READERS AS CO-PRODUCERS OF MEANING: FRAMES OF RECEPTION AND THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF POST-9/11 MILITARY PRISON DETAINEE MEMOIRS

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ABSTRACT

Extant War on Terror scholarship has focused on the role the American state played and the logics it employed in this self-declared conflict, while life writing emerging from post-9/11 military prisons has largely formed a critical blind-spot. Scholarly engagement with similar kinds of testimonial writing has uniformly tagged these texts as what Barbara Harlow called ‘resistance literature.’ This thesis seeks to draw attention to the fact that theorizations of texts such as the detainee memoirs have been rooted in these texts’ conditions of production, while eliding the role of the reader as a co-producer of meaning. Using frame theory, this thesis seeks to re-center the role of the reader in theorizations of the political potential of these texts. Chapter One examines how the critical project of reading post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs as resistive is complicated by the texts’ refraction through the extratextual state-constructed reading frame of a terrorist ontology being defined in terms of the mind. Chapter Two turns to the frame of the trial, and how reading detainee memoirs through this frame encourages readers to pay attention to the narratives offered by the metaphorical defendants—the state and state actors. This chapter then demonstrates that while the political power of detainee texts could be located in achieving consensus regarding the state-and-actor nexus’ culpability, receiving these texts through the frame of the trial coaxes readers into paying attention to the mutual scapegoating that occurs in the state and state actor’s accounts of the post-9/11 atrocities, transforming them into a
hung jury. This readerly deadlock, in turn, complicates the unambiguous political power critical discourses read into detainee memoirs. Chapter Three focuses on how the formal features of the detainee texts—the genres they can be read within and their stylistic features—function as intertextual frames that further trouble critical discourses of political productivity constructed around these texts. This thesis thus argues that paying attention to the extratextual and intertextual frames that structure readers’ hermeneutic encounter with detainee life writing allows for a more nuanced theorization of the political potential of these texts.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way—my mentors, Professor Samantha Pinto and Professor Christine So, my family and my friends. Thank you for supporting me, intellectually and emotionally, through this process. This thesis is as much mine as it is yours.

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INTRODUCTION

What can literature do, after all? Can the very noun itself, ‘literature,” come to be used as a verb? Indeed as a transitive verb—“to literature” as synonymous with “to do”? (Harlow “Resistance Literature Revisited” 12)

The War on Terror … reveals the limits of older resistance paradigms. (Olguín “From Counter to Hegemonic” 184)

[T]he agency of testimony is contingent. (Whitlock “Protection” 95)

A few days after the 9/11 terror attacks, on 16 September 2001, President Bush told a journalist at Camp David: “This crusade—this war on terrorism—is going to take a while … And the American people must be patient. I’m going to be patient. But I can assure the American people I am determined” (Bazinet). The phrase Bush used to describe the U.S.’s stance against the terrorist groups that orchestrated 9/11—‘war on terrorism’—took on the now well-known moniker of ‘War on Terror’ on 20 September 2001, in an address Bush delivered to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, with the words, “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated” (Bush).

One of the hallmarks of this War on Terror that the Bush administration declared was the United States’ act of arresting men it deemed as ‘terrorist suspects’ and indefinitely detaining them in its vast global network of military prisons or ‘black sites’. These ‘black sites’ were numerous: “[I]n 2001, the US officially reported a total of eighty-nine military prisons, fifty-nine in the US and thirty outside, including recent prison acquisitions in Iraq (officially counted at sixteen) and Afghanistan (officially counted at one), omitting the unknown number of secret prisons” (Gordon 43). The two most prominent of these innumerable post-9/11 carceral sites
were Guantánamo Bay, an American naval base in Cuba converted to a prison, and Abu Ghraib, a prison in Iraq. The Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib military prisons were also linked by the fact that they both employed torture in the interrogation of their detainees. In fact, the very individual that implemented the harsh interrogation techniques at Guantánamo was also sent to Abu Ghraib to implement the same torture-filled interrogations there—“[i]n early 2004, General Geoffrey Miller, former commander of Guantánamo was sent to Abu Ghraib to ‘Gitmoize’ the prison, and it was only after Miller’s arrival that the atrocities began” (McClintock 68).

The most expansive critical debates on the War on Terror, and the military prisons as sites where this ‘war’ was being transacted, have focused on the roles the American state took on and the logics it employed in this conflict—the state’s imperial ambitions¹, its functioning as a national security state² and a carceral state that exported the logics and technologies of military prisons to domestic supermax prisons³, how sovereignty emerged within state governmentality⁴, and how danger was manufactured to rhetorically buttress the state’s project⁵—as well as on how legal apparatuses were manipulated to accomplish the state’s ends⁶. So far, cultural productions emerging from military prisons have received sparse critical attention. While scholars like Erin Trapp and Flagg Miller have produced some work on an edited and translated collection of Guantánamo detainee poetry, its aesthetic features and the kind of political subject it articulates, life writing produced by detainees held in these sites remains under-engaged. Even when engaged, these texts have been deployed to again index conversations about the roles America

¹ See Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today” for a discussion of U.S. imperialism in the War on Terror.
² See Michaels.
³ See Brown, Gordon.
⁴ See Butler 50-100.
⁵ See Campbell 1-14.
⁶ See Dudziak and Volpp, Ahmad 1703-1714, Sadat.
took in this self-declared conflict. Despite scholarship on post-9/11 military prison detainee life narratives, for their own sake, being scant, critical engagement with testimonial texts such as the testimonio and Gulag memoirs, as well as the uses such testimonial texts have been put to, reveal that detainee life writing is likely to be theorized as simultaneously resistive and productive.

Memoirs produced by post-9/11 military prison detainees can be read as testimonial narratives because they fit the definition scholars such as Gillian Whitlock outline for a testimonial text—“a subset of autobiography … [that] emerges out of a political context, in response to a particular set of political circumstances and rhetorical conditions” (Whitlock 85). Testimonial narratives have typically been read by scholars as simultaneously resistive and agential, as oppositional forces capable of being politically productive. This reading can most effectively be gauged through scholarship on Gulag memoirs, texts that “recount experiences of imprisonment at the height of the Stalinist repression in Romania, between 1947 and 1964” (Petrinca 2) and on the testimonio. On one hand, scholars have hailed Gulag memoirs as “serv[ing] a highly politicized goal, namely … [that of] reclaim[ing] the country’s history and reshap[ing] its national identity” (Petrinca 2) and as texts that “are instrumental in interpreting official data, reconstructing history, and in filling the gap that archival material and history books are unable to do” (Petrinca 2). On the other hand, John Beverley, writing on the testimonio—“[a] novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet … form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (Beverley 30-31)—also identifies such a text as “implicitly or explicitly a component of what Barbara Harlow has called ‘resistance literature’” (31). He locates the testimonio as political by arguing that it either “[reconstructs] … a past obliterated by the violence of power” (Beverley 6), or represents “the
“voice of the subaltern” (Beverley 27). Extrapolating this scholarship on Gulag memoirs and the testimonio to post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs indicates that the latter are likely to be read in a similar vein.

Additionally, since human rights advocates and agencies have “focus[ed] upon testimony as a source of legal evidence” (Weine xviii) and since critics have written about the potential for “mobiliz[ing] … public concern through personal accounts and life story narrations” (Jolly 4), post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs are further likely to be read as resistive and productive, as “[vehicles] for articulat[ing] subjection, liberation, and violence” (Richardson 6).

It is indeed tempting to read post-9/11 detainee memoirs as resistive and generative, especially in the face of the American state’s attempt to create a “memorial master-narrative” (Bond 10) about 9/11, post the terrorist attack. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, America engaged in multiple commemorative acts to grapple with the loss of civilians, law enforcement officers, firefighters and military personnel in the attacks, such as the construction of “memorials at Ground Zero and Shanksville” (Bond 9); the “opening of the National September 11 Museum” (Bond 9); cultural productions such as E.L. Doctorow’s photo book Lamentation 9/11 that “combine[d] photographs of New York … in the days after 9/11 with … highly emotive text” (Bond 73) and public events, such as the “2006 exhibition funded by the World Trade Center Memorial Foundation” (Bond 75). Through these memorializing acts, America tried to forge a cultural memory—a type of memory Jan Assmann defines as “exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms” (qtd. in Bond 3)—of America’s victimization. This cultural memory, in turn, was premised on a “sense of reenactment … where emotion dominates, overwhelming any attempt at (re)consideration of the event—its historical context, present
significance, future implications … keep[ing] reflection at a distance” (Senie 167) and therefore, by a corresponding “absence of critical memory” (Senie 168).

While creating this “memorial master-narrative” (Bond 10), America also attempted to push its retaliation to the 9/11 attack—its military prison operations and the atrocities enacted in these prisons—“to the edge of geo-social consciousness” (Gordon 43). Since these post-9/11 military prison operations have been “forgotten, remembered, and forgotten again” (Ševčenko), it is indeed seductive to read post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs as resistive to state master-narratives of 9/11, “mak[ing] visible [once more] the crimes of the U.S. War on Terror” (Trapp), and as generative, functioning as “refusal[s] of revisionist history” (Chevigny 248).

However, reading post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs as singularly and unambiguously politically productive would be succumbing to a form of what Jerome Bruner termed “narrative banalization” (9)—treating these detainee texts “as so socially conventional, so well known, so in keeping with the canon, that we can assign [them] to some well-rehearsed and virtually automatic interpretive routine” (Bruner 9).

Since testimonies are stories “that [are] open to many alternatives, meanings, or responses” (Weine xiii), this thesis seeks to respond to a problem Stevan Weine identified in his book, *Testimony After Catastrophe: Narrating the Traumas of Political Violence*—the problem that “torture testimony has been far more concerned with the production of testimonies than with their transmission, interpretation, and reception” (21). Testimonial texts have repeatedly been theorized based on the conditions of production, while the reception of these texts has been largely neglected. The only strands of critical conversation taking into consideration the reader’s role in determining the political potentiality of testimonial texts have focused on the emotions
engendered in readers as part of the reading experience\textsuperscript{7} and the fact that these texts have recently begun to circulate in environments of suspicion\textsuperscript{8} due to hoax allegations levied against testimonies such as that of Guatemalan state atrocity survivor, Rigoberta Menchú. Despite critical forays into this arena of questioning, the former thread of scholarly conversation largely assumes that testimonial texts are productive in marshaling readers’ solidarity, debating only which kinds of affect can translate into politically powerful action. It is only the latter branch that has begun the work of questioning whether the politically powerful reception critics have heretofore assumed to be self-evident is truly as uncomplicated as prior theorizations deem it to be. Through this thesis, I seek to use frame theory as a fertile inroad into expanding this nascent branch of scholarship by asking: How do the frames readers use to read post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs alter the scaffold of resistance and political productivity through which these texts are typically theorized?

Frame theory, initially introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman in his book, \textit{Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience}, proposes that “[t]here is no human signifying act, no meaningful perception, cognition and communication without ‘frames’” (Wolf 1), where frames are defined as “basic orientational aids that help us to navigate through our experiential universe, inform our cognitive activities and generally function as preconditions of interpretation” (Wolf 5). While frame theory was initially deployed as an analytic in communication studies, it began to gain traction in literary studies with studies of the text that brackets noteworthy or particularly meaningful passages in a book\textsuperscript{9}, frame stories structured in

\textsuperscript{7} See Berlant, Ure and Frost.
\textsuperscript{8} See Smith and Watson, “Witness or False Witness?”.
\textsuperscript{9} See Caws.
mise-en-abyme style\textsuperscript{10} and paratextual elements such as a book’s title and cover\textsuperscript{11}. For the purpose of this project, I will use the original definition of frames as “‘keys’ to interpretation … metaconcepts [that] enable us to interpret both reality and artefacts” (Wolf 4). In this thesis, I demonstrate that readers’ hermeneutic experiences of post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs are mediated through both extratextual frames, “extratextual in the sense that they depend on … ‘outside’ (extra) information, unspecified by the text” (MacLachlan and Reid 3) and intertextual frames that “relate one text or text-type to another” (MacLachlan and Reid 4), to argue that such framed reception complicates the political potential critical discourse attributes to these texts.

In Chapter One, I investigate the critical desire to read Guantánamo detainee memoirs as resistance literature and the dual demands of narrating state violence and proving the detainees’ innocence this levies on these texts. Through an investigation of how detainees Mohamedou Ould Slahi, in \textit{Guantánamo Diary}, and Lakhdar Boumediene and Mustafa Ait Idir, in their jointly authored \textit{Witnesses of the Unseen}, narrate their minds and bodies, I argue that the demand made of these texts to narrate state violence functions as antagonistic to the demand of proving detainee innocence, due to the extratextual reading frame constructed by the state through its definition of a terrorist ontology in terms of the mind. The antagonism between these two demands then complicates the critical project of reading these texts as singularly resistive.

In Chapter Two, I argue that by inviting readers to adjudicate their narratives, the Guantánamo detainee memoirs become amenable to being received through the frame of the trial—a frame that encourages readers to pay heed to the narratives proffered by the metaphorical defendants, the state and its actors. When readers pay attention to the narratives put forth by the state and state actors, they are transformed into a hung jury due to the mutual scapegoating that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item See Dällenbach.
  \item See Genette.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
occurs in these narratives. Since part of the political power critical discourses read into Guantánamo detainee texts could be attributed to the consensual blame they produce in identifying the state-and-actor nexus as culpable, the state and state actors’ mutual scapegoating and consequent transformation of readers into a deadlocked jury risks attenuating the texts’ political power. Thus, I posit that studying the frame of the trial that structures the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs is productive for a nuanced theorization of the political potentiality of these texts.

In Chapter Three, I read Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* and Boumediene and Ait Idir’s *Witnesses of the Unseen* alongside Abu Ghaiba interrogator Eric Fair’s *Consequence*, arguing that the formal features of these texts—the narrative genres they are susceptible to being read within and the stylistic features they employ—function as intertextual frames that further complicate the critical discourses of political productivity surrounding Guantánamo detainee life writing.

Since “testimony cannot be said to be only a product of the survivor, who … speaks it, but also of the receiver with whom words, memories, and stories are exchanged” (Weine 93), through this thesis, I argue that post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs cannot be thought through as uncomplicatedly resistive or productive, and that the political potentiality of these texts is always mediated by the reading frames within which these texts are received. Only by considering the reader’s hermeneutic processes, filtered through the reading frames that structure the reception of these post-9/11 military prison detainee memoirs, can a nuanced theorization of these texts be achieved, since “[t]he reader represents the fray of discourses … into which the witness must enter to be heard at all” (McBride 2).
CHAPTER ONE

Hearing the “Worst of the Worst”: Antagonism between Narrations of State Violence and Establishment of Innocence in Guantánamo Detainee Memoirs

Guantánamo Bay, or ‘Gitmo’, as it is popularly called, is an American naval base in Cuba, converted into a military prison post-9/11 by the Bush administration as part of the War on Terror. It is, as Amy Kaplan states, “one island in a global archipelago, where the United States, [post-9/11], indefinitely detain[ed], secretly transport[ed], and torture[d] uncounted prisoners from all over the world” (“Where is Guantánamo” 831) to harvest intelligence about 9/11 masterminds, Al-Qaeda and future terrorist agendas. The United States held ‘Arab-looking’ Muslim men in this prison, depicting them as “the most dangerous terrorists in the world” (Kaplan, “Where is Guantánamo” 840).

In the process of arresting men as suspected terrorists and transporting them to Guantánamo, a “location that [was] neither foreign nor domestic” (Kaplan, “Where is Guantánamo” 846) according to U.S. law and thus a “legal black hole” (Kaplan, “Where is Guantánamo” 837), America removed these individuals from the political protection of their countries of citizenship and rendered them stateless. Statelessness is an ontological condition where the detainees “not only … formally lost their nationality but also … could no longer benefit from their citizenship rights” (Gündoğdu 2). Political theorist Hannah Arendt explains the violence statelessness enacts by arguing that “the effective guarantees of human rights rely on membership in an organized political community” (Gündoğdu 3), despite the conception of human rights as “moral entitlements that are derived from inherent human attributes such as reason, autonomy, and dignity” (Gündoğdu 4). Thus, by rendering the detainees stateless,
America also rendered them rightless—deprived of both human rights and rights accorded to individuals by nation-states on account of their citizenship.

Memoirs written by detainees about their experiences in Guantánamo, on account of the detainees’ rightless status in that space, can thus be conceptualized as what A. Naomi Paik calls the “testimony of the rightless” (13). Paik goes on to identify the “testimony of the rightless” as constituting a “counterarchive of struggle” (13). Paik’s identification of the ‘testimony of the rightless’ as a ‘counterarchive of struggle’ evinces a critical desire to read Guantánamo Bay detainee writing as a counter-archive about 9/11.

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, after the 9/11 terror attacks, America engaged in multiple acts of hyper-memorialization, attempting to enforce a singular cultural memory of the name-date 9/11—a cultural memory of American victimization at the hands of Islamic terrorists. Since “remembering also has a politics … [and] [t]here are struggles over who is authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography 18), Guantánamo detainee writing may be read to posit a parallel cultural memory of 9/11 as an event that not only produced American victimization, but also marked the American state as an aggressor that unjustly enacted violence on those “dismissed—or ignored—as nameless dark bodies from forsaken parts of the world” (Jayawardane 91). Further, as a counter-archive, an archive of knowledge opposing state narratives, Guantánamo detainee writing may also be read to challenge America’s ascription of the label of ‘terrorist’ to individuals detained in Guantánamo. Thus, Paik’s identification of the ‘testimony of the rightless’ as a ‘counterarchive of struggle’ reveals a critical desire to read Guantánamo detainee writing as resistance literature, a form of literature Barbara Harlow defines in her seminal text of
the same name as literature that “sees itself … as immediately and directly involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological and cultural production” (29).

However, through this chapter, I argue that the critical desire to read Guantánamo detainee memoirs as resistance literature is complicated by the reading frame the state assembles through its act of defining a terrorist ontology in terms of the mind. I begin this chapter by setting up the different moving pieces to be taken into consideration by explaining the seductive critical impulse to read the memoirs produced by Guantánamo Bay detainees as resistance literature and the dual demands this impulse places on detainee writing—the demands of narrating state violence and representing the detainees’ innocence—as well as the reading frame set up by the state. Then, through an investigation of how Guantánamo detainees Mohamedou Ould Slahi, in Guantánamo Diary, and Lakhdar Boumediene and Mustafa Ait Idir, in Witnesses of the Unseen, narrate their minds and their bodies, I argue that the critical demand for this writing to expose state violence functions as antagonistic to the demand for the detainees to demonstrate their innocence, due to the reading frame constructed by the state. The antagonism between these demands, in turn, complicates the critical desire for these memoirs to function as resistance literature. This complication is also generative in revealing that state-produced definitions and logics of innocence, in the War on Terror, protect the state’s ability to ascribe guilt arbitrarily, and if readers continue to use these state-produced paradigms of innocence, those assumed guilty will be unable to write themselves as innocent.
Guantánamo Memoirs as Resistance Literature: Twin Demands of Narrating State Violence and Establishing Detainee Innocence

A. Naomi Paik’s extended engagement with the concept of ‘the testimony of the rightless’ in her book, Rightlessness: Testimony and Redress in U.S. Prison Camps Since World War II, helps parse the expectations critical frameworks place on Guantánamo detainee writing. Paik quotes Paul Gilroy when he claims that “such testimony [the testimony of the rightless] challenges the violence and dehumanization at the heart of rightlessness in ways that can work against its persistent reemergence” (qtd. in Paik 13), further stating that “[e]xcavating the subjugated knowledge of rightless subjects by closely reading their testimonies can sharpen our understanding of the complex predicaments of rights, rightlessness, and state violence. From these testimonies … we can find our way toward an alternative future” (14). Gilroy’s words reveal that the critical impulse to read Guantánamo detainee writing as a counter-archive, as discharging a resistive function, is constituted by the dual desire for it to be both revelatory of state violence and generative of alternative futures.

These dual goals Paik speaks of, by quoting Gilroy, are reflected in the critical conversation surrounding the two genres Guantánamo Bay detainee memoirs straddle—that of prison writing, on account of Guantánamo being a carceral space, and trauma literature, since the state tortured the detainees to procure intelligence.

D. Quentin Miller, writing about prison literature, states that “[p]rison narratives are written primarily (even exclusively) for outsiders … One of the most basic functions of these narratives is to communicate the horror and degradation of being incarcerated. But they invariably go beyond the walls of the prison to address broader social ills” (“On the Outside Looking in” 15). Miller asserts, “the obsessive subject of contemporary prison literature is the
way identity is shaped, compromised, altered, or obliterated by incarceration” (“Introduction” 3). Thus, the critical conversation surrounding prison literature seems to identify it as a kind of writing that exposes state violence—writing that both exposes how the state alters subjectivity through incarceration and that reveals social dynamics that the state endorses, on account of their amplification within the carceral space.

In addition, Kali Tal, discussing writers of trauma literature, explains:

Each of these authors articulates the belief that he or she is a storyteller with a mission; their responsibility as survivors is to bear the tale. Each one also affirms the process of storytelling as a personally reconstitutive act, and expresses the hope that it will also be a socially reconstitutive act—changing the order of things as they are and working to prevent the enactment of similar horrors in the future.

(121)

Tal therefore suggests that the act of ‘bearing the tale’ holds the potential to be socially reconstitutive. One way to understand how the act of telling can effect social change is by understanding the role readers’ emotions can play in this process. Critical scholarship has long grappled with “politically charged emotions: compassion, and cognate terms such as pity, sympathy and clemency” (Ure and Frost 1), emotions that when evoked by sad and sentimental stories hold the potential to motivate readers to take political action. While the role of compassion as an emotion that can motivate political action has been controversial, with advocates such as Martha Nussbaum and Kristen Monroe arguing that “compassion … motivates citizens to respond to others’ suffering” (Ure and Frost 3) and critics such as Roger Crisp and Luc Boltanski rebutting with the claim that “this sentiment does not deliver on these political promises” (Ure and Frost 3), the concept of compassionate anger has had more traction.
Scholars such as Nicholas Faulkner and Martha Whitebrook, drawing on social psychology findings, claim that compassionate anger is “politically valuable” (Ure and Frost 10) because “[a]nger is politically galvanizing” (Ure and Frost 10). As such, when the critical conversation around both prison writing and trauma writing reads the objects of its scholarship as “[b]earing witness” (Tal 7), this act of ‘bearing witness’ is assumed to compel readers to experience compassionate anger on the behalf of the victims of state violence, and thus facilitate an experience of “critical witnessing” for the reader—“the process of being so moved by a reading experience as to engage in a specific action intended to forge a path toward change” (Lopez 64).

As a genre of writing that sutures prison writing and literature of trauma, Guantánamo Bay detainee writing is likely to be burdened with the critical desire to function as a form of resistance against state violence by exposing state violence, generating compassionate anger in its readers and thus petitioning for social change. M. Neelika Jayawardane reiterates this critical desire in her discussion of Mahvish Rukhsana Khan’s memoir about Guantánamo Bay detainees, while also illuminating an important caveat specific to memoirs produced by terrorist suspects. Jayawardane mentions that “the revelation of wrongdoing alongside a call to action” (95) remains an important aspect of these memoirs. Here, Jayawardane identifies an intervening factor between the critical desires for revelation and social change through the use of the word ‘wrongdoing’. In the particular case of Guantánamo detainee literature, since these texts circulate among a “public whose attitude toward the Guantánamo detainees is, at best, skeptical” (Tomsky 25), it is important to note that the compassionate anger critics want readers to feel, and therefore the social reconstitution they desire, is most likely to occur when detainees portray themselves as innocent of the terrorist charges the state levies against them.
Most literature that bears witness to torture can elicit reader empathy, or compassionate anger, simply through descriptions of torture. Jennifer Ballengee explains the rhetorical function of torture—how torture can be mobilized to evoke such empathy by writing:

We see a body in pain, and we react with our bodies, with what our bodily memory tells us about pain: the worst that we have experienced, the worst that we can imagine. And in this bodily response, in our uncomfortable consciousness of our own bodies, we feel certain; the body, in this sense, in our sensory awareness of our bodies, appears to be trustworthy … Torture thus conveys a sense of certainty by means of experiencing or witnessing the body in pain: this is an empathetic, not a logical connection. (9)

However, in the particular case of Guantánamo detainee writing, since the state depicts these writers as suspected terrorists, as “alleged Islamic radicals with an ideological agenda” (Tomsky 25) and as perpetrators of heinous proportions of violence, only limited empathy, or compassionate anger, might be generated by their descriptions of torture alone. When coupled with representations of the detainees’ innocence, however, the violence the state enacts through torture would appear indefensible and thus generate greater compassionate anger. Further, descriptions of torture alone may prompt a condemnation of the state, but if these writings are to produce social reconstitution—a goal that requires a larger impetus for its accomplishment than mere condemnation—the detainees are compelled to establish their innocence, to divorce themselves from terrorist associations. As Maureen Whitebrook states, compassionate anger is “directed at the causes of suffering… informed by knowledge of situation and context, and in that sense is objective and rational” (25), thus making the detainees’ establishment of their innocence crucial to the project of generating compassionate anger in their readers to motivate them to act to achieve social reconstitution.
In the next section of this chapter, I will explain how the state has created a reading frame for judging the innocence of terrorist suspects by defining a terrorist ontology in terms of the mind.

**Understanding the State-Produced Reading Frame: A Terrorist Ontology**

Post-9/11, the American state began to discursively define a terrorist ontology in terms of the mind. Michel Foucault, in his seminal work published in 1975, *Discipline and Punish*, already laid the groundwork necessary to think through how the state began to concern itself with the mind. He claimed that due to the disappearance of the spectacle of corporal punishment in and after the nineteenth century, “the body as the target of penal repression disappeared” (Foucault 8), further explaining that the state “no longer touched the body, or at least as little as possible, and then only to reach something other than the body itself” (Foucault 10-11). Thus, Foucault identified a “shift in the target of modern discourse, as the fleshy body gave way to the mind as a focus of concern” (Shilling 67). My argument dovetails with Foucault in claiming that the state indeed took the mind as its object of concern. However, in the post-9/11 War on Terror, the American state was not as preoccupied with disciplining the mind, as Foucault claimed it was in the twentieth century, as much as it was concerned with defining the characteristics of a terrorist ontology in terms of the mind.

The state discursively constructed this terrorist ontology in contradictory terms, as evinced in President Bush’s State of the Union Address delivered in January 2002. On one hand, discussing the terrorist camps claimed to have been discovered in Afghanistan, Bush said, “We have found diagrams of American nuclear power plants and public water facilities, detailed instructions for making chemical weapons, surveillance maps of American cities” (Bush). In this
way, Bush depicted a terrorist mind as one that is capable of developing elaborate and intricate plans, as hyper-intelligent, as augmented. On the other hand, in the same address, Bush named some of the groups constituting the “terrorist underworld” (Bush) as “Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Jaish-i-Mohammad” (Bush). By thus exclusively identifying Islamic fundamentalist groups as terrorist groups, Bush constructed a link between the terrorist figure and Islamic fundamentalism. These ideas of fundamentalist indoctrination then depicted the terrorist mind as one marked by diminished cognitive capacity, a notion cemented by Middle Eastern Studies scholar Deepa Kumar, when she writes, “those who are seen as ‘terrorists’ are presented as crazed, irrational” (49). These images of fanaticism and diminished cognitive capacity worked to reduce the terrorist figure to a “zombie-like body, incapable of independent thought” (Morey and Yaqin 1)—a body unthinkingly carrying out acts it was ordered to perform. Thus, post-9/11, the state simultaneously coded the terrorist figure as both possessing an augmented mind and as lacking a mind, to the point of almost becoming a body incapable of thought.

Morey and Yaqin assert that “[g]overnments … seek … to establish agendas through the tried and tested (and perhaps more controllable) vehicles of the imagined community, … [such as] the press” (3) and the state agenda of defining a terrorist ontology in terms of these contradictory stereotypes of an augmented mind and a lack of mind indeed found further reinforcement in the press. Articles published by the New York Times the day after the 9/11 attacks made these contradictory constructions of the terrorist figure most evident in their attempts to demystify such an individual. An article titled “A Day of Terror: The Background” described terrorists as individuals “that aim to kill many people in technically complex operations” (Kahn)—and therefore possessing augmented cognitive capabilities—while another article titled “Essay; New Day of Infamy” described them as individuals “indoctrinated with
fanaticism” (Safire) and thus lacking a mind that is the “active seat of thought, will and agency” (Heikes 77), mind-less bodies carrying out assigned tasks. These contradictory constructions were also echoed in articles published in the Washington Post that described the profiles of typical terrorists—while some were described to be individuals “whipped into religious frenzy and dispatched to holy war” (Mintz), others were described as “well-educated” (Mann) and intelligent enough to learn how to “[construct] … hairbrush bombs” (Mintz) and “[funnel] large sums of money to bin Laden through … Persian gulf charit[ies]” (Mintz).

Through these conflicting markers of a terrorist ontology, the state also established a master-yardstick—a reading frame—via which the innocence of suspected terrorists could be adjudicated by readers when reading Guantánamo detainees’ representations of themselves, their memoirs. While, at first glance, it may seem that alternative means of adjudicating innocence are available to readers, such as trusting that the detainees had no terrorist affiliations and were not masterminding or planning to execute terrorist operations, it is important to note that texts written by Guantánamo detainees, and therefore their representations of self “circulate in a world that is often skeptical of their veracity” (Tomsky 28). Readers are often aware of the claustrophobic reading experience produced through life writing—the fact that they “can only see what the author sees and chooses to describe” (Pearlstein)—as evinced in Terri Tomsky’s statement that “[w]riters of reviews of several Guantánamo prison testimonies display ambivalence toward the … detainees, questioning the reliability of the narrators as well as the excision of inconvenient information, which for example, links an author to radical Islamic figures or to Mujahideen training camps” (28). Due to readers’ awareness of the possibility of receiving only partial representations from the detainees, the reading frame established by the state becomes a heuristic for differentiating a terrorist ontology from a non-terrorist one.
Thus, to function as resistance literature, Guantánamo detainee memoirs are burdened with the demands of exposing state violence while also “negotiat[ing] private identity in the public sphere and ... re-present[ing] and defend[ing] themselves to the public at large” (Jayawardane 92) as innocent of terrorist associations by representing minds that have neither augmented nor diminished cognition.

In the rest of this chapter, I will analyze Slahi’s memoir Guantánamo Diary and Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir Witnesses of the Unseen to examine how the dual critical demands of exposing state violence and establishing detainee innocence operate in these texts. Slahi, author of the memoir Guantánamo Diary, as well as Boumediene and Ait Idir, authors of the joint memoir Witnesses of the Unseen, were men detained in the Guantánamo Bay prison at the behest of the U.S. after the 9/11 attacks. While Slahi wrote his memoir in Guantánamo and was still detained in Guantánamo at the time of its publishing, Boumediene and Ait Idir narrated their memoir to a team comprising of an interviewer and two editors after being released from Guantánamo and being rehabilitated in France and Sarajevo respectively. While it may seem like Boumediene and Ait Idir’s release from Guantánamo established their innocence, absolving them from the burden of proving their innocence to the reader through their memoir, widespread allegations of released Guantánamo detainees re-engaging in terrorist acts12 reintroduces this demand. Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir is then still burdened with the demands of both narrating state violence and representing the detainees as innocent of possessing a terrorist ontology.

In the rest of this chapter, I argue that in Slahi’s Guantánamo Diary, the narration of state violence compels Slahi to write himself into the state-produced contradictory stereotypes of

12 See Goldman and Ryan, Kheel, Lamothe.
augmented or diminished cognition, to the point of it being absent, thus precluding his ability to prove his innocence. Additionally, in Boumediene and Ait Idir’s *Witnesses of the Unseen*, I argue that to narrate state violence in terms of how their ‘average minds’ were erased by the state, the detainees are compelled to mediate their narration through editorial presences and these editorial presences—by raising suspicions about whether the detainees’ ‘average’ minds were narrated as such by the detainees or inscribed by the editors—jeopardize the detainees’ claims of possessing neither augmented nor diminished cognition before detention, and consequently their innocence. I conclude this chapter by exploring how the tension between narrating state violence and establishing detainee innocence, and the consequent complication of the critical impulse to read Guantánamo detainee memoirs as resistive, is generative in terms of what it reveals about articulations of innocence.

**Narrating State Violence, Writing Oneself into Terrorist Stereotypes in Guantánamo Diary**

Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s memoir, *Guantánamo Diary*, is particularly amenable to being read through the critical rubric of resistance. The redactions the state imposes on Slahi’s writing, interspersed through the text as black bars interrupting his narration, render visible a struggle for control over the narrative between the state and Slahi. This struggle may suggest that the memoir is an exposé of state violence. Further, Slahi’s address to the reader at the end of his memoir provides a productive moment—“What do the American people think? I am eager to know. I would like to believe the majority of Americans want to see Justice done, and they are not interested in financing the detention of innocent people” (372), Slahi writes. Here, Slahi identifies an American readership as his audience, presents his story before these readers and asks them to adjudicate his situation. The particular aspect he requests American readers to
adjudicate seems to be that of the state’s unjust violence, predicated on and made more indefensible by his represented innocence. Slahi’s memoir is then particularly susceptible to a critical impulse to read it as resistive, as a piece of literature that is capable of eliciting the reader’s compassionate anger by revealing state violence and proving Slahi’s innocence.

Slahi’s memoir testifies against state violence in two ways: by supplying keen analyses of the relationships and exchanges taking place within the sites of his captivity—in Guantánamo and the other ‘black sites’ the American government detained him in—and by narrating the physical torture he was made to undergo. However, as I will demonstrate, Slahi’s narration of state violence is antagonistic to his ability to prove his innocence by representing himself as possessing neither augmented nor diminished cognition. On one hand, when Slahi narrates state violence by describing the hegemonic cultures the state preserves, he writes himself into the state-produced stereotype of the terrorist figure whose terrorist ontology is defined by augmented cognition, such as the capacity for the mind to function as separate from the body. On the other hand, when Slahi narrates state violence in terms of torture, he writes himself into the state-produced stereotype of the terrorist figure whose terrorist ontology is marked by diminished cognition, to the point of such cognitive activity being almost absent apart from mere consciousness. Thus, the dual demands placed on his text force Slahi’s text into a narrative bind where narrating state violence renders him amenable to being read as possessing a terrorist ontology. In this way, Slahi is unable to simultaneously narrate state violence and write himself into innocence.

Slahi narrates state violence in terms of social dynamics by identifying the hegemonic cultures the state preserves, and by narrating American imperialism and hypocrisy. He writes, “My observations resulted in knowing that only white Americans were appointed to deal with
me, both guards and interrogators. There was only one black guard, but he had no say. His associate was … younger, white … but the latter was always in charge” (Slahi 287). Slahi attempts to further highlight this dominance of white bodies over colored bodies by paying attention to and transcribing the racially inflected insults the American guards and interrogators voice; “[y]ou know we have some black motherfuckers who have no mercy on terrorists like you” (117), he quotes the American interrogator in Mauritania saying. In this context, Slahi seems to be revealing state violence by implicating America to be what David Theo Goldberg calls a ‘racial state’, a state that “employs physical force, violence, coercion, manipulation … to the ends of racial rule … [w]hich is to say, to the ends of reproducing the racial order and so representing for the most part the interests of the racial ruling class” (Goldberg 112). Hence, Slahi narrates how within Guantánamo, America’s character as a ‘racial state’, one that seeks to establish the social hegemony of whiteness, is reproduced and made hyper-evident. Slahi also narrates state violence in a broader geopolitical context by commenting on American imperialism when he is detained in Senegal at the behest of the U.S.: “[y]ou could clearly tell that the country had no sovereignty: this was still colonization in its ugliest face” (85), he writes. He also testifies to such state violence by remarking on the American state’s hypocrisy in enlisting Arabs to torture detainees while being “a government that preaches against dictatorship and ‘fights’ for human rights and sends its children to die for that purpose” (Slahi 257). Through these observations, Slahi fulfills the critical demand for his writing to reveal state violence in terms of its social dynamics. Further, through his penetrating insights, Slahi appears to write himself out of the terrorist stereotype predicated on the assumption of an irrational mind.

However, it is imperative to focus on the contexts within which Slahi makes these observations. Slahi usually perceives the social dynamics that reveal state violence while he is
being interrogated and tortured or as he is awaiting such torture-filled interrogation. This is evinced by the fact that soon after Slahi narrates how he noticed American hypocrisy, “[t]he two guys grabbed [him] roughly, and since [he] couldn’t walk on [his] own, they dragged [him] on the tips of [his] toes to the boat” (258). Similarly, Slahi’s observations about American imperialism are made as he waits with the Senegalese and American interrogators for a flight that would transport him to Mauritania, his country of origin, for further interrogation. Before Slahi makes this latter observation at the airport, when the Senegalese inform him that he will be turned over to Mauritania, Slahi describes his emotional state as an intermingling of “agony, fear, nervousness, helplessness, confusion” (84). Immediately after his observation of American imperialism too, as he waits for his flight, Slahi writes, “I was too scared to memorize everything” (86). Thus, when Slahi observes American hypocrisy, he is in acute pain: “I was too hurt to be able to move. After all I was bleeding from my mouth, my ankles, my wrists, and maybe my nose” (258); when he notices American imperialism, Slahi’s immediate emotional circumstance is marked by overpowering fear. Furthermore, when Slahi narrates the racial dynamics of the prison, though he is often not being interrogated or tortured in those very moments, his physical circumstances are still ones marked by the looming threat of interrogation, and therefore ones in which he is constantly “terrorized” (Slahi 90, 131). In Slahi’s own words: “Waiting on torture is worse than torture” (91), and hence even when he is not being tortured, his emotional state is still marked by amplified fear.

Since Slahi mentally analyzed and processed these forms of state violence while in acute pain or fear, we need to pay attention to Elaine’s Scarry’s discussion of the experience of intense physical pain and Thierry Steimer’s work on fear to understand what Slahi’s observations in these circumstances imply. Scarry, writing about the experience of physical pain, states that
“[i]ntense pain is world-destroying” (*The Body in Pain* 29). Scarry’s statement can be read, in this context, to mean that pain “obliterate[es] … the contents of consciousness. Pain annihilates not only the objects of complex thought and emotion but also the objects of the most elemental acts of perception” (Scarry, *The Body in Pain* 54). Since pain, by its very nature, eliminates all other experience, cognitive and sensorial, apart from the sensation of pain itself, Slahi’s ability to produce complex observations while his body is being subjected to acute pain, reads as atypical. Slahi’s descriptions of his fellow detainees’ reactions to being tortured cements this reading: “the detainees had reached their pain limit. All I heard was moaning” (33), and “I’ll never forget the moans and cries of the poor detainees … when they were suffering torture” (11). The detainees’ moans in these scenes work to perform their pain, to indicate that its intensity compelled their minds to only focus on their immediate aversive sensory experience. Acute fear too, due to its intense aversive quality and its main evolutionary function of acting as a “signal of danger, threat, or motivational conflict … giv[ing] rise to defensive behavior or escape” (Steimer), can also be expected to elicit this same reaction of compelling one to focus on the present, on the immediacy of this sensory and emotional experience.

In this context of constant torture-filled interrogations and circumstances marked by pain and fear—sensations that compel one to focus on the present—Slahi’s ruminations suggest a Cartesian dualistic separation of mind and body. Slahi’s ability to observe and narrate state violence suggests that he possesses a psyche that can occupy a space outside his body and emotions, a psyche that can withstand corporeally and affectively averse experiences. Such a psyche seems hyper-intelligent, trained to resist pain and overcome fear to achieve its ends, and therefore one that possesses augmented cognitive capacity. Thus, functioning as cultural critic compels Slahi to confirm the accusation American guards and interrogators plaster on him—that
of being a “high-level, smart-beyond-belief terrorist” (Slahi 271). By narrating state violence, Slahi thus writes himself out of the terrorist stereotype predicated on an almost-absent mind, but directly into the terrorist stereotype based on augmented cognition, precluding his ability to prove his innocence.

Even if Slahi makes these observations about state violence as he is writing about his experiences, rather than while he is experiencing the events he narrates, it is important to note that he is still detained in Guantánamo at the time of his writing. Therefore, even at the time of writing, his circumstances are still marked by the ever-present threat of torture-filled interrogations, and thus by the affective state of fear, as evident when Slahi writes, “I was living … in terror” (218). Hence, even if Slahi makes these observations while writing, he still represents himself as possessing the ability to occupy a cognitive space outside his immediate material circumstances, thus rendering himself susceptible to being incorporated into the stereotype of the hyper-intelligent terrorist.

The alternative technique Slahi harnesses to testify to state violence is that of narrating literal violence, that which state actors enact on his material body. Slahi depicts how the state handled his body—“we were tied together with a rope around our upper arms. The rope was so tight that the circulation stopped” (25); “we got a cavity search” (27). He also describes the methods of torture the state practiced on him—the American interrogator “kept punching me everywhere, mainly on my face and on my ribs” (251); “they tightened the chain around my ankles and my wrists; afterwards, I started to bleed” (252).

During these descriptions of corporeal state violence, Slahi’s body is foregrounded at the expense of his psyche. Scarry explains that “our interior states of consciousness are regularly accompanied by objects in the external world … love is love of x, fear is fear of y … [yet]
physical pain—unlike any other state of consciousness—has no referential content. It is not of or for anything” (*The Body in Pain* 5) and it is “precisely because [physical pain] takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language” (Scarry, *The Body in Pain* 5). Despite the fact that physical pain has no referential content in the external world, Scarry identifies that “in any given instance of pain, there may actually be present a weapon … or wound; and the weapon or wound may immediately convey to anyone present the sentient distress of the person hurt” (*The Body in Pain* 15). Hence, the only way Slahi can communicate his experience of physical pain, and therefore corporeal state violence, to the reader is by focusing on the wounds or actions registered on his body.

By narrating the state-sanctioned physical violence American interrogators and guards inflict on his body, Slahi focalizes the reader’s attention on his body, effectively effacing his psyche from the page. In this way, Slahi writes himself into the stereotype of the terrorist figure that has diminished cognition, to the point of lacking a mind, due to the erasure of his mind and the focalization of his body in his narration.

During some of these instances of physical torture, Slahi does try to make his cognitive processes visible on the page, narrating what he was thinking when the interrogators “turned the air conditioner all the way down to bring [him] to freezing” (Slahi 242). Slahi writes:

The interrogators turned the A/C all the way down to reach 0°, but obviously air conditioners are not designed to kill, so in the well insulated room the A/C fought its way to 49°F, which, if you are interested in math like me, is 9.4°C—in other words, very, very cold, especially for somebody who had to stay in it more than twelve hours, had no underwear, and just a very thin uniform, and who comes from a hot country. (242)
However, here too, Slahi’s mathematical calculations and the objectivity with which he perceives this experience of torture threatens to exhibit augmented cognition, the ability of his mind to function outside of his painful bodily circumstances, that renders his innocence suspect.

Slahi is then placed in a narrative bind, where the only way he can represent state violence is by writing himself into the contradictory stereotypes that define a terrorist ontology. Slahi’s memoir then evinces that the demand for detainee writing to narrate state violence is antagonistic to the demand levied on his memoir to represent him as innocent, due to the state-constructed reading frame that structures the memoir’s reception. Due to this incompatibility of demands, the critical desire to read Slahi’s memoir as resistive remains fraught.

*Witnesses of the Unseen: A Narrative of State Violence Undercut by the Editorial Shadow*

The title of Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir, *Witnesses of the Unseen*, presents an ambiguity that makes it amenable to being accommodated within the critical impulse to read such writing as resistive. On one hand, this title indicates that the detainees were witness to events that were publicly unseen, and therefore unknown; on the other hand, it insinuates that by narrating this text, the detainees are making the reader witness to events that have been occurring away from the public eye. Thus, the title of the memoir suggests that Boumediene and Ait Idir both narrate state violence in their memoir and urge readers to undertake social reconstitution through this text.

This dual implication is further amplified in the epigraph, quoted from the Quran: “[W]e do not bear witness except to what we have known, and we could not keep watch over the unseen” (Boumediene and Ait Idir). The “we” in the first line seems to refer to the detainees, indicating that they are making a truth claim—they are only testifying to events they have
witnessed and experienced first-hand. However, the “we” in the second line seems to speak on behalf of a collective public, suggesting that the only reason people have not intervened in the state operations at Guantánamo so far is because they were concealed from the public eye. In this capacity, the second line then suggests that if people are made aware of the state-sanctioned brutalities occurring at Guantánamo, they will experience a political emotion such as that of compassionate anger, intercede and prevent such violence from occurring in the future. Thus the ambiguities in the title and epigraph allow for a reading that goes beyond a simple narration of the detainees’ experiences, to one that suggests the creation of witnesses that can in turn galvanize social change.

In this memoir, Boumediene and Ait Idir’s narration of state violence can best be understood by examining how their minds work alongside their bodies from before they were arrested through the torture they experienced in the prison. Boumediene and Ait Idir begin their memoir by narrating their lives before they were arrested and taken to Guantánamo. In this part of the narrative, the detainees evince many cognitive states. Boumediene evinces cognitive states by emphasizing his likes and dislikes: “My favorite subjects were history and geography … I loved the peacefulness of the village … I loved spending time with my grandparents” (4). Ait Idir also evinces cognition when he narrates his preferences and curiosity as a child: “From the start, I liked school … my favorite subject was math. I also liked science classes, especially lab. I was always curious to learn more about the inner workings of things” (27). Boumediene and Ait Idir also write about their thought-through beliefs, which indicate the ability to use powers of reasoning to arrive at rational conclusions. When describing how he was approached by jihadists in Pakistan, seeking to enlist him in their cause, Boumediene says, “I didn’t want any part of their jihad. To kill someone in cold blood and say, ‘Well, he deserved it, he doesn’t share my
beliefs’—that’s not how I was raised” (13). Ait Idir too evinces a belief system when he explains why he deferred compulsory military service in Algeria: “I had no interest in firing weapons or blindly following orders” (30). Through this evincing of different mental states before their arrest, Boumediene and Ait Idir display normal mental processes, and hence average cognition.

Once Boumediene and Ait Idir enter the Guantánamo prison, their minds cede the ground to their bodies as they describe the torture the state performed. Ait Idir provides detailed descriptions of the violence that was enacted on his body in the form of beatings and wounds. At first, Ait Idir only describes physical violence: “I was hit and kicked repeatedly. If my leg so much as twitched, they would beat me” (84). However, this focus on the body being beaten into submission soon gives way to graphic images of wounds produced on Ait Idir’s body due to the violence: “When I came to, the left side of my face was bloody, swollen, and completely numb. Even my left eye was blood red … I suffered severe headaches, and I only had limited control of my left eye” (Boumediene and Ait Idir 147). Boumediene too narrates torture in ways that focalize his body—“[a soldier] cuffed my hands, placed a chain around my chest … shackled my legs, and led me out of the cell. As we walked, the chains dug into my skin, drawing blood” (81); “[the soldier] started poking me with a needle, repeatedly missing the vein … Eventually … my arm had become a bloody, sodden mess” (110). As Scarry discussed, since pain can only be conveyed by focusing on wounds, and by extension, the body, the detainees’ focus on their bodies blocks the narration of their minds. It is here that the detainees risk writing themselves into the terrorist stereotype of diminished minds, to the point where they are absent, due to the focus on their bodies and the erasure of their minds from their narration.
Giorgio Agamben’s conceptualization of bare life can help illuminate what this trajectory of evidence of mind to cognitive erasure implies. Agamben, in his book *Homo Sacer*, references two distinct terms the Greeks used to refer to life: *bios* and *zoē*. He explains the difference between the two as follows: “*zoē* … expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings” (Agamben 1), thus referring to natural biological life, equivalent to animal life, whereas *bios* implied a “qualified life, a particular way of life” (Agamben 1), a kind of life that distinguished human life from animal life. Agamben deploys Foucauldian and Aristotelian thinking to assert that inclusion in a political community differentiates *zoē* from *bios*, as evident in the binary pairs he identifies: “bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*” (Agamben 8). Having determined that the condition that transforms *zoē* into *bios* is its politicization, Agamben argues that the “production of bare life is the originary act of sovereignty” (83) and that “sovereign violence is in truth founded … on the exclusive inclusion of bare life in the state” (107). In other words, Agamben identifies the constitutive act of sovereignty to be the ban, where a politically qualified life is ejected from the political community and thus artificially removed from *bios* and transformed into *zoē*. While *zoē* itself is unassociated with *bios*, bare life that has been ejected from *bios* is included within *bios* through the sovereign act of exclusion. Since bare life is neither firmly *bios* nor firmly *zoē* given its prior affiliation with *bios*, it straddles a zone of indistinction between the two, and it is the state’s act of removing it from *bios* that produces this bare life.

If an Agambenian analytic is used to understand Boumediene and Ait Idir’s situation, one can surmise that their progression—from presence of mind before state interference to an erasure of mind through torture—reveals state violence. Since state rhetoric identifies the presence of an ‘average’ mind, rather than a hyper-intelligent or diminished mind, as the criterion for admission to the political community, the fact that the detainees narrated ‘average’ psyches before they
were arrested firmly places them within the category of *bios* (human, rather than terrorist) before their detention in Guantánamo. It is only once the American state arrests them, detains them, and tortures them, that their bodies are foregrounded at the expense of their psyches and their cognitive erasure is produced, transforming them into bare life. Thus, the state’s act of expelling Boumediene and Ait Idir from *bios* by artificially producing them as cognitively unsophisticated reveals state violence, rather than confirming the detainees’ fit within the terrorist stereotype.

However, here it is important to be cognizant of the fact that *Witnesses of the Unseen* is a highly mediated text. While Slahi wrote the text of *Guantánamo Diary* and the editors simply made “[l]ine by line [edits to] … regularize[e] verb tenses, word order, and a few awkward locutions, and occasionally, for clarity’s sake, consolidate[ed] or reorder[ed] text” (Slahi xii), Boumediene and Ait Idir narrated their experiences to an interviewer, Kate List, in Arabic, who then collaborated with editors Daniel Hartnett Norland and Jeffrey Rose to produce *Witnesses of the Unseen*. The editors thus played a relatively larger role in the creation of Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir than Slahi’s did. This large editorial shadow on the text encourages doubts about whether the ‘average minds’ Boumediene and Ait Idir narrate before being detained in Guantánamo, were in fact narrated to read as such by the editors.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s analysis of the “politics of co-production” (54) in autobiographical genres, through a discussion of Native American collaborative writing, produces some valuable insights. Smith and Watson write:

> [W]ith collaborative narratives of Native American and indigenous colonized people, the situation is in fact often triangulated among three or more parties. Someone must undertake the translation and transcription from the indigenous language for the person who finally “edits” the narrative into a metropolitan language, such as English, and a
culturally familiar story form, such as traditional autobiography or the ethnographic “life”. This complex nexus of telling, translating, and editing introduces a set of issues about the process of appropriating and overwriting the oral narrative. … thus [often] controlling the pattern of meaning. (Reading Autobiography 54)

Thus, a skeptical reading of these memoirs may suggest the following: Boumediene and Ait Idir indeed narrated these experiences to the interviewers; yet, the effects of triangulation Smith and Watson discuss may have occurred with their narratives too. In other words, the interviewer and editors may have listened to Boumediene and Ait Idir’s narratives, appropriated them and unintentionally re-wrought meaning in ways that portray the detainees’ minds as ‘average’ before they were detained in Guantánamo.

This situation again makes visible a paradox—if Boumediene and Ait Idir want to narrate state violence to a wide readership that can bring about political change, they have to submit their narrative to triangulation, since they do not speak the widely spoken language of English. This triangulation, in turn, troubles their ability to narrate their ‘average’ minds before they were detained in Guantánamo—due to suspicions about whether the detainees narrated their minds as ‘average’ or whether the translator and editors constructed the text to read as such—and hence to establish their innocence.

It would only be apt to conclude this investigation by noting how the tension embedded in the critical desire to read Guantánamo detainee literature as resistive to state violence is generative in and of itself. The uneasiness of this endeavor can be attributed to a reliance on the reading frame defined by the state, in terms of the state-produced definition of innocence, as well as on state paradigms of adjudicating innocence. First, the fact that Slahi, in his memoir,
unable to simultaneously narrate state violence and testify to his innocence demonstrates that the contradictory definitions the state uses to identify a terrorist mind—that of augmented and diminished cognitive ability—protect its ability to label whomsoever it wants as a terrorist. Therefore a reader’s reliance on state definitions of terrorist minds and the expectation that individuals can write themselves out of these arbitrary, blurry-boundaried state-defined parameters of guilt is a fiction. In other words, until readers rely on state-produced frames of what innocence means, they will be unable to read Slahi as innocent. Finally, the fact that Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir are unable to simultaneously narrate state violence and establish their innocence points toward the logic readers use to determine innocence—a logic that replicates the state logic of ‘guilty until proven innocent’, rather than ‘innocent until proven guilty’. By thus complicating the critical desire of being resistive to state violence, Guantánamo Bay detainee memoirs are generative in demonstrating that state definitions and logics operate in service of the state—they enable the state to predetermine individuals as guilty in ways that render it near impossible for these individuals to represent themselves as innocent.
CHAPTER TWO

Bad Apples or Bad Barrel: Reading Guantánamo Detainee Life Writing Through the Frame of the Trial and the Creation of a Hung Jury

Guantánamo Bay detainees Mohamedou Ould Slahi, through his memoir Guantánamo Diary, and Lakhdar Boumediene and Mustafa Ait Idir, through their joint memoir Witnesses of the Unseen, articulate claims to victimhood: Slahi writes that after 9/11, “the U.S. government started a secret operation aimed at kidnapping, detaining, torturing, or killing terrorist suspects, an operation that ha[d] no legal basis” (370) and that “[he was] the victim of such an operation” (370); Ait Idir states that “there are reports every day of people getting attacked because of their race or their religion …. [and that he has] been subjected to such attacks” (225); Boumediene closes his memoir with the words, “I used to think, when I was in Guantánamo, that I would be able to erase the worst memories after I got out … But it isn’t easy for a human to forget … [N]o apology can make up for the pain and humiliation I endured” (231-232).

The Guantánamo detainees’ enunciation of their victimhood in their memoirs is supplemented with a levying of blame on those responsible for their plight. Slahi, in his memoir, holds collective forces, such as the state, as well as individuals—state actors—culpable for his victimhood. On one hand, his words quoted above—“the U.S. government started a secret operation aimed at kidnapping, detaining, torturing, or killing terrorist suspects, an operation that ha[d] no legal basis” (370)—accuse the collective body of the state for the abuses he was subjected to in Guantánamo. On the other hand, Slahi also indicts the actors who acted on the behalf of the collective in statements such as the following:
I’m sure [the guards and interrogators] aspired to better jobs in the government, but I personally don’t believe in working with a government that’s not righteous; to me, the need for the miserable wages is not an excuse for the mischief they were doing under the color and authority of an unjust regime. In my eyes, they were as guilty as anybody else, no matter what excuses they may come up with. (131)

Boumediene and Ait Idir, in their memoir, follow the same pattern. They condemn both the system that allowed the post-9/11 military prison abuses to take place, as well as the individuals that acted on behalf of the system, as evinced in the following quote:

Everyone involved in what happened to me insists that it was someone else’s fault. “The Americans made me do it,” says Lagumdžija [the former foreign minister of Bosnia]. “My supervisors made me do it,” say the guards who abused me. And in some sense, I suppose, they are right. If the guards had not beaten me, belittled me, and denigrated my religion, they might have lost their jobs. If Lagumdžija had protected my basic rights as a citizen instead of acquiescing to the Americans, there could have been harsh consequences for him and perhaps even for Bosnia. At a certain point, though, a man has to stand up. If the school principal threatened to fire me unless I tortured one of my students, I would quit, and it would not be a difficult decision. I can understand why men like Lagumdžija and the abusive guards chose the path of least resistance, but it is not a choice I can forgive. (224-225)

This demand for accountability that the Guantánamo detainees levy, through their memoirs, on both collective state apparati as well as on individual state actors can function as one source of the political power critical discourses sprouting around these texts attribute to them. The Guantánamo detainee memoirs’ indictment of the state-and-actor nexus is powerful
because it acknowledges, as human rights and legal scholar Kirsten J. Fisher, states, the “inter-reliance” (68) of the two in transforming the detainees into abject victims. In that, the detainee texts’ simultaneous accusations produce the recognition that “[t]he actions of individuals play a significant role in the accomplishments of the collective, but so, too, does the general state of the collective have a very serious effect on the frame of mind and actions of individuals” (Fisher 68).

Recognition of this interdependence of the state and its actors, in turn, is a pivotal precondition for readers of Guantánamo detainee memoirs to reach a consensual identification of the culprit for the atrocities that took place in post-9/11 military prisons—a unanimous incrimination through which they can then experience the politically generative compassionate anger discussed in Chapter One, and take action to prevent such occurrences in the future.

While the critical evaluation of post-9/11 military prison detainee life writing ends at this juncture, I demonstrate that going further to interrogate the frame through which these texts are received is vital, since it problematizes the political productivity critical discourse reads into these texts. In this chapter, I posit that since the Guantánamo detainees invite readers to adjudicate their situation, these detainee memoirs are susceptible to being received through the frame of the trial—a frame that invites readers to also pay heed to the narratives put forth by the metaphorical defendants, the state and the state actor. The narrative put forth by the state—available in the form of the state’s response to the exposé of the torture it undertook in post-9/11 military prisons—portrays the state as innocent while scapegoating the state actor, while the narrative put forth by the state actor—available through an unpacking of Abu Ghraib interrogator, Eric Fair’s memoir, Consequence—depicts the state actor as innocent while scapegoating collectivities such as the state. I argue that this mutual scapegoating that occurs in the state and state actor’s accounts of post-9/11 military prison atrocities transforms readers into
a hung jury—a deadlocked jury that is unable to attribute blame, and is therefore unable to undertake political action to prevent such atrocities from occurring in the future. In other words, through this chapter, I argue that studying the frame of the trial, that structures the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs, helps nuance critical understandings of the political potentiality of these texts.

**Guantánamo Detainee Memoirs and the Frame of the Trial**

Guantánamo detainees Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir all invite readers into their memoirs to adjudicate their situation. Slahi concludes *Guantánamo Diary* with the words, “What do the American people think? I am eager to know. I would like to believe the majority of Americans want to see Justice done, and they are not interested in financing the detention of innocent people” (372). Through the latter part of this statement, Slahi introduces the conclusion he would like readers to arrive at after reading his memoir—that of determining him and the other detainees to be innocent individuals wrongly implicated as terrorist suspects—and yet, through the leading question, “What do the American people think?” (Slahi 372), Slahi encourages readers to submit his narrative to their own arbitration process and arrive at an independent conclusion.

The plural noun ‘witnesses’ in the title of Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir, *Witnesses of the Unseen*, is replete with ambivalence and perhaps duality. On one hand, this signifier may point to the detainees, Boumediene and Ait Idir, as being individuals who are bearing witness to events that were publicly unseen, and therefore unknown in the world outside of Guantánamo. On the other hand, this signifier also holds the potential to refer to the readers, who Boumediene and Ait Idir, by relating their experiences, are transforming into witnesses of unseen events and
atrocities occurring in this post-9/11 military prison. The title of Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir can also be read as referring to both these processes—first, that of the detainees bearing witness and narrating their unseen experiences to a reader, who in turn is transformed into a witness that can circulate this narrative within the public realm and potentially bring about a change in other detainees’ material circumstances and intervene against similar operations occurring in the future. Between these two processes, however, lies another implicit call for adjudication—once readers digest Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir, a process of adjudication has to occur where readers critically think through the narrative and determine the detention and torture of the detainees to be egregious enough to warrant public attention and action, before taking on the role of witness. This intervening act of adjudication between the detainees bearing witness and readers being transformed into witnesses is underscored by the editor, Daniel Norland, in the Preface to *Witnesses of the Unseen*: “Readers can draw their own conclusions, but these materials strongly suggest that the incarceration of Lakhdar and Mustafa was a mistake” (xvii).

By thus granting readers an adjudicative role, Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoirs become susceptible to being received through the frame of a trial—a frame that motivates readers to read the plaintiffs’—the Guantánamo detainees’—accounts against those offered by the metaphorical defendants, the state and the state actor. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson further state that testimonial narratives circulate in “environment[s] of suspicion” (“Witness or False Witness” 598) due to the stirring affective and political demands they make on readers. The fact that Guantánamo detainee memoirs “circulate in a world that is often skeptical of their veracity” (Tomsky 28), further increases the likelihood of the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs being structured by the frame of the trial.
The State’s Accounting for Post-9/11 Military Prison Abuses: The Bad Apples Narrative

In this section of my chapter, I demonstrate that when readers, using the frame of the trial, pay attention to the state’s account of the post-9/11 military prison atrocities, they are confronted with a narrative that paints the collective body of the state innocent while levying blame on state actors through the ‘bad apples’ narrative.

The torture occurring in American post-9/11 military prisons first came to public attention in April 2004, when ‘60 Minutes II’ aired a news report showcasing photographs of detainee abuse at the Abu Ghraib prison: photographs of “Iraqi prisoners naked on a leash; stacked in a pyramid; made to perform sexual acts; exposed to barking dogs; blindfolded and connected to electric wires; or lying dead on the floor next to grinning soldiers” (Zacka 40). In a New Yorker article authored soon after this exposé, Seymour Hersh described Abu Ghraib as “one of the world’s most notorious prisons” (Hersh) used first during Saddam Hussein’s regime and then transformed into a U.S. military prison, marked by “torture, weekly executions, and vile living conditions” (Hersh). While the released photographs depicted a few military personnel undertaking the sadistic maltreatment of detainees, Hersh compelled readers to think about how collectivities such as the state were implicated in these atrocities by asking a provocative question in the subtitle of his article: “American soldiers brutalized Iraqis. How far up does the responsibility go?” (Hersh).

The collective body of the Bush administration responded to this accusation of bearing responsibility for the torture of detainees in post-9/11 military prisons by vociferously putting forward the ‘bad apples’ narrative. President Bush claimed that the abuses that had taken place in Abu Ghraib represented nothing more than “disgraceful conduct by a few American troops” (qtd. in Giroux 783), while General Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “suggested
that the acts were the work of a ‘handful’ of ‘rogue soldiers’, who had presumably acted on their own accord” (Zacka 40). The vice president of the United States at the time reinforced this narrative when he said in an interview, “Abu Ghraib was not policy … There were people involved in that activity that were not conducting themselves in accordance with the standards that we would have expected” (Cheney). This ‘bad apples’ narrative put forth by the American state suggested that the acts of detainee abuse occurring in post-9/11 military prisons “were those of a few bad soldiers whose misconduct was their own invention and not part of any officially sanctioned method of interrogation” (Mastroianni 54). It thus worked to render the collectivity of the American state and its institutional arms such as the military, innocent, while scapegoating the state actors deployed in the space of the post-9/11 military prison.

The State Actor’s Accounting for Post-9/11 Military Prison Abuses through Confessional and Testamentary Narration in Eric Fair’s Consequence: The Bad Barrel Narrative

In this section of my chapter, I posit that Abu Ghraib interrogator Eric Fair, mobilizes confessional and testamentary forms of narration in his memoir, Consequence, to secure the reader’s forgiveness toward him, as a state actor, while simultaneously compelling readers to blame institutions such as the state for the post-9/11 military prison atrocities.

Fair begins his memoir with an epigraph from Maimonides, the Laws of Repentance: “For example, a person is not forgiven until he pays back his fellow man what he owes him and appeases him. He must placate him and approach him again and again until he is forgiven” (Fair). This epigraph contains an acknowledgment of Fair’s guilt, but subsumes this acknowledgment of guilt under a petition for forgiveness, thus gesturing to one of the primary modes Fair’s text operates in—that of the confessional.
A survey of the critical scholarship around confessions is useful in determining which aspects of the self are mined by confessional acts, and the work the mining of these particular aspects of self do. Scholarship on Western confessional narratives identifies them as having close affiliations with three primary practices: the Roman Catholic confessional tradition, Freudian psychoanalysis and confessions performed in juridical spaces. While the confessional narratives’ linkages with the Roman Catholic confessional tradition and psychoanalysis reveal that the psyche is the part of the self that is accessed by confessions, confessions performed in legal settings reveal the teleological endpoint of confessional practice to be the confessor’s re-inclusion in the human community.

Abercrombie et al. state, “the confessional has a very long history in Christianity” (43), an observation reaffirmed by Peter Brooks in his book, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature*, when he asserts that the confessional tradition began in “the year 1215, when the Roman Catholic Church, in the Fourth Lateran Council, made annual confession obligatory for all the faithful” (2). Brooks also connects confessional practices to Freudian psychoanalysis when he writes, “the most elaborated … form of modern secularized confession … is psychoanalysis” (52), where the analysand sits before a psychoanalyst and ‘confesses’ his or her thoughts, problems and motivations to the psychoanalyst.

Both these elements associated with the confessional narrative—Christian confessional practices and psychoanalytic practice—share another commonality: that of centralizing the confessor’s interiority, and therefore his or her psyche. Brooks observes that “[t]he religious tradition of confession, crucial to our conception of confession in law, literature, and everyday life … promotes self-examination and the avowal of faults as necessary to spiritual well-being … [and] thus promotes the metaphors of innerness, depth, recesses within, where one can track
the self” (111). In other words, by compelling the confessor to plough the depths of his or her psyche to understand and confess his or her faults, the Christian confessional tradition focalizes the psyche. In a similar vein, Freudian psychoanalysis also centralizes the psyche through the process it employs—that of the analysand directly ‘confessing’ the conscious mind to the psychoanalyst by narrating his or her desires, thoughts, and motivations and indirectly ‘confessing’ the unconscious mind to the psychoanalyst by following along with the “interpretive process” (Eriksson) the psychoanalyst leads him or her through. Through these linkages, the confessional tradition, including the confessional narrative, is marked by an “inward turn” (Radstone 171) and “offers a royal way into the individual’s psyche, into his or her personal beliefs, aspirations, faults” (Brooks 99).

The last significant link constructed by scholars is the one between the confessional narrative and confessions made in the courtroom. Susannah Radstone writes, “in a court of law, the defendant may acknowledge their guilt. In such cases, they place themselves in the position of the confessant” (168), thus arguing that “at stake in the discourse of the confessant is the question of their … guilt” (168). Building on this association between confessions and questions of guilt, Brooks observes, “confession of wrongdoing … constitutes a verbal act of self-recognition as wrongdoer and hence provides the basis of rehabilitation” (2). The act of confession of guilt then becomes “the precondition of the end to ostracism … [and] reentry into one’s desired place in the human community” (Brooks 2). The confessional narrative’s close ties with juridical settings thus reveal the confessional act’s teleological endpoint to be that of securing forgiveness and consequent rehabilitation in the human community.

Uniting these branches of critical work on confessional acts—that identifies them as accessing the psyche and that determines their objective to be the confessor’s rehabilitation in the
human community—I first assert, in this section, that Fair, through a confessional mode, focalizes his psyche over his body, and that this foregrounding of his psyche enables Fair, as a state actor, to articulate a successful claim for the reader’s forgiveness and consequent rehabilitation in the human community.

The first few pages of Fair’s memoir immediately ground readers in Fair’s mind, as evinced in Fair’s statement—“The report says something about the general’s sons being involved in anti-Coalition activities, which doesn’t make much sense because he’s Shia, and it’s January 2004 and the Shia haven’t turned their guns on us yet. But it’s hard to know what’s true inside Abu Ghraib and it’s hard to make sense of anything going on in Iraq” (Fair 2). The above statement renders Fair’s thoughts visible to the reader, with phrases such as “doesn’t make much sense because he’s Shia” (Fair 2) showcasing Fair’s mental rationalization and “it’s hard to know what’s true inside Abu Ghraib” (Fair 2) displaying his confusion.

Fair’s text not only makes the workings of Fair’s mind visible to the reader, but also emphasizes the rawness of the representation of these mental workings by showcasing the vacillation in his mental reasoning and decision-making. This is evinced when Fair narrates his perception of the war America is waging in Iraq. Fair first fleshes out this perception by stating, “Ferdinand and I stop conducting interrogations at night. Instead, we sit and talk and make plans for our next job. Ferdinand and I are convinced there is a more honorable way to do war … We’ll leave the ugly world of interrogation” (Fair 126). This statement suggests that Fair reasoned that the way America was conducting the war in Iraq, including its detention and interrogation operations, was wrong and dishonorable, and therefore he was disinclined to participate in this war effort, a reading concretized when Fair writes, “I shouldn’t be here. I should have quit by now. A single month at Abu Ghraib is enough to know that all of this is
wrong … It’s all bullshit” (3). However, the statement Fair makes after returning to the U.S. from Iraq directly contradicts this notion—“I reapply to the NSA … I have every intention of using the NSA to get me back to Iraq” (161). This representation of the contradiction in Fair’s reasoning and decision processes is again echoed when he first states “There is to be no redemption for me in Iraq” (188), only to be followed by the statement, “At the last minute, another opportunity in Iraq becomes available. It will extend my deployment an additional two months … I volunteer” (190). As demonstrated here, the text renders Fair’s constant mental oscillation—between deeming America’s war in Iraq to be wrong and therefore being hesitant to participate in it and re-deploying to Iraq to be a part of this very war—tangible. This demonstration of Fair’s mental oscillation on the page then has the effect of making the representation of his mental workings seem raw to the reader.

Fair’s representation of his psyche helps establish an intimacy between the reader and Fair—an intimacy based on the perception that the reader has direct access to Fair’s thoughts. The text’s depiction of the contradiction in Fair’s thoughts—its emphasis on the rawness of their representation—then augments this established intimacy by investing the representation of Fair’s psyche with authenticity. In other words, by rendering visible, on the page, how Fair’s thoughts and perceptions sometimes contradict each other, Fair’s text convinces readers that they are receiving an authentic, un-altered snapshot of Fair’s psyche.

Having convinced readers of the authentic insight they have into Fair’s psyche, Fair’s memoir proceeds to render his psyche visible in ways that are productive for his self-representation. One way in which Fair’s psyche finds representation on the page is through a narration of his motivations for working in Iraq. When diagnosed with a cardiac disease and warned that he would be unable to undertake physically strenuous activity, Fair states,
“Everyone else is closing doors. I set out to open them again” (63), demonstrating that his single-mindedness in overcoming limiting circumstances was the foremost reason he decided to serve in Iraq. As the memoir progresses, Fair’s motivations to work in Iraq again simmer to the fore in statements such as, “I want to go to Iraq because I feel obligated to do my part, obligated to serve alongside my colleagues, and obligated to contribute to a national war effort. But I also want to go because of the way it makes other people think about me” (Fair 78).

Fair also renders his psyche visible through a narration of the guilt he experienced regarding the interrogative acts he was compelled to undertake and the consequent trauma he suffered, evinced through his dreams and his attempts at intentional forgetting. Fair describes his guilt to the reader by showcasing his thoughts both as he is going in to interrogate a prisoner—“In Scripture, God often works in prisons, but he is never on the side of the jailer. He is always on the side of the prisoner” (87)—and as he is retrospectively reflecting on his interrogation work—“I think of all the sets of footprints I left while walking into … facilities. I think of God living in the prison with the detainees. The footprints that lead inside are mine” (191). Further, Fair relates the trauma he endured as a result of the interrogations he witnessed and was forced to perform by describing his attempts at not remembering as well as his dreams, products of his unconscious mind. Describing his attempts to forget the interrogations, Fair writes:

I try not to remember the things I didn’t like. The smell is something I try not to remember. The sound is something I try not to remember. The naked man is something I try not to remember. The dark cell is something I try not to remember. I gave Stefanowicz a copy of the deafening music. I try not to remember that, either. (96)

Fair also describes his dreams, which in turn stand testament to the psychic trauma he endured—“In this nightmare, which recurs often, someone I know begins to shrink. At first I can hold them
in my hand or put them on a table, but as they grow smaller I begin to lose track of them. They slip through my fingers and disappear onto the floor … I hear their screams in my panic as I scramble to avoid stepping on them” (108). Dream research specialist Kelly Bulkeley, in a discussion with other psychologists, asks “Are dreams utterly meaningless?” (Paulson et al. 31), going on to respond to his rhetorical question by asserting:

That assumption does not square with actual dream research—the same with the idea that dreams are bizarre and weird and fanciful … [y]ou tend to dream about the people you know, you’re dreaming about places you’re usually in, you’re doing familiar things. In other words, the dreaming mind can simulate our waking reality with great ease and does so on a regular basis. (Paulson et al. 31)

If dreams are thus anchored in reality, Fair’s dream can be linked to his interrogation experiences and be read in a way that identifies the shrinking individuals to be the Abu Ghraib detainees, metaphorically made smaller by their dehumanization and humiliation at the hands of American interrogators. Fair’s panic about stepping on these shrinking individuals can then be interpreted as his traumatized mind re-playing his role in the prisoners’ dehumanization and his desire to do otherwise in his dreams. Fair illustrates the pervasive nature of these dreams by stating, “Iraq comes at night. There are shrinking dreams and liquid nightmares and darkroom dreams” (158).

As stated earlier, Fair’s representation of his psyche does important work for him, as a state actor who participated in detainee maltreatment. First, the representation of Fair’s psyche, achieved through the depiction of his motivations to work in Iraq, insinuates an equivalency between Fair and the reader. This representation reveals that Fair’s decision to work in Iraq was not a product of a sadistic personality or cruel intentions, but that of the pedestrian motivations of superseding external limitations and expectations—motivations that readers themselves may
have experienced. Additionally, the representation of Fair’s psyche, achieved through a narration of the guilt he experiences, constructs him as a fundamentally moral individual. Peter Brooks states that “[c]onfession of wrongdoing is considered fundamental to morality” (2) and Fair’s narration of his guilt then depicts him as an individual possessing a conscience. The text’s establishment of Fair’s morality through the representation of his guilt-ridden mind then renders him, a state actor, forgivable and amenable to being rehabilitated in the human community, because as Brooks discusses, our contemporary culture views confessions, admissions of guilt, as “grounds for mitigating punishment … as the basis of rehabilitation” (2).

The dream Fair describes about the shrinking individuals and his attempt to avoid stepping on them works to reaffirm Fair’s inherent morality, while also suggesting that his innermost desires are in fact benevolent toward the detainees. Kelly Bulkeley describes dreaming to be “imaginative play in sleep … a different way … [to] engage in reality” (Paulson et al. 29), one that allows individuals to “[go] beyond what is, to imagine what might be” (Paulson et al 31). In this context, the depiction of Fair’s dream-self avoiding stepping on the shrunk individuals, who stand in for the Abu Ghraib detainees, represents his desire to avoid engaging in harsh, potentially torture-filled interrogations, thereby painting him as an individual with a conscience—an individual who imagines a world where he can avoid participating in the metaphorical shrinking of other human beings. This, in turn, works to temper the egregiousness of the violence Fair discharged and renders him further amenable to being rehabilitated in the human community. The fact that readers are oriented toward receiving these representations of Fair’s psyche in an intimate fashion, and as authentic, boosts the effects produced by these representations, making Fair all the more likely to receive the reader’s amnesty.
The questions that most directly proceed from these conclusions are: How is Fair’s body—the physical agent that executed the abusive interrogations—represented in the text? Do representations of Fair’s body undercut the moralizing and rehabilitative work the representation of his psyche achieves?

To answer the first of these questions, it is imperative to pay attention to the scenes where Fair represents his body performing violent interrogations. To begin with, it is pivotal to note that scenes depicting Fair’s body physically torturing detainees are sparse. When present, they are either quickly skimmed over or portrayed in highly euphemized language. The first scene that depicts Fair torturing a detainee embodies this fact—“I interrogated a young man in one of the uncomfortable interrogation booths. I made him stand with his arms in the air until he dropped them in exhaustion. He lied to me … So I hurt him” (Fair 3), Fair writes, immediately moving on to a depiction of him conversing amicably with an Iraqi general in the ‘comfortable’ interrogation room. Fair’s use of words such as ‘hurt’ as well as the representation of him engaging in relatively milder interrogation techniques stand testament to the euphemized descriptions of his torturing body, while the quick transition to him conversing with an Iraqi general evinces a desire to skim over representations of his torturing body. Fair’s use of euphemistic language to describe the torture his body enacts on Iraqi detainees is evinced multiple times in the text—“I lay my hands on more detainees” (Fair 5), “I lay hands on the boy. I scare him. I shout. I throw a chair. It ricochets off the wall” (Fair 102) and “In Iraq, I’ve grabbed detainees, pushed them, shoved them, and tugged at their shirts” (Fair 115).

At this juncture, it is worth pausing to juxtapose Fair’s description of the torture he enacted with the officially reported torture techniques practiced at Abu Ghraib, described by Karen J. Greenberg and Joshua L. Dratel in their book, *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu*
Greenberg and Dratel describe the torture practices revealed in cases where U.S. courts found American personnel as guilty of having tortured detainees: one detainee’s “captors … chained him to spikes, administered electric shocks to his hands; battered his feet with iron bars and struck him in the kidneys with a rifle; struck him on the side of his head with a hand grenade, breaking a nose and a jaw; placed boiling tea kettles on his shoulders” (214) and for another detainee, “[a]t one point, while he was shackled to a cot, the guards placed a towel over his nose and mouth and then poured water down his nostrils. They did this for six hours. … Afterwards, they left him shackled to his cot for six days” (216). The juxtaposition of Greenberg and Dratel’s descriptions of torture with Fair’s representation of his torturing body—described through phrases such as “lay hands on” (Fair 5, 102) and verbs such as “pushed” (Fair 115) “grabbed” (Fair 115) and “shoved” (Fair 115)—demonstrates that Fair’s representation is highly euphemized.

Examining the representation of Fair’s body in scenes where he is not partaking in violent interrogations helps parse the work these skimmed-over, euphemistic depictions of Fair’s torturing body do. The following statement from Fair’s text helps conceptualize how Fair’s body is represented in scenes where he is not participating in detainee interrogations—“In Scripture, God often works in prisons, but he is never on the side of the jailer. He is always on the side of the prisoner. The realization brings on a physical reaction. My hands shake. My face warms. I feel nauseated. The sensation is terrifying” (Fair 87), Fair writes. In this instance, Fair’s body is represented in a way where it indexes his psychic state—his guilt, and consequently, a guilt-induced terror.

This pattern of Fair’s body finding representation in a way that indexes, and therefore privileges, his psyche is repeated multiple times in his memoir, particularly in the events Fair
describes from his childhood. The first such event Fair narrates is from the time he was in sixth grade. Fair recounts: “In 1983, I start sixth grade. I am small and slightly overweight … I can’t do pull-ups. I just hang on the bar with my face to the wall. My fellow students sit behind me on the gym floor and laugh. There is also a shuttle run and some sort of stretching exercise. I fail to impress on those events as well” (Fair 9). The purpose of this representation of the body becomes evident immediately after, when Fair writes, “[a] few weeks later, during homeroom, Principal Kartsoitis announces my name over the school’s intercom. He recites other names, too … Principal Kartsoitis tells us that we will be removed from our special activities classes and enrolled in a fitness program … At home, I remember being told I shouldn’t feel embarrassed” (10). In this particular circumstance, the representation of Fair’s body functions to demonstrate his capacity to feel humiliation, an emotion comparable to that of shame. Psychologist Michael Lewis identifies shame as a “self-conscious emotion” (20). In that, shame “require[s] self-reflection” (Lewis 13) and can only be elicited in response to introspection. Considering that humiliation is a cognate of shame, this representation of Fair’s body demonstrates that Fair possesses the cognitive ability to introspect and experience affect that attends such self-reflection—in this case, that of humiliation.

The next two representations of Fair’s body occur when he is in high school. Fair first writes: “One day, in ninth grade, I accidently step on the heel of a larger student. The student says something threatening. I try to walk away, but he approaches from behind and strikes me on the back of the head with an oversized textbook. The blow leaves me nauseated” (11). Fair then describes another situation where he had worn a Red Sox hat to school the day after the New York Mets defeated the Boston Red Sox in a World Series match. “A boy wearing a Mets hat beats me badly for this, while his friends stand by and laugh,” (Fair 12) Fair writes. Fair uses
these incidents in his childhood to write about how they compelled him to “seek refuge at church” (Fair 12). When Fair begins to spend time at church, the pastor, Don Hackett, “challenges [him] to memorize Scriptures” (Fair 12) and “asks [him] to help teach the sixth-graders on Wednesday nights” (Fair 12). Thus, Fair describes the assaults his body was made to endure in high school to demonstrate how they helped him cultivate his psyche by subscribing to the concrete belief system of Presbyterianism.

Fair also mobilizes the assaults on his body to describe how these incidents compelled his family members to step in and protect him. When the bulkier student hits Fair on the head with a textbook, Fair’s father protects him from future assaults by “standing guard in the center of the crowded overpass … along with a group of students from his senior history class” (Fair 12), whereas in response to the Red Sox incident, Fair’s older sister “takes notice and forces [him] to tell her what happened” (Fair 12). Fair’s sister then asks one of her male friends, who plays linebacker on the high school football team, to pay back the bully that assaulted Fair. Fair’s family members’ acts of protection inculcate a desire to protect others in Fair, as evinced when Fair states, “I feel called to protect people” (19). In this way, Fair’s representation of his assaulted body indexes his psyche by demonstrating how it engendered a desire to protect people in him—a desire Fair later cites as one of the primary motivators behind his decision to pursue a law enforcement career, which eventually led to his deployment in Abu Ghraib.

A final overt instance of Fair narrating his body occurs when he writes about how he was diagnosed with cardiomyopathy, a heart condition dire enough for all the doctors he consulted to advise him that he should end his law enforcement career. However, here too, Fair upturns a fully corporal situation to index his mind by describing how this diagnosis acted as a motivator for him to relinquish his job at the police department and take up a job at the National Security
Agency as an intelligence analyst to prove all his naysayers wrong—a step that eventually led to his deployment in Abu Ghraib. Hence, here too, Fair represents his body in a way that brings to the fore his motivations, which are psychic in nature, for choosing the jobs that eventually led him to Abu Ghraib.

These scenes stand testament to the fact that representations of Fair’s body always operate in service of his psyche—to affirm some psychic aspect about him. This deduction can be extrapolated to Fair’s quickly narrated, euphemized descriptions of his body performing torture. In other words, Fair’s skimmed-over, euphemized representations of his torturing body also function in service of his psyche. First, by narrating his torturing body in euphemistic terms, Fair acknowledges his complicity in the abominable act of executing torture-filled interrogations, while simultaneously downplaying his role in them. Further, by quickly maneuvering away from descriptions of his body performing torture to more abstract musings, Fair centralizes his psyche, rather than his body, in his memoir. Fair’s attempt at downplaying the extent of the torture he performed coupled with his centralizing of his psyche does important work—it works as a distracting technique that compels the reader to grapple with Fair’s psyche at the expense of his body. As determined earlier, representations of Fair’s psyche establish him as an innately moral individual, one akin to a civilian reader. This distracting technique then compels the reader to focus on Fair’s inherent morality and his similarity to the reader, while also subtly coercing the reader’s attention away from Fair’s body, the agent that performed the reprehensible torture. Together, these effects render Fair as an individual who is likely to secure the forgiveness he seeks from the reader and to be re-assimilated into the human community.

As established here, Fair’s mobilization of the confessional mode allows him, as a state actor, to acknowledge his participation in the post-9/11 military prison abuses while
simultaneously rendering him forgivable in the reader’s eyes. I now demonstrate how Fair’s use of the testamentary mode in his memoir shifts any residual blame readers may levy on him to collective bodies, such as that of the state.

Fair transitions between the confessional and testamentary modes of narration with statements such as “I’m supposed to collect information about the location of the general’s sons” (Fair 2) and “I take the time to ask the general about his life and learn what I can about Iraq. When I write the report, I’m supposed to call this the approach phase. I’m supposed to be building rapport” (Fair 3). Fair’s repeated use of the obligatory words ‘supposed to’ discharges a dual function: on one hand, these words acknowledge that Fair did execute these duties; however, on the other, they underscore that Fair was being externally compelled to undertake these tasks and he himself had little faith in them. These statements then fit the confessional mode by acknowledging Fair’s guilt in executing the unsavory duties assigned to him and consequently, securing the reader’s forgiveness through this confession. However, they also prime the reader for Fair’s testamentary narration by signaling that while Fair might be the instrument for their execution, the tasks themselves were conceived of and dictated to Fair from higher up.

Fair also calls attention to the fact that this experience—of simply being a tool for the execution of tasks he did not necessarily approve of—was not particular to him, but one that was shared by most of the state actors deployed in the post-9/11 military prison. Fair accomplishes this by interspersing his personal narration with sentences that use the collective pronoun ‘we’—“We begin to question the process” (93); “At night, the five of us return to our cell and pretend we aren’t at Abu Ghraib … We disappear into headphones and drown ourselves in music” (90)—or by completely erasing the subject from his sentences, as evinced when he writes,
“There are doubts about the number and quality of the detainees being processed at Abu Ghraib. There are doubts about the effectiveness of an interrogation program that prohibits interrogators from spending more than an hour or two with any detainee. There are doubts about the presence of chemical weapons” (93).

Writing in the testamentary mode, Fair first levies blame for the Abu Ghraib atrocities on the American Army—a branch of the American state—by bearing testament to how sloppy and underhand their operating procedure regarding the war in Iraq was. Fair testifies against the Army by stating that “[t]he Army seem[ed] unconcerned with [his and the other interrogators’] qualifications or experience. They overlook[ed] gaps in [the interrogators’] paperwork and ma[de] exceptions to rules whenever convenient” (77) as well as through his claim that “This [was] how the Army often work[ed]. It establishe[d] rules, encourage[d] soldiers to ignore them in the name of completing a mission” (119).

Apart from the American Army, Fair also testifies against CACI, a private contracting company that was enlisted by the American state to oversee its Iraq operations. Fair narrates how CACI’s operations were marked by disorganization—“I can’t find the CACI representative and I don’t want to leave for Fort Bliss before checking in, so I let the bus go without me. By the time the next bus is available, four hours later, there is still no CACI representative at the airport” (72)—and a lack of accountability, evinced when Fair writes, “When we talk about CACI, we never really know whom we are talking about … None of us even know what ‘CACI’ stands for. In Iraq, there are CACI employees who hold job titles such as ‘country manager’ or ‘site supervisor,’ but they never have answers to our questions” (108). Fair testifies to how CACI’s operations are trademarked not only by a lack of protocol and accountability, but also by its
placing of untrained, un-vetted individuals in positions of power: “I come across more and more CACI employees in powerful positions. Some are qualified; most are not” (Fair 183).

Fair’s testimony against the Army and CACI suggest that the reader should at least partially blame state apparati for the detainee abuse that occurred in these military prisons. However, Fair does not limit his indictment to these ancillary arms of the state. Through the testamentary mode of narration, he condemns the state itself, as evinced when he writes: “I am not prosecuted. No one from CACI is prosecuted. Nothing we did in Iraq was illegal. We tortured people the right way, following the right procedures, and used the approved techniques. There are no legal consequences” (218) alongside “Two more years will pass before the vice president of the United States tells the world that he ordered waterboarding. Two years will pass before he says, ‘I thought it was absolutely the right thing to do.’ Eight years will pass before the U.S. Senate releases a report on torture and the country learns about the technique called rectal rehydration” (208).

By thus holding the state and its arms—the military and CACI, the organization the American government hired for its Iraq operations—responsible for the Abu Ghraib atrocities through a testamentary mode of narration, Fair proposes a ‘bad barrel’ narrative. George Mastroianni explains the ‘bad barrel’ narrative as a narrative that holds that “the soldiers at Abu Ghraib were simply doing what they had been asked or ordered to do … [while] the Army chain of command and the high administration officials [were truly] responsible for promoting these harsher policies and procedures” (54). Therefore, in this ‘bad barrel’ narrative, Fair depicts himself, as a state actor, worthy of amnesty, while advocating for the majority of the blame to be shifted to collectivities such as the state and the various state apparati operating under its aegis.
As demonstrated here, state accounts of the post-9/11 military prison abuses advance a ‘bad apples’ narrative that holds state actors fully responsible for the maltreatment of detainees, whereas accounts provided by state actors advocate for a ‘bad barrel’ narrative, completely shifting the blame to the state and its apparati that oversaw the post-9/11 military prison operations. When readers then approach Guantánamo detainee memoirs through the frame of the trial and consequently heed the accounts of the metaphorical defendants—the state and state actors—they are, on one hand, encouraged to levy blame on state actors due to the ‘bad apples’ narrative and on the other, coaxed into indicting the state and its apparati due to the ‘bad barrel’ narrative. The frame of the trial that dictates the reception of post-9/11 detainee life writing then runs the risk of breaking the readerly consensus on the state-and-actor nexus’ guilt, that the detainees attempted to create, and supplanting it with a bad apples-bad barrel dichotomy. The result of this either-or decision the frame of the trial cajoles readers into making is the creation of a hung jury—a readerly jury that is unable to reach a consensus on who to prosecute for the post-9/11 military prison abuses. The readers’ inability to unfalteringly attribute guilt, in turn, holds the potential to dilute the compassionate anger they may feel on behalf of the detainees and consequently, the preventative/redressive action that can emerge from such political affect. Paying attention to the frames that structure the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs then emerges as a crucial step in any attempted theorization of such life writing, considering the potential they hold to drastically augment or attenuate the political potentiality attributed to these texts based on their conditions of production.
CHAPTER THREE
Literary Genre and Style as Frames of Interpretation in Slahi’s Guantánamo Diary, Boumediene and Ait Idir’s Witnesses of the Unseen and Fair’s Consequence

As discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter One, Guantánamo detainee memoirs are burdened with the critical desire of functioning as political—as texts that can resist state power and marshal readers’ compassionate anger for the detainees, against state violence. Further, as explored in Chapter Two, Guantánamo detainees Mohamedou Ould Slahi, Lakhdar Boumediene and Mustafa Ait Idir employ a juridical frame for their memoirs, Guantánamo Diary and Witnesses of the Unseen. This juridical frame invites comparison between the detainees’ memoirs and a memoir authored by their counterpart, Abu Ghraib interrogator Eric Fair’s Consequence.

In this chapter, I suture these aspects, responding to the detainee memoirs’ juridical frame by reading Slahi’s and Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoirs alongside Fair’s Consequence to determine how the critical attachment to reading Guantánamo detainee memoirs as unambiguously resistive and politically productive is impacted by the formal features of these texts. More specifically, I posit that the literary features of the Guantánamo detainees’ and Abu Ghraib interrogator’s memoirs—namely the genres they are amenable to being read within and the narrative styles they employ—function as intertextual frames that complicate the existing critical discourse on Guantánamo detainee memoirs’ political productivity.
Torture in Guantánamo Detainee Memoirs and the Reading Frame of Torture Porn

A recurrent, and therefore prominent, feature of Guantánamo detainee memoirs is the detainees’ narration of the torture American state actors perform on their bodies in the post-9/11 military prison, and the pains and wounds these acts produce. Slahi, in his memoir, *Guantánamo Diary*, presents the reader with visceral descriptions of the torture he is forced to undergo—“Every once in a while the pain of the urine urge pinched me … The guard beside me kept pouring water bottle caps in my mouth, which worsened my situation. There was no refusing it, either you swallow or you choke” (6); “‘Bad’ detainees like me were shackled 24 hours a day and put in the corridor, where every passing guard or detainee stepped on them. The place was so narrow that the barbed wire kept pinching me for the next ten days” (15); “[The soldier’s] partner kept punching me everywhere, mainly on my face and on my ribs … he punched me the whole time without saying a word” (251). In these narrations of torture, Slahi highlights the pain he experiences through the repeated use of the word ‘pinch’—a highly evocative word that communicates the very sensation of pain to the reader—while also engaging in extended descriptions of the acts that induce this pain. Boumediene and Ait Idir, in their memoir, reproduce this graphic recounting of torture and pain: “my wrists were swollen and oozing pus. The cuttingly tight cuffs must have caused an infection” (82); “While I was receiving fluid through an IV, a nurse handed me a vial, said he needed a urine sample, and walked out. I wasn’t able to urinate at that point … A group of nurses, some male and some female, pulled down my pants and inserted a catheter. It was … extremely painful” (110); “[A soldier] started bending my little finger backward, as though he were trying to touch my fingernail to the top of my wrist, until the bone snapped. I was in horrendous pain” (144). As evinced here, Boumediene and Ait Idir also extensively describe the acts of torture performed on them, while communicating their
pain to the reader by furnishing him/her with lurid descriptions of the repercussions of this torture on their bodies, in the form of wounds and injuries.

In this section of my chapter, I demonstrate how the Guantánamo detainees’ graphic narrations of torture may have politically productive ramifications and may hence reinforce the critical apparatus typically used to approach these texts. However, I further argue that due to their protracted depiction of torture and pain, Guantánamo detainee memoirs are also susceptible to being received within the torture porn subgenre. Torture porn, as a reading frame, then holds the potential to structure readers’ hermeneutic takeaways from these texts in ways that undercut accepted critical discourses of resistance and political productivity surrounding them.

On one hand, as Jennifer Ballengee notes in her book, *The Wound and the Witness*, “the body in pain becomes a rhetorical figure, presented before an audience in order to prompt a response or judgment” (15). As discussed in Chapter One, when “[w]e see a body in pain … we react with our bodies, with what our bodily memory tells us about pain: the worst that we have experienced, the worst that we can imagine” (Ballengee 9). Reading grisly descriptions of torture in Guantánamo detainee memoirs may thus initiate a bodily mirroring in the reader, a shared corporeal response between the Guantánamo detainee narrators and the reader that is filled with potentiality in its ability to prompt an empathetic response from the reader. Film scholar Aaron Michael Kerner describes another way in which descriptions of torture may facilitate politically productive mirroring in the reader. Discussing films depicting torture, Kerner writes that although “the spectator’s body is never in peril … scenes of torture, graphic gore, the explicit rending of bodies … encourage spectators to cringe, to furrow their brow, to avert their eyes, to squirm … ‘to twist’ or to writhe” (39) and in “elicit[ing] sensations from the spectator” (Kerner 39), these films compel the spectator to “effectively [replicate], if only in faint outlines, what is
onscreen” (Kerner 39). Kerner’s analysis can be extrapolated to Guantánamo detainee memoirs to imply that in addition to compelling the reader to mirror the detainees’ bodily pain through his/her past recollections of excruciating pain, these texts, through their explicit descriptions of torture and consequent wounding, produce sensations in the reader’s body that faintly approximate the detainees’ affective and bodily reactions to torture. This bodily mirroring creates an almost corporeal empathy within the reader toward the detainees, thus inscribing these texts with political potential.

However, Ballengee inserts a critical caveat in her text that I would like to draw on at this juncture: a warning about “[t]he polysemy of torture” (10), the fact that the body in pain does not lend itself to a unitary interpretation, but instead, “communicate[s] a number of different associations or messages” (Ballengee 10). It is this ambiguous signifying potential of torture, and the consequent pained bodies it produces, that illuminates the first reading frame that may structure the reception of these texts—that of the torture porn subgenre.

‘Torture porn’ was a term first used by David Edelstein in his 2006 New York Magazine Article, “Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn” to “refer to a variety of … films with good production values and wide distribution that centered on the torture of relatable characters” (Pinedo, “Torture Porn” 346). While the subgenre of torture porn has typically been evoked in critical discussions of film, since this subgenre is defined by “extensive and graphic depiction[s] of torture” (Pinedo, “Torture Porn” 346), Guantánamo detainee memoirs—marked by repeated and sustained depictions of detainee torture at the hands of American state actors—are also amenable to being received within this frame. Kerner makes the connection between post-9/11 military prison detainee abuse and torture porn explicit when he writes: “Revelations
about abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay Prison, disclosures regarding the ‘Torture Memos,’ and the rendition program fuel torture porn narratives” (3).

Scholars writing about torture porn have identified it as a subgenre of horror because torture porn, like other forms of horror, “offers its audience a visceral experience” (Kerner 14). Having established this linkage between torture porn and horror, I will now probe the critical conversation around why people consume horror to reveal how the frame of torture porn, structuring the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs, holds the potential to trouble the critical discourses that have read unambiguous political power into these texts.

The theoretical debate around the effects horror has on its consumers has been loquacious. However, a common argument that has emerged in various iterations in these scholarly conversations is that audiences consume horror because it is pleasurable. American philosopher Nöel Caroll claimed that “horror fictions provide forms of narrative pleasure alongside emotions of fear and disgust” (Hills 2), while film theorist Barbara Creed identified the emotion of disgust elicited by horror as pleasurable in and of itself. As Isabel Pinedo explains, “[f]or Creed, viewing a horror film entails … the desire to see ‘sickening, horrific images’ … a process she describes as ‘pleasure in perversity’” (Recreational Terror 66). William Paul built on Creed’s notion of disgust being pleasurable in his theoretical engagement with the “gross-out” (Pinedo, Recreational Terror 67) reaction to horror—“gross-out always implies an ambivalence because it is founded on attraction to that which repulses, or more precisely it inverts normal values to acknowledge an attraction in revulsion” (qtd. in Pinedo, Recreational Terror 67) and it is this very ‘attraction in revulsion’ that makes the disgust evoked by horror pleasurable. Psychoanalytic approaches have theorized horror as a source of pleasure as well, as demonstrated in Aaron Smuts’ summarization of the same:
We have powerful desires to do violence to others. In order to live in civilization, these desires must be repressed … But some horror movies give us a chance to see our violent impulses realized … we are able to vicariously satisfy our desire to do harm to others. The movies also give us a way to hide this fact from ourselves. We are able to vicariously satisfy desires that we can happily deny having. (10)

Since torture porn can be read as a subgenre of horror, and horror has been theorized as eliciting a perverse pleasure in its consumers, one can safely presume that consumers’ engagement with torture porn is often marked by pleasure as well. Consequently, when the subgenre of torture porn forms a frame through which readers engage with Guantánamo detainee memoirs, these texts run the risk of becoming depoliticized, thus complicating the available critical apparati currently used to read War on Terror testimonies produced by Guantánamo detainees.

Guantánamo Detainee Memoirs and the Reading Frames of the Gulag Narrative and the Slave Narrative

As I will flesh out in this section, Guantánamo detainee memoirs also bear resemblances to the Gulag narrative and the slave narrative, allowing these two genres to also function as frames through which Guantánamo detainee memoirs can be read. These intertextual frames, structuring the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs, again beg a nuancing of the singularly political critical models available to engage these texts.

Irene Khan, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, in the organization’s 2005 Report, christened Guantánamo Bay “the gulag of our times” (i). The Gulag is a “Russian abbreviation for Glavnoe Upravlenie Lagerei, or Main Camp Administration … refer[ring] to the
network of Soviet labor camps established during Stalin’s rule” (Bosco). The then Executive Director of Amnesty International, William Schulz, explained this analogy by stating:

There are some similarities. The United States [was] maintaining an archipelago of prisons around the world, many of them secret prisons into which people [were] being literally disappeared, held in indefinite, incommunicado detention without access to lawyers or a judicial system, or to their families, and in some cases … they [were] being mistreated, abused, tortured and even killed. And those are similar at least in character, if not in size, to what happened in the Gulag. (Sales)

This parallel constructed by Amnesty International—between Guantánamo Bay and the Gulag—provides a productive inroad into the next reading frame that can structure the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs—the frame of the Gulag narrative genre.

Ruxandra Petrinca argues that since Gulag memoirs share “common tropes, motifs, characters, and techniques of narration” (2), they can be thought to form a “genre of historical writing” (4). Leona Toker, in her extensive study of Gulag literature as a genre, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors*, identifies several key literary tropes that mark the Gulag genre—tropes that can be traced in Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoirs as well.

One such trope Toker identifies as a key feature of the Gulag genre is a discussion of “dignity” (Toker 84) in these texts, particularly that of “inmates ha[ving] to unlearn conventional physical shame … to inform public opinion not only about the brutality of interrogators and the callousness of the guards but also about the disgraceful sanitary conditions” (Toker 84). This negotiation of dignity Toker identifies as part of the Gulag narrative genre also finds expression in Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* and Boumediene and Ait Idir’s *Witnesses of the Unseen*. Slahi engages with the question of dignity in his text by outlining both the unsanitary living conditions
in the detention camp as well as how he was compelled to sacrifice his sense of shame in this space. Statements such as “[t]he bathroom was a barrel filled with human waste” (Slahi 12) testify to the unhygienic conditions in Guantánamo, while claims such as “we got a cavity search” (Slahi 27), “[t]hey stripped me naked and pushed me into an open shower. I took a shower in my chains under the eyes of everybody, my brethren, the medics, and the Army” (Slahi 34) and “one night [an interrogator] undressed me with the help of a male guard … I never felt so violated” (Slahi 247) attest to how state actors in Guantánamo humiliated Slahi and consequently compelled him to ‘unlearn’ shame. Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir predominantly grapples with the latter—with how their experiences in Guantánamo were marked by constant humiliation and a loss of dignity. Boumediene and Ait Idir narrate humiliations similar to those Slahi was forced to undergo—“the soldiers … took me to a bathroom. It was a Porta-John and [they] came in with me. Urinating as they stood there behind me was uncomfortable, but I had no choice” (78) and “I was stripped, hosed down” (84)—while also narrating how they were forced to undergo sexual humiliation, such as when a female interrogator “sat a few feet from [Ait Idir] and unbuttoned her shirt, exposing herself” (97) and how they were humiliated by being treated like animals, as evident in the fact that “[their] cell[s] [were] like … cage[s] at the zoo” (78).

Another trope Toker identifies as prevalent in Gulag narratives is an engagement with “moments of reprieve” (Toker 87). In that, Toker claims that Gulag narrative authors often pay “sustained attention to the more pleasant moments in camp life—significant conversations, snatched opportunities to read, occasional freedom of movement, occasional solitude, a hot bath, ripe berries, little acts of kindness” (Toker 87). Through a description of his “first hot meal since [he] left Jordan” (Slahi 41), in exclaiming, almost with relish—“Oh, the tea was soothing!”
and in describing his friendlier interactions with the Guantánamo guards at length, both in terms of conversations he had with them and the occasional kind gesture they performed such as that of bringing him “Fermat’s Last Theorem … [a] book … written by a British journalist” (Slahi 322), Slahi’s memoir echoes this key trope of the Gulag narrative genre. *Witnesses of the Unseen* too bears resonances of this trope in the scenes where Ait Idir describes the conversations he had with the other detainees about “[their] lives back home, [their] families, the jobs [they] had once held” (96-97) or when Boumediene narrates how a detainee, Sami al-Hajj, “every day, for half an hour between sunset and evening prayers” (177) would read from *The Da Vinci Code* to the other detainees in the cellblock.

As per Toker, Gulag narratives also share the common feature of being divided into “stages” (Toker 84), of being structured into “graphically separated units (chapters or sections) that deal with well-defined periods of the author’s stay in different prisons or camps” (Toker 84). Slahi’s text fits this pattern, with each chapter tackling a distinct segment in his detainment, as evidenced in the chapter titles—“Senegal-Mauritania January 21, 2000 – February 19, 2000” (71), “Jordan November 29, 2001 – July 19, 2002” (150) and “GTMO February 2003 – August 2003” (191), among others. Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir is also divided into sections that tackle three distinct phases of their experience—before they were imprisoned, “Before Guantánamo” (1), their experiences in Guantánamo, “Welcome to America” (65) and their experience after legal intervention in the Guantánamo operations, “Until Proven Innocent” (119).

The overlap of key tropes, including but not limited to the ones discussed above, renders the Gulag narrative genre amenable to being mobilized as a frame through which Guantánamo detainee memoirs may be received. The deployment of this frame of reception has the potential to accrue political impact for Guantánamo detainee memoirs through what Yogita Goyal calls
“the power of analogy” (71). The Gulag narrative genre, as a reading frame for Guantánamo detainee memoirs, allows the reader to establish a parallel between the Guantánamo detainees and Gulag detainees—historically acknowledged victims of state power—thereby accomplishing the work of securing the reader’s recognition of the Guantánamo detainees’ victim status.

However, by guiding the reader to draw an equivalency between Guantánamo and Gulag detainees, this frame also runs the risk of allowing the reader to “obscure[e] the specificity and indeed the contemporaneity of a site like Guantánamo Bay” (Goyal 71), to elide the two experiences and erase the particularities of the Guantánamo Bay detainees’ experiences and the political conditions that produced their victimhood. By allowing the reader to place the Guantánamo detainees into well-known and recognized models of victimhood, this frame also risks rendering the detainees “predictable [and] knowable” (Weine 146).

Guantánamo detainee memoirs also bear an uncanny resemblance to slave narratives, as evinced by the text and paratext of Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* and Boumediene and Ait Idir’s *Witnesses of the Unseen*. The narrative content of both these memoirs is prefaced by material written by editors that vouches for the detainees’ credibility and attempts to purchase the reader’s trust in the narratives. Slahi’s editor, Larry Siems, writes in the Introduction to Slahi’s memoir, “The story [Slahi] tells is well corroborated by declassified record; he proves again and again to be a reliable narrator. He certainly does not exaggerate” (xlvi). Boumediene and Ait Idir’s editor, Daniel Norland, in his Preface to their memoir, observes the detainees and presents these vignettes to the reader—“Lakhdar paused at each intersection, waiting for the walk signal even when there were no cars in sight … [Lakhdar’s toddler] pointed skyward and Lakhdar scooped him up” (xiv) and “[Mustafa] is a louder, more gregarious sort. He calls everyone ‘brother,’ be it a hotel valet or a college professor, and he joked with the cashiers while shopping at stores where
he was clearly a regular” (xvi). Norland’s description of Boumediene following the traffic rules attests to his law-abiding nature, while his description of Boumediene playing with his son paints Boumediene as jovial, the very antithesis of a nefarious terrorist. Similarly, Norland’s vignette of Ait Idir paints him as jocular and friendly, rather than as a man who holds the potential to be malicious. Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir’s editors also corroborate the detainees’ narratives with supplementary material such as timelines and transcripts of the detainees’ interviews with intelligence analysts. The editors also regularly intervene in the texts—in Slahi’s case, by attempting to fill in redacted material in the footnotes, by “regularizing verb tenses, word order, and a few awkward locutions, and occasionally, for clarity’s sake, consolidating or reordering text … [and by] incorporat[ing] the appended flashbacks within the main narrative and streamlin[ing] the manuscript as a whole” (Slahi xii); in Boumediene and Ait Idir’s case, through Translator’s footnotes explaining the meaning of Arabic words and Islamic practices, and by editing Boumediene and Ait Idir’s translated words “for narrative flow” (Note on the Text).

The editors’ authenticating presence in these memoirs and their editorial interventions make the Guantánamo detainee memoirs resemble slave narratives. As Robert Burns Stepto claims, “slave narratives are full of other voices … mainly they appear in the appended documents written by slaveholders and abolitionists alike” (225). The formal resemblance between Guantánamo detainee memoirs and slave narratives—encouraged by Slahi when he makes a direct comparison between his material condition and that of slaves through his statement to an American interrogator, “You’re holding me because your country is strong enough to be unjust. And it’s not the first time you have kidnapped Africans and enslaved them” (Slahi 212)—allows the slave narrative genre to work as a frame through which Guantánamo detainee memoirs may be received.
The mobilization of the slave narrative genre as a reading frame for Guantánamo detainee memoirs again holds the potential to be politically generative because it constructs a link between “past and present forms of oppression” (Goyal 71). This linkage, in turn, orients the reader to approaching the detainees’ plight as a coordinate within continuing forms of state oppression, thereby affirming the political power of War on Terror detainee life writing. As Yogita Goyal writes, “For some readers, locating [the detainees] by means of an analogy to slavery helps restore greater historicity to [their] story and places the seemingly anomalous and apocalyptic War on Terror declared in 2001 in a much larger history of US empire” (84). The frame of the slave narrative genre may allow help foster compassionate anger in the reader by “channel[ing] the American public’s presumed revulsion with slavery into a solidarity with the detainees” (Goyal 80).

However, the frame of the slave narrative genre, evoked through editorial interventions, has an alternative impact on the reception of Guantánamo detainee memoirs as well. Paige M. Hermansen, discussing the editorial presences in a slave narrative, The History of Mary Prince, states that the editor of the text, “through his footnotes and the documents placed before and after Prince’s narrative … becomes a powerful editorializing voice … to the extent that he almost becomes a co-author” (69). Since the editors of Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoirs intervene in their texts in similar ways, this critical observation can be extrapolated to their narratives as well. In other words, the editorial presences in Guantánamo detainee memoirs also deprive the detainees of sole narrative authority by situating the editors as co-authors of these texts. The editors’ role as co-authors then “undermines the purpose of the [detainee memoirs] as the opportunity for the subjugated, voiceless [detainees] to share an authoritative, personal, firsthand account of atrocity” (Hermansen 69).
Robert Burns Stepto goes a step further in demonstrating that the editorial co-opting of authority further has the effect of “weaken[ing] the slave’s control over the narrative and … relegat[ing] him to a posture of partial literacy” (231). This partial literacy in turn makes the slaves, and in this case, the Guantánamo detainees, what John Sekora calls “literary child[ren]” (511), individuals that are infantilized on account of the editors’ paternalistic co-opting of their language and literary representation.

The editorial authentication in slave narratives, and by extension Guantánamo detainee memoirs, holds another danger—it dilutes the slave/detainee’s credibility instead of augmenting it. Hermansen observes that the editor’s “repeated, impassioned attempts” (87) to secure the slave’s credibility has the effect of making “[the editor’s] faith in Prince [seem] tenuous, and since [the editor] is the authority in the text—after all, as he says, we are meant to trust his judgment—the audience’s faith in Prince becomes tenuous as well” (87). Similarly, in the Guantánamo detainee life narratives, the editors’ earnest attempts to shore up credibility for the detainees—by attesting to the fact that Slahi is a “reliable narrator” (Slahi xlvi) or by providing character proofs for Boumediene and Ait Idir—paradoxically debilitate the detainees’ credibility.

In this way, the reading frames created by the Gulag narrative and slave narrative genres orient readers toward receiving Guantánamo detainee memoirs in ways that can be politically productive, in alignment with how critical frameworks have read these texts up till now; however, these frames simultaneously open up a space for a depoliticized reception of detainee texts that challenges the rigidity of the extant critical scaffolds assembled around them.
Collective Narration as a Frame for Reading Guantánamo Detainee Memoirs

In both Guantánamo Diary and Witnesses of the Unseen, Guantánamo detainees Slahi, Boumediene and Ait Idir narrate the stories of other detainees alongside their own. Slahi’s narration of the other detainees’ stories takes the form of him informing the reader about how his neighbors at Guantánamo were brought to the military prison—“[m]y third neighbor was a Palestinian from Jordan. He was captured and tortured by an Afghani tribal leader … [The Palestinian] managed to flee from captivity in Kabul. He made it to Jalalabad, where he easily stuck out as an Arab mujahid and was captured and sold to the Americans” (23)—as well as how these detainees were treated in Guantánamo, through statements such as “I saw an Afghani detainee who passed out a couple of times while hanging from his hands. The medics ‘fixed’ him and hung him back up” (16) and “It was an Afghani teenager, I would say 16 or 17. [The interrogators] made him stand for about three days, sleepless” (19). Both these strands of narration—the lack of proper rationale behind why the detainees were brought to Guantánamo and the brutal torture they were made to undergo—parallel Slahi’s own narrative. Boumediene and Ait Idir too narrate the stories of their fellow detainees by describing the torture they experienced in Guantánamo, often very similar to the kind Boumediene and Ait Idir themselves experienced—“In addition to the amputated Yemeni and the Palestinian with the steel leg, there was a man missing a hand and another with only one eye” (82); “Once, I saw the soldiers pummel a man as he lay unconscious upon the gravel” (87). The text of Witnesses of the Unseen is itself composed of both Boumediene and Ait Idir’s narratives, which constantly mirror each other, as evinced when Ait Idir equates his cell to a cage by stating “I was … deposited in my cage” (84), only to be followed by Boumediene’s statement about being “taken back to [his] cage for another night of broken sleep” (89).
Critical scholarship has typically thought through communal/collective narration as narration that is performed by a group of individuals representing the central narrator, such as Natalya Bekhta’s concept of a ‘we-narrative’—“a narrative situation with a dominant category of person where ‘person’ refers to a group who narrates and who is also a character, consistently using the first-person plural pronoun for self-designation” (165)—or Uri Margolin’s formulation of a ‘collective narrative agent’ composed of “a group of two or more individuals represented as a singular higher-order entity or agent, a collective individual so to speak, with global properties or actions” (592) and evoked using “expression designating a collectivity, plurality or group of some kind” (Margolin 593). However, Susan Lanser, in her book, *Fictions of Authority*, illuminates the possibility of two other kinds of collective narration: “a singular form in which one narrator speaks for a collective” (21) and “a sequential form in which individual members of a group narrate in turn” (21). Lanser’s two different forms of collective narration allow both Slahi’s and Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoirs to be read as communally narrated texts, due to the fact that the narrators speak for a collective body of detainees in both memoirs, along with the fact that Boumediene and Ait Idir’s memoir involves sequential narration.

In this section of my chapter, I posit that the detainees’ collective narration functions as another frame through which these memoirs are read. Additionally, while the frame of collective narration has typically been theorized to reinforce the political potentiality of these texts, I demonstrate that it works in more complex ways than critical conversations have allowed for.

The frame of communal narration does crucial work in helping the reader perceive the detainees as an oppressed people because “the communal mode … [has] primarily [been] a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities” (Lanser 21), such as that of slaves. As evinced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s statement, slave narratives adopted a communal narrative
stance similar to that of the detainees: “[T]he black slave’s narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual’s autobiography. Each slave author, in writing about his or her personal life experiences, simultaneously wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captive throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and the American South” (xiii).

However, the power the communal narrative frame confers on the Guantánamo detainees’ memoirs is tempered by the violence it enacts—a violence that can be understood through a parsing of the repercussions the collective narration frame had on slave narratives. When slaves such as Frederick Douglass used the communal form in their writings, they wrote as “an artifact of slavery [versus] as a complicated and ‘cultivated’ person” (Blumenthal 178-179). In other words, “the lives in the narratives [were] never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like” (Olney 154) and the slaves themselves “[were] important insofar as [they] represented the experience of slavery (and therefore of antislavery)” (Sekora 494). Similarly, as representative bodies received through the communal narration frame, the detainees become conduits whose particularities the reader bypasses, even as he/she gazes upon them, to understand the larger phenomenon of the War on Terror operations transacted at Guantánamo.

Representations of Reality: The Frame of the Journalistic Diary in Guantánamo Detainee and Abu Ghraib Interrogator Memoirs

Diary theorist Kylie Cardell identifies several key features of the diary as being the text’s existence as a “document written in media res” (14), its being ordered as per “dated entries” (5) or in “chronological and sequential” form (64), as well as its grappling with “excessive
interiority… [or being marked by] an emotional register” (5). Several of these markers are present in Guantánamo detainee, Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* and Abu Ghraib interrogator, Eric Fair’s *Consequence*, thus allowing both these texts to be read as invoking the diaristic form.

Apart from the explicit use of the word ‘diary’ in the title of Slahi’s text and the parenthetical diary-like paratext of his handwriting, Slahi’s memoir invokes the diary form through its depiction of him recording the events occurring around him in both Guantánamo and the other ‘black sites’ he is detained in by the U.S. as they occur, from “within the whirlwind” (Cardell 14). Further, Slahi’s text is divided into chapters titled with a location and a date range—“Senegal-Mauritania: January 21, 2000-February 19, 2000” (Slahi 71); “Mauritania: September 29, 2001-November 28, 2001” (107); “Jordan: November 29, 2001-July 19, 2002” (150)—reminiscent of the dated entries Cardell discusses. Slahi’s recording of external events also bears his emotional imprint, such as when he writes, “I cannot describe my feelings: anger, fear, powerlessness, humiliation, injustice, betrayal” (135), as well as an increased focus on his interiority through a record of his thoughts: “[W]hat if they don’t believe me? No, they would believe me, because they understand the recipe of terrorism more than the Americans” (260).

Fair also invokes the diary form in his memoir through his narration of the events occurring around him in Iraq almost *in medias res*. Statements such as “[t]here is no discussion of policy or procedure. As at the processing center at Fort Bliss, and the convoy briefing at Camp Victory, everyone is left to essentially carve out their own way forward” (Fair 88) and “Stefanowicz takes me to a windowless cell where he and an analyst have been working on a detainee … The cell is long and narrow … There are two doors, one behind the other. Both doors are covered in plywood and spray-painted black. You can close the first door before opening the
second. That way, you ensure no light enters the cell” (Fair 95) stand testament to this diaristic narration. Temporally too, Fair’s memoir invokes the diary form. The text begins in Abu Ghraib with the dated entry “Abu Ghraib: January 2004” (1), proceeds to recount the motivations and circumstances that led Fair to be in Abu Ghraib, almost as though tracing his memory, and then continues in relatively chronological form through his deployments in Abu Ghraib, Fallujah and back in the U.S. Cardell, in her book, also remarks that the “diary [is] a confessional mode” (17) of writing. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, since Fair’s text employs a confessional mode of narration, Consequence becomes further reminiscent of the diaristic form.

Here on, I explain how the diaristic form acquires power in its linkage to long-form journalism, alongside an explication of the features of the diary that typically make this linkage possible. I then demonstrate how these features can be traced with increased facility in Fair’s memoir compared to Slahi’s, allowing Fair’s text to be received through the frame of the journalistic diary, while Slahi’s memoir is precluded from a similar reception. I argue that the amenability of an Abu Ghraib interrogator’s memoir, and not a Guantánamo detainee’s memoir, to be read through this frame of the journalistic diary further complicates the critical discourse on Guantánamo detainee memoirs’ political power.

The diary is often associated with long-form journalism on account of two factors: the rise of personal writing in journalism and the fact that diaries have been read as constituting a form of reportage from the ground. New Journalism marked the advent of the personal within journalistic writing. Journalism theorist Rosalind Coward explains New Journalism to be a form of journalism marked by “the centrality of the personal voice, either through direct use of ‘I’ or by employing such distinctive style it presents as the personal identity of the author” (52). Richard Keeble expands on Coward’s concise definition of New Journalism by noting that the
“obsession with eyewitness recording of ‘facts’ is one of [New Journalism’s] defining features” (10). The emphasis on the personal in journalism can also be traced through narrative journalism:

Narrative journalism takes the mediating subjectivity of the reporter as an organizing principle … Narrative journalists thus … aim to convey the experience of an event or situation … They organize and represent social reality through the filters of personal experience and moral judgment and the individual reporter’s prior knowledge, experiences, values, and convictions provide the frame of reference. (Harbers and Broersma 643)

Since the diary “signals a status as intimate, personal writing” (Cardell 5) and as Coward notes, “[s]peaking personally is now a dominant element in journalism” (7), the diary has been increasingly drawn upon as a journalistic source.

Aaron William Moore, in his book Writing War: Soldiers Record the Japanese Empire, touches on an additional reason for the linkage between the diary and journalism. He finds “[w]ar reportage and the field diary … [to be] writing forms with roughly similar goals and similar objects, [that] began to influence one another at the beginning of the twentieth century” (21). As Cardell states, “[l]ike photographs, which represent themselves as metonymical remnants of their objects, the diary accrues the weight and authority of reality itself” (14), and therefore, in its capacity to function as a “documentation of information in the field” (Cardell 48), the diary is often mined as a journalistic source.

While the diary form acquires power through its association with long-form journalism, only certain kinds of diaristic writing are considered authentic enough to be read as journalistic. Moore uncovers one such feature that when present in diaries, allows them to be conceptualized as journalistic, when he notes: “A diary’s reliability is often perceived to be a function of how
private it is” (11). Popular assessments of a diary’s ‘privateness’, in turn, are made in multiple ways, one of which is operationalized by Cardell when she states: “Even in ‘literary’ incarnations the diary is stereotypically perceived of … as a nonliterary and spontaneous mode” (14). In fact, notions of ‘nonliterariness’ and ‘spontaneity’ are not always separate, but often imbricated with one another. “Naturalness and lack of artistic intent” (Cardell 13)—‘nonliterariness’—become markers of a text’s spontaneity, its ‘private’ nature and hence its amenability to being received as a journalistic diary.

Fair’s memoir, *Consequence*, is marked by connective gaps and inconsistencies, both of which work to render his text likely to be received through the frame of the journalistic diary. The connective gaps in Fair’s narration primarily make themselves conspicuous through his discussions of queerness. While Fair primarily narrates his experiences in Abu Ghraib in his memoir, he also inserts anecdotes about his relationship to queerness in the text—anecdotes whose connection to the remainder of the narrative remain unexplained. Statements such as “Karin and I have much in common, but I fell in love with her in the pew at First Presbyterian Church when she refused to applaud during the sermon about homosexuals and rapists” (Fair 47) and anecdotes about how he “[did not] understand why that soldier felt he needed to kill Barry Winchell” (Fair 42), a man dating a transgender woman who was beaten to death, appear in the memoir without any connective tissue linking them to the rest of Fair’s experiences in Abu Ghraib and outside. Contradictions too proliferate in Fair’s text, as discussed in Chapter Two, such as when Fair states that on one hand, he was convinced that “[he] shouldn’t be [in Iraq]. [He] should have quit by now” (3), while later claiming that “[he] had every intention of using the NSA to get [him] back to Iraq” (161). These connective gaps and contradictions have the effect of making Fair’s text seem disjointed and therefore, not one created for public
consumption. The ‘non-literary’ quality of Fair’s memoir and the notion it encourages of not being crafted for public circulation then renders it likely be received through the frame of the journalistic diary.

Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* functions in a radically different manner. This memoir does invoke the diaristic form, as discussed earlier, and yet, it is less likely to be received within the frame of the journalistic diary. Slahi’s text is peppered with explicit references to an implied reader: “You, Dear Reader, said more words to them than I did” (225) and “You, Dear Reader, could never understand the extent of the physical, and much more the psychological, pain people in my situation suffered” (232). These invocations of an implied reader are supplemented with the editor’s claim that Slahi “always hoped that his manuscript would reach the reading public” (Slahi xi). Taken together, these statements mark Slahi’s memoir as a discursive creation—one intending to engage readers in a dialogue through its circulation—starkly opposed to the “intimate, personal” (Cardell 5) mode of the journalistic diary.

Additionally, Slahi’s editor, Larry Siems, makes several statements in the Introduction worth unpacking further due to their import on Slahi’s text being consumed through the frame of the journalistic diary. Siems writes about Slahi’s memoir: “[Slahi] recognizes the larger context of fear and confusion in which all these characters interact” (Slahi xlvii) and “[Slahi] deploys a vocabulary of under seven thousand words—a lexicon about the size of the one that powers the Homeric epics. He does so in ways that sometimes echo those epics” (Slahi xi-xii), while also branding Slahi’s memoir “an epic for our times” (Slahi xlix). Siems’ statements—labeling the state actors and detainees populating Slahi’s narrative as ‘characters’ and comparing Slahi’s memoir to an epic—have the effect of priming the reader to approach Slahi’s text as a highly stylized piece of writing.
Perceptions of stylization have the effect of weakening a work’s authenticity, as confirmed by Susan Sontag in her seminal work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Although Sontag makes these observations with respect to the photography of atrocities, her insights can be transported to how a reader may read Slahi’s text. Sontag asserts:

For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance. Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don’t have the look that comes from being ‘properly’ lighted and composed … By flying low, artistically speaking, such pictures are thought to be less manipulative. (26-27)

The ‘literary’ quality stylization imparts to Slahi’s text then damages its authenticity, further attenuating its likelihood of being received through the frame of the journalistic diary.

The fact that an Abu Ghraib interrogator’s memoir is likely to be received through the frame of the journalistic diary, while the Guantánamo detainee’s is not, is significant for extant critical discourse on the political potential of Guantánamo detainee life writing because both these kinds of texts offer differing accounts of the War on Terror—accounts that clash in terms of which parties’ innocence they champion and which parties they ascribe guilt to. Guantánamo life writing advocates for the detainees’ innocence, as emphasized in Slahi’s statement expressing his hope that Americans “are not interested in financing the detention of innocent people” (372), while simultaneously indicting the state-and-actor nexus, as discussed in Chapter Two. Paradoxically, Abu Ghraib interrogator accounts seek to exculpate the interrogators, as also examined in Chapter Two, while simultaneously accusing brown bodies being detained or evading detention of violent potential, as evinced in Fair’s descriptions of the Iraqis launching IEDs that killed American soldiers and his mention of terroristic detainees, such as the one that
“lied to [him], [saying] he didn’t know anything about the men he was captured with or the bomb that had been buried in the road” (3). In the face of these antithetical accounts of the War on Terror, the fact that the Abu Ghraib interrogator’s account can be received through the frame of the journalistic diary—and therefore as an authentic and credible account of the War on Terror—while the Guantánamo detainee’s cannot, complicates the critical impulse to read political potential into Guantánamo detainee life writing.

As I demonstrate in this chapter, the intertextual frames, both generic and stylistic, within which Guantánamo detainee memoirs can be received, highlight the multiple interpretive possibilities present in these texts. Recognition of the polysemous nature of these texts, then, is in itself a sufficient challenge to critical apparati that attempt to fix detainee life writing within a singular hermeneutic matrix of resistance and political productivity.
CONCLUSION

[T]he reader writes the text. (Derrida, qtd. in Crosman, 149)

[T]estimonies, *if we are willing to listen*, offer us a beacon. (Paik *Rightlessness* 227; emphasis added)

Canadian poet and scholar, Proma Tagore, writes in her book, *The Shapes of Silence: Writing by Women of Color and the Politics of Testimony*: “[P]art of the task of critics involves recognizing that there are no ready-made testimonies or testimonial archives simply waiting to be found or discovered. Rather, the critic is implicated and shares in the process of co-creating testimonies, archives, and movements that have yet to be made” (152). Tagore’s statement works in a two-pronged way. On one hand, by arguing that it is the critic’s responsibility to imbue texts that attest to violence (state-sponsored or otherwise) with the political potential that transforms them into testimonies, Tagore’s statement denaturalizes the link between political power and such testifying texts, rendering political power artificial, foreign, something that is read into texts rather than something that is inherently contained in them. On the other hand, Tagore’s statement imagines critics not as scholars that deconstruct a text—loosen its screws and peer inside its dark interior to understand its workings—but as activist-creators in charge of curating archives and building political movements.

The key to understanding why scholars grappling with testifying texts, such as Guantánamo detainee life writing, are fixed as creators of movements rather than de-constructors of texts lies in how recent scholarship has theorized testimonial writing. Testimonio critic John Beverley has been a powerful voice behind the school of thought that conceptualizes testimonial
writing as anti-literary, as markedly different from ‘literature’, due to its extra-textual referentiality. Beverley writes:

The narrator in testimonio is a real person who continues living and acting in a real social history that also continues. Testimonio can never in this sense create the illusion of that textual in-itselfness that has been the basis of literary formalism, nor can it be adequately analyzed in these terms. It is, to use Umberto Eco’s slogan, an “open work” that implies the importance and power of literature as a form of social action, but also its radical insufficiency. In principle, testimonio appears therefore as an extraliterary or even antiliterary form of discourse. (42)

However, through this coda to my thesis, I hope to demonstrate that it is essential to re-conceptualize testimonial texts, such as Guantánamo detainee life writing, as literary, in order to sustain the nuanced theorization of their political power that I have argued for in this thesis and to further illuminate under-theorized areas of critical inquiry.

The theorization of testimonial writing as anti-literary due to its extra-textual referential power has stunted the critical discourse emerging around it. Such a theorization of testimonial texts, as Elisabeth Burgos notes, has “delegitimiz[ed] every attempt at critical skepticism” (86) and “convert[ed] [these texts] … into an almost religious canon, bordering on the absolute” (86), where subjecting them to any critical interrogation has become equal to sacrilege. In other words, the theorization of testimonial texts as anti-literary, with its corresponding hyper-focus on their extra-textual referentiality, has compelled scholars to only engage with these texts’ conditions of production in a way such that any scrutiny about their political power risks reading as what David Stoll calls a “betray[al] [of] the victims” (Stoll 405).
This is not to say that critical discourse holds no ethical imperative when approaching testimonial texts such as those written by the Guantánamo detainees. However, the hyper-focus on these texts’ conditions of production, emerging from their theorization as primarily anti-literary, has contributed to a rather reductive understanding of these texts as objects circulating in the world. Additionally, such an unquestioning, unilateral theorization of testimonial writing as politically productive based on their conditions of production has in fact done an ethical disservice to the subalterns attesting to the violences enacted on their bodies through these texts, by further abjectifying them. As Alberto Moreiras claims, reading “third-world or resistant texts … only … with ‘affect, empathy, or commiseration’” and to “never ‘intellectualiz[e] them’” (219) is to “trea[t] [them] abjectly” (219).

Through the conclusion to this thesis, I thus seek to reinforce that any critical engagement with testimonial texts, such as those written by post-9/11 military prison detainees, is incomplete without the recognition that these texts “suspend the literary at the very same time that [they] constitut[e] [themselves] as … literary act[s]” (Moreiras 212). These testimonial texts, despite referring to extra-textual realities, circulate in the world as literary texts. This understanding of testimonial texts as always already literary is crucial because it allows a Barthesian perspective to filter into theorizations of these texts. Barthes states that literature “is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body writing” (142), and allowing space for this death of the author is important because as Barthes argues “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148). In other words, theorizing testimonial texts written by Guantánamo detainees as literature guards against the author-function from over-determining their meaning and political potential. It allows for a conceptualization of these texts as objects that are interacted
with, as entities whose receivers are not incidental to their meaning and their political potential, but are active co-participants in the creation of the same.

Theorizing testimonial texts, such as the life writing produced by Guantánamo detainees, as literature and consequently taking into consideration the reader’s role in co-determining the meaning and political potential of these texts, as I have attempted to do in this thesis, also illuminates several areas for future critical inquiry.

As I have argued in this thesis, the frames through which readers receive testimonial texts such as Guantánamo detainee memoirs determine the political impact these texts can have. An important direction future scholarship can then take is a theorization of how such texts can be approached—an operationalization of what a ‘responsible’ reading of these texts would look like. One such ethical reading practice can be inferred from Bertrand Russell’s theory of the “rotation of nouns” (qtd. in Scarry “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People” 106). Russell discusses the experience of reading the newspaper everyday, prescribing that “we ought routinely to substitute the names of alternative countries to test whether our response to … event[s] arises from a moral assessment of the action or instead from a set of prejudices about the country” (Scarry, “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People” 106), calling this act of “detach[ing] a given action from country X and reattach[ing] it to country Y … ‘the rotation of nouns’” (Scarry, “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People” 106). This ethical practice, when extrapolated to the reading of testimonial texts, can be envisioned as such: When one reads a testimonial text by a post-9/11 military detainee, he/she can attempt to detach the text from the authorship of a terrorist suspect, instead thinking through the text as written by a survivor of any state brutality, to change the frames that structure his/her reception of these texts.
Finally, an expansive debate in the field of subaltern studies has revolved around Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s assertion that “[t]he subaltern cannot speak” (104). In fact, the “very ontology of being subaltern … [has been theorized to be that of] silence” (Roof and Wiegman). However, paying attention to the testimonial text’s “discursive frameworks and partners” (Wagner 101) shifts the terms of the scholarly debate—instead of discussions of the subaltern’s silence solely arising from the question, ‘can the subaltern speak?’, they can now also be theorized from the provocative standpoint of, when such a subaltern does speak, ‘can the subaltern be heard?’
WORKS CITED


