantánamo Docket"), yet never charged with a crime; whose *habeas corpus* petition was granted in 2010 and then appealed by the Obama administration and sent back for rehearing; and who remains at Camp Echo. Echo, rehearing, indefinite detention, forever prisoner, forever war (Filkins 2008, Danner 2016)—the language that gestures only obliquely toward the material grounding of *Guantánamo Diary* nonetheless derails the progressive narratives of both "Mission Accomplished" (Bush 2003) and normative human rights discourses that would transform the victim to claimant and then activist. The book enters that rift, asking

readers to look backward to the legal underpinnings of rendition and special interrogation techniques and then, once clouds of euphemism have been dispersed by the force of Slahi's narrative, toward an unresolved future for human rights and national security.



HOISTING THE U.S. FLAG AT QUANTANAMO ON JUNE 17, 1898
COURTESY OF THE QUANTANAMO MEMORY PROJECT

I teach *Guantánamo Diary* at the end of the semester, once students have learned about the modern history and paradoxes of human rights and have practiced reading legal and literary works in tandem. Although specific texts, assignments, and human rights topics that lead up to the book vary, certain foundational pedagogical goals remain constant: I introduce normative human rights as a particular set of legal instruments that arose and continue to be shaped by historical and geopolitical circumstances and whose narrative structures reflect those circumstances. I ask students to wrestle with the ways in which universal human rights are tethered to and delimited by constructions of legal personhood (e.g., Butler 2004) and what Samera Esmeir has called "juridical humanity" (Esmeir 2012) in a colonial context. And I ask students to think carefully about the ethical stakes of the aesthetic representation of atrocity (e.g., Dawes 2009). By happenstance, our reading this fall also coincided with the terrorist attacks in Paris, the release of Shaker Aamer (the last British resident held at Guantánamo), and the passage of the US National Defense Re-authorization Bill that included provisions making it more difficult to close the detention facility (the bill was vetoed once by President Obama and then a revised version—still containing the same Guantánamo provisions—passed both Houses with veto-proof votes and was signed into law in November 2015). This immediate context made *Guantánamo Diary* more urgent and compelling for my students, but did not, of course, predetermine their responses. Indeed, analyzing *Guantánamo Diary* asked students to think critically about how (and why) they respond to ostensibly competing calls for security and human rights and how they might refuse that false choice. Thus, it was crucial for our class discussion to be equally open to the military veteran, the recent refugee, the Saudi Arabian exchange student, and

the New Yorker who watched one of the World Trade Center towers collapse from her kindergarten playground.

Building Context

History

For the majority of my students, “9/11” has rhetorical currency, although they lack familiarity with specific referents such as Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib or, for some, even the year of the attacks. Establishing a shared historical and legal framework as well as a shared lexicon is essential for substantive work to follow. I begin with the Guantánamo Memory Project (www.gitmomemory.org), an impressive website that provides an historical overview of the site from a human rights perspective. At a minimum, students can see how the facility has been used to further U.S. imperial interests and as a detention center housing Cuban, Haitian, and then HIV-positive Haitian refugees (see also, Braziel 2006 and Kaplan 2005). This historical background precludes a view of the current Guantánamo detainees as anomalies who are solely the products of a “new kind of war,” as several of the Torture Memos argue. Instead, the multimedia website documents a legacy of detention coupled with rightslessness at the base, which itself serves as gatekeeper of American interests and fears.

A second aspect of Slahi’s larger historical context that needs mention is what Steve Coll has termed “the Cold War jihad alliance” (Coll 2004, 224): an alliance funded largely through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia of U.S. and anti-communist, often radical Islamist, groups in Afghanistan from the mid-1980s to 1992 to force the Soviet withdrawal and the fall of the communist Afghan government of Najibullah. Slahi had joined this effort in 1991 and 1992, first at an al-Qaeda training camp and then under the command of Jalaluddin Haqqani, who had long benefited from covert CIA support. Slahi’s loyalty oath to al-Qaeda in 1991 continually condemns him in the eyes of his American interrogators. Therefore, in reading the allegations against him, students need to remember what his interrogators refuse to countenance: that al-Qaeda is an erstwhile ally turned foe in the post-9/11 era.

The Law

Giorgio Agamben, following Carl Schmitt, has famously theorized sovereignty in relation to a state of exception wherein sovereignty is precisely the power to suspend the law that grounds its legitimacy, in the name of protecting that same legal order (Agamben 1998 and 2005). For many social theorists, the Guantánamo detention facility exemplifies the abusive paradox of the state of exception that reinforces absolute sovereignty at the expense of, yet in the name of, the law. Although the state of exception offers a conceptual framework that can help students grasp the legal and even geopolitical paradoxes of Guantánamo, it forecloses analysis of legal reasoning used to build and sustain the camps and to guide the treatment of its inhabitants as well as the ways in which Guantánamo fits within larger systems of racialized abuse. As Joshua Comaroff has argued, “Precisely what is interesting in the endless memos that have circulated among the president, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Vice President Dick

Cheney, and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales is that they express a need for *legal* tactics to defend such ideas as the ‘enemy combatant’ and detention without trial, in the face of eventual challenge from the judiciary” (Comaroff 2007, 385). In addition, approaching Guantánamo as a paradigmatic state of exception in effect denies the possibility of reading the detainees as anything other than what Agamben theorizes as bare life—the life that may be taken with impunity and without sacrifice in the state of exception, the political life that is nonetheless beyond the reach of the law and therefore demonstrates the power of sovereignty and sovereign violence.

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To turn the focus back toward how the law variously constitutes its subjects, I begin with the international legal instruments that should protect detainees and to which the Torture Memos respond or, in the case of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (adopted 2010, not ratified by the U.S.), which the administration’s treatment of suspected enemies seems to demand. Discussing the Third Geneva Convention not only details the rights accorded to prisoners of war, it also allows students to consider that there are legal and illegal ways of conducting war. Most importantly, this discussion illuminates the stakes of categories such as “prisoner of war” versus “unlawful combatant” through which the detainees are legally recognizable. We turn to a close reading of Articles 1 through 4 of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT, adopted 1984, ratified by the U.S. 1987) to understand the precise legal definition of torture—particularly the components of severity, intentionality, and official consent, and for the reminder that “No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture” (Article 2). We also look closely at Article 3, outlawing the transfer of a person to a state where torture is likely, and the Optional Protocol to CAT (adopted in 2002, not ratified by the U.S.), which aims to increase the effectiveness of CAT by guaranteeing visits to detention facilities by “independent international and national bodies” (Optional Protocol, Article 1). Slahi spends 2002 first in Jordan, where he endures harsh treatment and is hidden from the view of International Red Cross observers, before he is flown to the U.S. Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and then the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo Bay. Finally, to follow up on Article 4 of CAT that directs signatory states to adopt parallel domestic criminal law, we briefly examine 18 U.S.C. §2340 (1994) for how its definition compares to that in CAT (particularly the U.S. code’s inclusion of “the threat of imminent death” and whether it stands as an independent criterion or a

qualifying clause in the definition of torture). These close readings provide students with a framework for evaluating the treatment Slahi describes as well as illuminate the key principles that the Torture Memos address. In addition, the review of adoption and ratification dates encourages students to think critically about the U.S. government's commitment to international law.

In terms of teaching human rights more generally, this close reading of international law also reveals some of human rights' foundational paradoxes addressed earlier in the semester, including the ways in which its ostensibly universal principles are only recognizable within the nation-state system (see, for instance, Douzinas 2000 and Brown 2002). As Greg Mullins has written, "if human beings have universal and inalienable rights, why do human beings need to be protected from the state, and more pointedly, why must they be protected *by* the very state they are being protected *from*?" (Mullins 2012, 121). One student traces that paradox and its implications for detainees in her analysis of CAT:

In the preamble it states that its rationale recognizes "that those rights derive from the inherent dignity of the human person," and that its ultimate goal is "to promote universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms." However, in the articles it immediately transitions into legal language, putting the power of recognizing and enforcing torture violations into the hands of "state parties." This rhetorical contradiction, of making the motivation behind the document one of personal human dignity, and yet putting ultimate power in the hands of institutions, leaves room for many of the legal arguments of the U.S. torture memos.



GUANTANAMO FROM THE AIR COURTESY OF THE GUANTANAMO MEMORY PROJECT

Another approach I take to the question of how the law constitutes legal personhood in multiple, possibly contradictory ways is to consider whether or not detainees figure as the subjects or objects of the laws at hand. Notwithstanding the slide from human dignity to state power in CAT, identified above, clearly the intention behind CAT, the Convention Against Enforced Disappearance, and related instruments is to detail the rights accorded human rights claimants. These non-derogatory rights define and defend the dignity of the subject to whom they are attached, although they may only be claimed by the legal person. Noting how the law seeks to constitute dignity and legal personhood through rights is helpful before turning to legal discussions of what is lawful to do *to* those swept up as enemies or threats in the administration's response to

the September 11, 2001 attacks, or, to state it slightly differently, how the presumption of legal personhood might be dismantled to render the detainee the object of state power rather than the subject of human rights law.

Perhaps the most challenging class leading up to *Guantánamo Diary* is that spent deciphering the Torture Memos. In my experience, students initially find them impenetrable, and I invite students to consider *why* the memos are often so obfuscatory, rather than to feel inadequate themselves. Using the *New York Times*' "Guide to the Torture Memos" and its links, we work in groups to provide close readings of core documents. I ask students to identify the speaker, his office, his audience, and the date in order to make visible the institutional priorities that the rhetor (in its more recent sense of a speaker with persuasive intent) advances and how the memos present an initial debate (Yoo, Gonzales, Powell, and Taft), its resolution (Bush's Directive), and its implications and attempts at clarification (Bybee and Rumsfeld). Next students pull out the central argument of each memo, the logic that sustains it, and, finally, any questions that the argument raises for them. One student asked in her close reading of one of the memos, "If we do not protect detainees from human rights violations[,] do we consider them 'human'?" Raising such questions engages students in the difficult work of translating between abstract principles and specific situations. It also allows us to consider the appeal of human rights in the rhetorical context of fear, which seeks to define rights and security as mutually exclusive. Another important strategic divide is that articulated in President George W. Bush's Directive on the Treatment of Detainees (7 February 2002), although in this case the rhetoric seeks to mask rather than to entrench the rooting of opposites. In the Directive, Bush seeks to reaffirm a sense of U.S. moral authority and political power, despite

concluding that the Geneva Conventions have only limited applicability to Taliban and none to al-Qaeda detainees. He nonetheless insists, "our values as a Nation . . . call for us to treat detainees humanely[, and . . .] to be a strong supporter of Geneva and its principles" ("Guide to the Torture Memos"). This false syllogism reinforces a human rights ethos at the moment its legal foundations are removed. Whether or not students find Bush's reasoning compelling in the context at hand, it can open a broader discussion of the efficacy of human rights as a legal versus moral framework.

Each stage of close reading the Torture Memos can be a challenge: students may be unfamiliar with the information in letterhead and how it is organized and need to pause to consider why, for instance, officials in the

Departments of Defense, State, and Justice might disagree on the applicability of the Geneva Conventions due to the interests of their respective departments as well as legal reasoning. By mapping the context and argument of each memo (in chronological order) on the boards around the classroom, students can see—spatially—how the debate from Rumsfeld, what it might mean to translate these decisions to U.S. military personnel and interrogators around the world. This mapping also highlights the importance of the redefinition of torture in the Gonzales memo of 1 August 2002, which, in Diana Taylor’s words, makes torture “synonymous with death rather than torment” (Taylor 2007, 731). Instructors seeking a more complete record of the memoranda and reports concerning the legal status of detainees, approved military, CIA and FBI interrogation techniques, and what protections, if any, detainees hold could consult *The Torture Papers* (2005), edited by Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel.

Although Slahi’s narration in *Guantánamo Diary* concludes in 2005, the book as a whole inevitably raises questions about his current status. If time allows, a close examination of subsequent laws and legal casework is productive in looking at the ways in which legal personhood can be incrementally constructed where it is first denied. I provide a brief overview of key laws and legal decisions that came toward the end and subsequent to the central narrative (although students frequently do additional research and close readings of these texts on their own): the Military Commissions Acts of 2006 and 2009, *Rasul v. Bush* (2004), *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* (2006), and *Boumedienne v. Bush* (2008). With the exception of the Military Commissions Act of 2006, these cases and laws enhanced the legal standing of the detainees, including by recognizing their right to *habeas corpus* petitions (a right Slahi exercised after *Boumedienne v. Bush*) and reiterating the principles of the Geneva Conventions and U.S. Uniform Code of Military Justice. Even this brief overview demonstrates for students that, as Angela Naimou has effectively argued, the legal options are not solely between the full rights of citizenship and the negation of Agamben’s bare life; rather, what lies between them “is an enormous range of particular legal identities” (Naimou 2015, 33). For more information about Slahi’s legal initiatives, the American Civil Liberties Union docket on *Slahi v. Obama* provides a legal history and current information on his case (<https://www.aclu.org/cases/slahi-v-obama-habeas-challenge-guantanamo-detention>).

Language

Parsing words and logic in the Torture Memos as well as analyzing how a political agenda can subvert common meanings in favor of ideologically-driven interpretations both invite a larger consideration of the role of euphemism in discourses surrounding terrorism, Guantánamo, and the international network of black sites which Slahi’s story includes. To give students a sense of the lexical context of the detainees, beyond their designation as unlawful combatants and Guantánamo as a detention facility and not a prison, I assign a news article on the official U.S. rhetorical switch from the “Global War on Terror” to “overseas contingency operation” (Burkeman 2009, see also *The Economist* 2007). A close reading of selections

from Fred Halliday’s *Shocked and Awed: A Dictionary of the War on Terror* or of terms simply pulled from major news media—e.g., “rendition,” “terrorist,” “Jihadi,” “fanatic,” “detainee,” “unlawful combatant,” “enemy combatant,” “prisoner of war,” “special” or “enhanced interrogation,” and “actionable intelligence”—can also be helpful in making available for scrutiny the language used to characterize detainees. Tracing the meanings of like terms, for instance, highlights the ways in which distinctions between them often collapse or are infused with ethnocentric connotations in everyday and official discourse in order to polarize the rhetoric surrounding detainees. In addition, these detailed, close readings of law and language translate into more nuanced discussions in class (and later in their written work), as students become increasingly careful about their own language use.

After two to three classes devoted to the book’s context, I assign *Guantánamo Diary* over two weeks (four class periods), in each meeting examining elements such as voice, the use of literary devices, the construction of credible authorship, the representation of atrocity, character development, and genre. Especially after analysis of how the arguments permitting detention without charge, trial, or conclusion were initially staged, this attention to the literariness of *Guantánamo Diary* allows us to consider how Slahi tells his story as well as how that story responds to the arguments that have, at least temporarily, legalized rightslessness.

Guantánamo Diary

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legible subject positions that have been foreclosed—disturbs the normative distribution of rights (Rancière 2004). Rancière describes this process in terms of staging dissensus: “Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (*manifestation*) of a gap in the sensible itself. Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen” (Rancière 2010, 38). In *Guantánamo Diary*, Slahi does not claim the rights he has been denied so much as re-orient the political field in which rights and the process of political subjectivization that activates them are negotiated. Through his narration, he emerges as a political subject whose very constitution is bound up with that of his readers and, thus, who has a claim on readers’ engagement.

Credibility and Authorship

To analyze how the book stages dissensus, we begin by thinking about the purpose of the paratextual frames in structuring the reader’s approach to the text. Why are there eight doors leading to the central narrative? How does passing through those doors shape our willingness to enter into Slahi’s story? Images of Slahi’s redacted, handwritten manuscript pages underscore the conditions under which it was produced as well as invite comparison with the edited version. These visual referents, combined with the dramatic black bars visible in both the original and typescript versions, emphasize the struggle for control over the story that follows. They also provide a layer of transparency to the editing process that the redactions seemingly resist.

Larry Siems’ introduction also serves multiple purposes, many of which we return to in relation to later chapters in the book. Although, as noted above, students may have widely differing views on whether or not the response to the attacks of 9/11 warrants the sacrifice of human rights, they can identify the strategies Siems uses to build the credibility of the narrative that follows. Among the most effective strategies is including the perspective of Senior Prosecutor from the Office of Military Commissions, Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Couch, who led Slahi’s prosecution for nine months from 2003 to 2004 (Slahi has never been charged with a crime). Motivated to return to active service following the death of a fellow Marine who was a co-pilot in the hijacked plane that hit the second World Trade Tower, Couch was pleased to be assigned to seemingly “high value” detainees. However, he withdrew after suspecting that the lengthy confessions Naval Criminal Investigative Service relayed to him could only have been obtained under suspect conditions. In an interview, Couch slides from past to present tense in disclosing his growing unease:

With Slahi I noted, as we went on into the fall of 2003, he was being very prolific with what he what he [sic] was saying. And there were a lot of reports coming out. And just the volume—I got to the point where I just couldn't keep up with what everything he was saying. I've got in the back of my mind what I had seen [of the conditions of the Guantánamo detainees] on that first trip. And I've also been told that Slahi is under special project.

All of that's kind of coming together. And I'm thinking, okay, why is he being this prolific? What's going on? Are they—are they, you know, is it physical coercion? (Interview 2007)

Couch explains his decision to withdraw from Slahi’s case in both legal and religious terms—because of the inadmissibility in court of evidence obtained through torture (CAT Article 15) and feeling complicit in the violation of human dignity such that, “I’m not honoring God by prosecuting a man with this type of evidence” (Interview 2007). From this, we can ask, what do the book’s framing devices, and Siems’ strategic use of Couch’s testimony in particular, presume about the audience for the book? My students find Couch credible and crucial to their willingness to read Slahi’s story because Couch is a Marine, military prosecutor, loyal friend and comrade, and Evangelical Christian. This list, generated in class, leads us to ask if are there any specific traits that we would look for in Slahi to maintain that trust in the narrative.

Indeed, Slahi proves a compelling narrator because he is a well-rounded character who maintains his own humanity—reflected in his love and concern for his family, empathy for the suffering of others, curiosity, knowledge, understanding, religious devotion, emotional range, sense of humor and irony, and desire to engage the reader—even in those moments when he is most dehumanized and abused by those around him. Again and again, he relates his own objectification in order to illuminate its all too human costs: “I was treated like a UPS package. I cannot describe my feelings: anger, fear, powerlessness, humiliation, injustice, betrayal” (Slahi 2015, 135). These moments also reveal both individual and systemic facets of abuse. On the one hand, Slahi represents the individual characteristics, human failings, and occasional kindnesses in his interactions with guards and interrogators. Even the briefest descriptions include references to the human drama of his detention: “Humiliation, sexual harassment, fear, and starvation was the order of the day until around 10 p.m. Interrogators made sure that I had no clue about the time, but nobody is perfect; their watches always revealed it” (233). On the other hand, Slahi’s close attention to how people speak, their understandings of themselves in the world, and the relative power of the camps’ personnel to one another also allows him to identify patterns of behavior and belief that point to the systemic racism (layered onto Islamophobia) underlying his treatment.

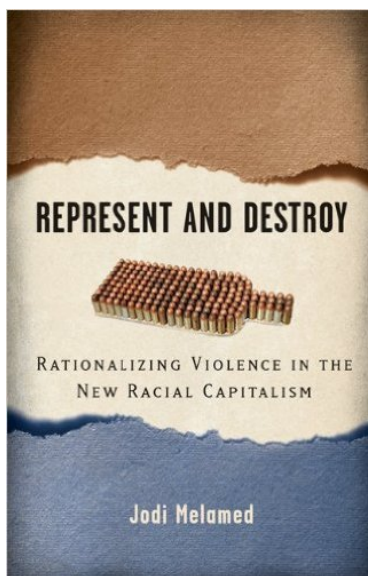
In *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed argues that the Bush administration justified indefinite detention in part by utilizing multicultural discourses at once to defend American values and to rationalize abuse. Through a process of “neoliberal racialization,” “neoliberalism’s beneficiaries [are cast] as worthy multicultural global citizens and its losers as doomed by their own monoculturalism, deviance, inflexibility, criminality, and other attributes deemed antisocial” (Melamed 2011, 138). At Guantánamo, according to Melamed, this policy in effect recognizes the religious beliefs and cultural practices of the detainees and uses that recognition to construct a

monocultural caricature of detainees that “justified torture” (153). *Guantánamo Diary* reverses the logic of monoculturalism. Although Slahi is regularly denied his right to religious practice (there is little evidence in the book of the multicultural dimension of Melamed’s argument, although one can examine aspects of it, such as the practice of Ramadan at Guantánamo through other sources), he is nonetheless always already guilty. “In the eyes of the Americans, you’re doomed,” one interrogator tells him. “Just looking at you in an orange suit, chains, and being Muslim and Arabic is enough to convict you” (220). Another tells him, “To me, you meet all the criteria of a top terrorist. When I check the terrorist check list, you pass with a very high score” (192). Rather than represent Slahi’s perspective in relation to that checklist, *Guantánamo Diary* reveals the interrogators’ racist comments to be reflective of their own monoculturalism, not Slahi’s. By comparison, Slahi, writing in his fourth language with references to American films, European history, the Bible and the Koran, Mauritanian folktales, and countless other cultural allusions drawn from experiences in Mauritania, Senegal, Germany, Afghanistan, Canada, Jordan, and Guantánamo resists polarizing identification.

Given Slahi’s capacious and detailed memory of the individuals he has encountered en route to and at Guantánamo, it is perhaps no surprise that the censors have attempted to render them unrecognizable by redacting many of their identifying markers. The redactions raise key questions about the authorship and credibility of the book that we take up in class. What principles seem to guide the redactions [and, once those principles are identified, how well are they followed]? Who or what do the redactions seem to be protecting and to what end? Do the redactions enhance or detract from Slahi’s credibility? Thinking about the redactions in one chapter, what is the story—according the editor’s footnotes and the larger context—that the redactions intimate and how does that story relate to the narrative in the chapter as a whole? Joseph Slaughter has written about redacted Guantánamo documents, “the unnarrated, which was once narrated, draws attention to itself as a political absence” (Slaughter 2015, 115). To some extent this is certainly true; however, I also encourage students to read the redactions as constitutive of Slahi’s story as opposed to places where narrative fails or is absent. That the redactions in the book are often inconsistent, self-defeating, and masking information available from other public sources oftentimes refigures the black bars less as signifying the political absence of the speaker than the presence of authoritarianism that seeks unsuccessfully to control what it does not understand. Siems’s decision to include the redactions makes visible the process of narrative construction and, with it, the process of Slahi’s political subjectivization. Together Slahi’s narration and the redactions thus make visible the staging of dissensus.

On the Close Reading of Torture and Institutional Racism

The ethical stakes of narrative control are particularly clear in the representation of torture. In “Human Rights in Literary Studies,” James Dawes identifies several paradoxes inherent in a literary or cultural approach to human rights, one of which is the paradox of suffering: “How do you resolve the paradox that your audiences hunger for images and stories of human calamity both because they want to understand their world and their moral responsibilities in it and because they are voyeuristic? What, ultimately, are the psychic costs of storytelling to the storyteller, the audience, and the person whose story is being told? And perhaps most important, what makes these acts of storytelling more or less effective in changing the world?” (Dawes 2009, 401-02). I take this quote as a point of departure for examining how Slahi writes about his experience of egregious suffering and why it matters. Although Slahi relates the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment he receives throughout the book, the intensification of abuse occurs in chapters five and six, when Rumsfeld approves a “special interrogation plan” for Slahi (Committee on Armed Services 2008, 135-41) and Lieutenant Richard Zuley is placed in charge of his interrogation team.



The representation of torture in Guantánamo Diary raises larger questions about torture’s uses and effects.

To begin this discussion, we turn back to the introduction, which includes a note Slahi wrote to his attorney in 2006 in which he identifies the summer of 2003 as the time “where my brake broke loose. I yessed every accusation my interrogators made. [. . .] I just wanted to get the monkeys off my back. I don’t care how long I stay in jail. My belief comforts me” (xvii). I ask students to consider what “my brake broke loose” means and how the reams of confession that Slahi generated during this period, whose quantity overwhelmed Lt. Col. Couch, might compare to the way in which Slahi describes his experience. Students sometimes find it initially challenging to see the “how” rather than the “what” of writing. In order to facilitate this analysis, we talk about whether Slahi seems to want us to understand what torture *feels* like and whether such a feeling might be possible through the medium of the text and across the many distances between our and Slahi’s respective geopolitical, psychological, and linguistic positions. This discussion also asks students to think critically about their own readerly desires. In addition, we turn briefly to *The Guardian (London)*’s article on Shaker Aamer’s psychiatric evaluation of 2013 by Dr. Emily Keram, who reported, “at numerous times during the five-day evaluation he became visibly agitated and interrupted himself when discussing the severe maltreatment he’s experienced. At those times, he

either stopped talking or repeatedly engaged in apparent efforts to distract himself from painful and disturbing memories by suddenly and loudly singing” (reported in Cobain 2015). Without conflating Slahi and Aamer’s responses to torture, Keram’s report can help attune students to the different strategies one might adopt to narrate the unnarratable. Looking at specific examples in *Guantánamo Diary*, students note the restraint with which Slahi writes; his desire to share how he felt without tantalizing the reader with a phenomenological description of torture; and his pattern of recounting moments of relief during even the most brutal treatment. With each of these strategies, he wards against the spectacularization of his own suffering. Instead of depicting himself solely as the object of state violence, in these passages he retains control not of the ostensible confessions given when “my brake broke loose”—which, given that Slahi has never been charged with any crime, are evidently of no legal value, but of an alternative form of “actionable intelligence” readers are invited to share: the process of his own political subjectivization that the book represents and makes possible, that takes place in the context of torture and degradation, and that asks readers to re-evaluate their own subject positions in relation to his.

The representation of torture in *Guantánamo Diary* raises larger questions about torture’s uses and effects. Is the purpose of torture to demonstrate the power of the state and the powerlessness of the tortured (Scarry 1985), to yield valuable intelligence (as in the popularized “ticking bomb” scenario), to punish? How can we understand the use of torture in relation to other modes of exercising state power? Darius Rejali’s magisterial research demonstrates, for example, that “police and military in the main democratic states were leaders in adapting and innovating clean [leaving few physical marks] techniques of torture,” and that cleanliness is essential to broadening public acceptance of their use (Rejali 2007, 5, 2). Although *Guantánamo Diary* cannot answer those questions about the purpose of torture, the book both presents them and, in Slahi’s case, allows readers to situate his experience in the larger contexts of democratic government and of structural and systemic racism. Melamed’s argument about neoliberal racism and monoculturalism discussed above provides one example. Delving into the footnotes about Lt. Zuley’s role in orchestrating Slahi’s torture reveals another dimension to the ideologies that sustain indefinite detention and abuse. Here it is helpful to mark passages in the book that speak to racism of guards and interrogators—the taunts Slahi receives, his careful analysis of the relative authority of white and black personnel, the way guards and interrogators’ casual racism suggests an ignorance about the dynamics of race (and slavery) in Mauritania, and Slahi’s own comparisons of himself to a slave. To make visible the ways in which racism has an institutional presence, I then turn to Spencer Ackerman’s exposés of Lt. Zuley’s decades of work as a police detective in Chicago, where he honed his abusive interrogation techniques on poor, predominantly non-white Americans in an urban “black site” before he transferred to Guantánamo. Ongoing practices in and investigations of Homan Square can disclose ways in which the treatment of detainees corresponds to police brutality addressed in

#blacklivesmatter and related campaigns. These patterns of abuses figuratively resituate Guantánamo from the edges of American empire to its center.

Literary Form and Genre

Whereas the U.S. government has defended its treatment of detainees in the name of national security and the search for “actionable intelligence,” Mark Danner, in his review of *Guantánamo Diary* for the *New York Times*, writes that “the vast and brutal American interrogation mechanism, stretching around the globe in an archipelago of black sites housing hundreds of detainees at the mercy of untold numbers of interrogators, transformed itself into an intricate machine for generating self-reinforcing fiction” (Danner 2015). Slahi agrees: “Torture doesn’t guarantee that the detainee cooperates. In order to stop torture, the detainee has to please his assailant, even with untruthful, and sometimes misleading, Intels” (Slahi 2015, 255). If torture coerces the production of fiction, how might we categorize the narrative Slahi voluntarily shares, its redactions notwithstanding, in *Guantánamo Diary*? I conclude my unit on the book with this question because *literary forms and genres provide guides to how we read—they shape authorial intention as well as readerly expectations. Thus, the question of literary classification becomes a question about active reading, and my objective is not to promote a specific label for the book but to ask students to take responsibility for their own reading practices.*

There are many possible responses to the question of the book’s literary form and genre. For Siems, *Guantánamo Diary* is “an epic for our times” (Slahi 2015, *xlix*). Its recursive structure, “lexicon about the size of the one that powers the Homeric epics” (*xi*), scope of its story, and Slahi’s repetition of “formulaic phrases for recurrent phenomena and events” (*xii*) are all characteristics of an epic. Students also describe the book as a thriller, memoir, autobiography, imagined diary (addressed to Dear Reader, rather than Dear Diary), individual and institutional memoir (that tells Slahi’s story and/as that of systemic, transnational racism), and as literary testimony. We talk about what reading through the lens of these different designations entails and how the terms structure the relationship between reader, author, editor, censor, and text.

Conclusion

At the end of the book, Slahi writes, “What do the American people think? I am eager to know” (372), and that question, whether or not students are American, invites a rejoinder. Moreover, the conclusion reiterates Slahi’s rejection of the terms through which he remains (il)legible to the U.S. government and his rejection of the argument that torture—as opposed to the use of dialogue, description, and imagination—produces knowledge. The book, with its regular address to “Dear Reader,” shifts the discursive context from the violence of interrogation to the conversation of the book. Reading *Guantánamo Diary* through literary and contextual analysis engages Slahi not as an interrogatee, a ghost of our political life, or simply a suffering body, but as a political subject who awaits our reply and whose future we share.

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