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# Indefinite Detention: Chronotopes of Unfreedom in Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary*

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**Abstract:** Former Guantánamo detainee Mohamedou Ould Slahi's memoir *Guantánamo Diary* (2015, restored edition 2017) is typically read as a testament to the range of grave rights violations enacted during the war on terror. In this essay, we show how the book also reveals overlaps between the United States government's techniques of torture and abuse and the Guantánamo naval base detention center's deep colonial roots as well its reliance on "ordinary" prison procedures marked by racist brutality. We build on the Bakhtinian chronotope as a theoretical frame through which to explore a set of simultaneously competing and complementary spatio-temporal frameworks that ground and emerge through the text. Analyzing the overlapping and often conflicting temporal registers of national emergency and imperialist history, our reading of the memoir accounts for the narrative's production of a post-torture—but not post-carceral—detainee subjectivity and reminds readers that the everyday violence of the war on terror persists even though the most egregious violence the text depicts has largely ended.

**Keywords:** literature and the war on terror, Guantánamo narrative, chronotopes, *Guantánamo Diary*, Mohamedou Ould Slahi

In "Dead Book Revisited," Saidiya Hartman offers a lyrical meditation on how to convey the dispossession of Black lives, from the transatlantic slave ships to the present, alongside what she calls "the lived experience of the multiple durées of unfreedom" (210). "Multiple durées of

unfreedom" echo in the title of our essay, which analyzes the temporalities of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* (2015, restored edition 2017), a story that is at once a contemporary captivity narrative and a neo- or postcolonial memoir. By exploring Slahi's long-lasting entrapment, we trace the constellations of violence and harm that intersect in the racialized war on terror, which contains distinct echoes of previous global violence such as the transatlantic slave trade. Hartman writes:

> How does time unfold in the confines of expected death? And does this negate or destabilize the very idea of the everyday or the ordinary? At the very least, would this suggest that time is lived in multiple and simultaneous registers that trouble discrete notions of the beginning and end of captivity, the before and after of slavery? How does one comprehend the routine struggle to endure together with the state of emergency? Is it possible to hold the disaster and the everyday in the same frame of reference? (213)

Hartman's cascading questions wrestle with the challenge of finding the language and form with which to apprehend the intimacy and immediacy of death in the slave ship's hold. They also seek to fathom slavery's legacy in contemporary state violence that continues to produce the deaths of Black and brown people and in the communal mourning and care that responds to it. Hartman is concerned with the specific history of lethal racism in the United States in its affective, juridical, and narratological dimensions, although her questions open a wider field of investigation into the complex temporalities of targeted harm. Significantly, she insists upon the material nature of past-present relations, extending and deepening the trope of haunting that has dominated theories of traumatic history with its intrusions into the present.[1] Describing the "clutch" of the slave ship's hold on Black life into the present day, Hartman insists that "[i]t was not a *melancholy* relation to the past but a *structural* one" (210; emphasis added). Hartman's attention to structural racism's violent grasp on time and global space resonates with the Afropessimist tenet that for Black (diasporic) people, as

Frank Wilderson notes, subjective trauma is inseparable from the structural trauma of systemic racism and its material effects. Wilderson calls this "vertigo"; his metaphor captures the fact that for those like Slahi, trapped in a *longue durée* of unfreedom extended by the global war on terror, this relationship to the past surely must be experienced as both melancholic and structural.

We begin with Hartman's essay because her questions help to frame our examination of the competing and complementary spatio-temporal frameworks, or chronotopes, that ground and emerge from Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary*. These chronotopes also help us to parse how and why Slahi's narrative relies on a notion of positive law—in both senses of the word "positive," as legislative instruments that promote justice—even as his narrative demonstrates what Wilderson calls "objective vertigo"—that is, "a life *constituted* by disorientation rather than a life *interrupted* by disorientation" (3; emphasis added). An early critic of the memoir, Yogita Goyal, reads the book as a contemporary slave narrative, whereas Zeinab McHeimech focuses more narrowly on Muslim slave narratives in the US through a comparison of Slahi's memoir with 'Umar ibn Sayyid's early-nineteenth-century slave autobiography. Building upon this work that identifies the slave narrative as one of several frames through which to read *Guantánamo Diary*, our aim is not to assert the primacy of a single genre in understanding the literary context of the book, nor to describe a homogenous US racism that collapses differences between the experiences of African-American and Muslim people during the war on terror or earlier periods of transatlantic or north-south African modes of enslavement. Rather, we explore the complex temporalities Slahi invokes in order to address for readers Hartman's question about the possibility of holding "the disaster and the everyday in the same frame of reference"—in this case, in the context of the war on terror. To do so, we turn to Mikhail Bakhtin's well-known formulation of the chronotope as a figure for space-time, or space as the fourth dimension of time; the place, he theorizes, "where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (84).

Through the chronotope, according to Bakhtin,

> time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. . . . It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing-forth, the representability of events. And this is so thanks precisely to the special increase in density and concreteness of time markers—the time of human life, of historical time—that occurs within well-delineated spatial areas. (84)

In other words, the chronotope permits critical examination of the inextricability of the (historical, individual, human) time of events from the (geopolitical, familial, human) spaces in which those events take place. In the case of Slahi's memoir, the events in question constitute the simultaneously concrete and unfathomable future that is indefinite detention during the war on terror—even, paradoxically, after one's release.

We read Slahi's narrative, then, for clues to the temporal and spatial frames within which one lives through the everyday violence produced by racialized, gendered, state-sponsored "emergency," and for how chronotopes, as a feature of narrative, help to construct the subject who inhabits them. Indefinite detention reverberates in the prison cells and aircraft of extraordinary rendition, the cells in which Slahi was tortured and held without charge, and the home from which he writes the restored edition of the book and in which he is confined and surveilled by both the Mauritanian and US governments. Slahi's narrative (and his lived experience) responds affirmatively to Hartman's suggestion that such time "is lived in multiple and simultaneous registers that trouble discrete notions of the beginning and end of captivity" (Hartman 213). As such, we argue that "national emergency" and "imperialist history" (spanning the transatlantic slave trade, the history of colonization in the Caribbean, and the global reach of US power during the war on terror) constitute hermeneutically significant, overlapping yet asynchronous chronotopes from which to understand the construction of Slahi's "I" voice in *Guantánamo Diary*. Each is linked to discrete spaces, places, and material/matériel, which, like the ship's hold, shape human experience in an everyday time that is produced by but not coterminous with

the politically manufactured and historically grounded state of emergency from which it has emerged. Slahi's representation of these discordant spatio-temporal frameworks illuminates his attempt to navigate the overdetermined narratives that have simultaneously produced him as a tortured political subject who uses writing as a means of escape *and* a perpetual detainee who necessarily writes from within the disjunctive narratives that define him, constrain him, and target him for harm. Significantly, *Guantánamo Diary* reveals both Slahi's investment in the very legal standards from which he was exiled and also, we argue, the extent to which the production of space-time in the war on terror is not an exception to those standards but rather a constitutive rule for some already-marked subjects.

**I. On the Conditions of Production**

Where and when might we locate the origin of *Guantánamo Diary*? The book is the edited, redacted, published, revised, and republished form of a 122,000-word manuscript that Slahi handwrote in English, his fourth language, in 2005, in the same Guantánamo cell in which some of his most harrowing abuses took place. It began as notes for his attorneys that he composed during the third of fourteen-plus years of detention without charge at the Guantánamo Bay naval base—a detention that lasted until October 2016, when he was at long last returned to his family in Mauritania. After lengthy legal proceedings to release the already redacted manuscript from government control, Slahi's attorneys sent it to author, journalist, and human rights activist Larry Siems, who edited it and provided corroborating and explanatory footnotes culled from publicly available material. The book first appeared in 2015 while Slahi was still captive at Guantánamo and before he and Siems had ever met or corresponded. After Slahi's repatriation, the two worked together to "repair" (Slahi li [2017]) the censored text by overlaying Slahi's narrative on the redactions, resulting in the 2017 restored edition. The convoluted process entailed multiple technologies of narrative production (and erasure) and involved Slahi as well as numerous people who had no personal connection to him but were nonetheless tasked with shaping the narrative form and contents, most particularly through the process of redaction.

And yet we might choose any number of other starting points for the book: moments from Slahi's narrated life story (contained in *Guantánamo Diary* as well as his current, as yet unpublished, writings) or from the US government's narratives about national security, fear, and terrorism—the narratives into which Slahi was involuntarily inserted and which rendered him to Guantánamo and constituted him as ISN (Internment Serial Number) 760, the position from which he writes. As Alexandra S. Moore and Belinda Walzer argue, "the book, as material object and narrative, documents a contested political and legal subjectivity in the making" (25). Moore and Walzer analyze temporality and subjectification in the book through the rhetorical concepts of kairos, akairos, and ambience. They argue that the text's akairotic, or "inopportune" (24) moments—legible in Slahi's dedication and use of fable, as well as in the redactions—illuminate how the state's discourses of securitization intersect with policies of precaritization (the targeting of specific populations for harm) and refute the reading of Slahi by many who celebrate the memoir as a paradigmatic human rights subject who has successfully written his way out of Guantánamo. Keeping that process of subjectification in mind, we pay greater attention to overlapping exceptional and quotidian chronotopes for the ways they characterize the modes of unfreedom that at once constitute and constrain Slahi as author and subject. Our reading underscores subjectification as at once discursive and material, both psychic and structural. In addition, it points to the double-bind of the subject who seeks recognition (legal and intersubjective) within and against the chronotopes of empire, law, and normative human rights.

**II. National Emergency**

In temporal terms, *Guantánamo Diary* illuminates the contradictions inherent in the language of emergency that the US has called upon to hold men indefinitely. This contradiction inheres in the many examples Slahi provides of his already determined status, a standing that precludes the possibility for any demonstration of innocence. Slahi's metanarrative of the dominant power's insistence upon his voice as suspect and dangerous positions the 2015 edition of *Guantánamo Diary* as a doubled

narrative through which a post-torture but not post-carceral subjectivity emerges—and in which the everyday experience of captivity in the no-nation's-land of Guantánamo is related within the thicker contexts of the US national emergency that called into being the war on terror, as well as the long imperialist history that positioned Guantánamo Bay as the space that would accommodate detainees like Slahi at this time.

The memoir's narrative offers up the everyday in a mostly chronological testimonial to Slahi's experience of arrest in Mauritania in 2001; detention in Jordan; and rendition first to Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan and finally to the US prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. The text concludes in 2005 with Slahi's indeterminate status of indefinite detention. However, the subjective narrative is overlaid with a structural one that highlights the context of putative national emergency, reconstructing years of US military and CIA interrogations and torture that focus on a series of past networks, events, and interactions in order to confirm Slahi's status as both future threat and "high value detainee" (that is, a detainee with connections or information crucial to the current war on terror or to prosecuting the crimes of the attacks of September 11, 2001). As Slahi notes, it mattered little that the events and connections in question were coincidental rather than planned, and that his most significant alliances took place ten years earlier, when his status as an al Qaeda member positioned him as a US ally (in the fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) rather than enemy. In the US government narrative that required Slahi's torture and indefinite detention, past is immutable prologue; his testimonial must, then, obey the rules of a disingenuous prolepsis by which a fabricated confession to long past (and, not insignificantly, failed) terrorist plots becomes the object of interrogations masquerading as urgent cross-examinations for the purpose of acquiring what military intelligence officials call actionable intelligence with which to foil potential future plots.

The 2017 restored edition of *Guantánamo Diary*, which begins with Slahi's dramatic narration of his release from Guantánamo rather than with Siems' original introduction, amplifies this absurdity, as Slahi's release (which results from administrative rather than judicial procedures) gives the lie to the rationales initially used to imprison him. At the same

time, in an extension of the mobius strip of self-confirming logic that prolongs his unfreedom into the present, he writes in 2017 from confinement in Mauritania: the US has largely denied him his right to travel as a condition of his release, and Mauritania refused until three years after his release to assert its sovereignty in recognition of its citizen's right to a passport. Indeed, the country still declines to disclose the full terms of its agreement with the US (specifically the length and level of Slahi's surveillance and travel restrictions). It is telling that in Slahi's recent testimony to a citizen-led commission in North Carolina that investigated that state's role in the CIA-sponsored Rendition, Interrogation and Detention program[2] under which he was apprehended, when asked if the commission could recommend an action—like an apology from the government, for example—that would be meaningful to him, he responded: "I want much less than that. I want them to let me *be*." He added, "I am still imprisoned by the United States of America. They denied me my passport, they denied me my medical treatment. . . . They don't want me to go to other countries and talk about these experiences" ("Testimony to the NCCIT" 27:00; emphasis in original). The freedom Slahi yearns for transcends physical release from the prison; it requires an additional release from the structural tentacles of empire's grip, although such release is only attainable through the same assemblages of law and administrative proceduralism that are integral to the harm he has endured. While no longer rationalized through discourses of emergency, this form of control nonetheless profoundly impacts the "routine struggle to endure" described by Hartman. In Slahi's case, that struggle includes coping with the lasting physical and mental trauma from torture and confinement, as well as the lack of adequate medical care in Mauritania—all within the limits of his new constraints at home.[3] Although the restored edition of *Guantánamo Diary* might seem to confirm the liberal subject's progressive teleology from silenced captive to self-narrating, free subject, the ongoing conditions in which he lives and the displacement of his detention demonstrate the still powerful reach of US empire, the perhaps unavoidable deference of neocolonial Mauritania to that empire, and the daily effects of a past incarceration that will not end. Significantly, Slahi's desire to just "be" asserts an

alternate, similarly indefinite chronotope in which to continue the process of selfhood or subjectification—if not on the fictitious "own terms" of the liberal subject, then at least on terms apart from those dictated by his perpetrators.

With the ability to "be" only now (post-publication) coming into reach after receiving his passport, *Guantánamo Diary* situates indefinite detention in a time and place that is at once exceptional and quotidian, urgent yet banal. It is at this nexus that we sketch the power of narrative chronotopes as a method for making meaning from the events associated with the war on terror and visited upon Slahi, whom readers meet as both protagonist and raconteur. We understand the subjectivity that emerges in the narrative to be a tortured one, an "I" that is inseparable from the governmental and other discursive formations that have produced him. There is no agentic autobiographical voice here; rather, the "I" built through Slahi's memoir remains suspended in two disorienting convergences in space-time. First, readers meet an "I" who has been tortured and remains incarcerated in the proleptic space-time of a solitary cell, in a prison camp excessively legalized yet situated outside the law, with no charge, no trial, and no sentence—neither one of life nor even one of death—through which to comprehend the serving of time or even its simple passage. And second, this authorial "I" of the revised edition occupies the indefinite time of waiting for permission for the most fundamental freedom of movement, first in the legal form of a passport and, now that it has been granted, in visa approvals from the countries he wishes to visit, which would also allow medical care, family visits, and engagement with diverse publics such that he could shape his own future—in other words, an "ordinary" human life—even after having been "freed" from the carceral space. This ongoing state of indefinite detention thus bifurcates Slahi, allocating a kind of freedom to his persona as a narrative subject who communicates via various print and electronic media—even as that communication is interpolated through the haze of the multiple governmental and social discourses that bind him—while still confining his body and self as a physical and legal person within the messy chronotope of quotidian days marked by the supposed urgency of the state of emergency/war on terror. All of this continues despite

the fact that the war on terror has been redefined multiple times, with changing geopolitical targets, in the years since Slahi's release.

Perhaps nowhere is the transformation of a human being into fodder for the war on terror more stark than in the moments and spaces in which torture takes place. Here, too, in providing even a glimpse of Slahi's treatment, *Guantánamo Diary* counters the language of historical rupture and national exigency that feeds the ticking bomb scenario most often used to justify torture. "Torture fantasy," as Hilary Neroni demonstrates in her analysis of the show *24* (95), equates actionable intelligence with truth and ties those concepts to the clock. The torture menu personally approved for Slahi by then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, however, decouples actionable intelligence from both truth and the clock such that the purpose of torture is clearly the performative production of pain and suffering as an end unto itself. In addition, Slahi's torture aimed to produce a confession (truthful or not) that would ostensibly justify the abuse that generated it. In other words, for both the torturer and the tortured, the clock serves as an integral component of the subject's position, although in different ways. Whereas for the perpetrator, the clock justifies torture, for the victim/survivor it can be a matter of sheer survival.

Slahi is intimately and excruciatingly aware of the manipulation of time as a weapon against him as his torturers attempt to deprive him of its markers and bring him to the edge of organ failure, death, and/or permanent mental suffering,[4] outcomes he tries to forestall by holding onto time even as the torture chamber expands to encompass his world. Describing the escalation of torture in June 2003, Slahi writes: "For the next seventy days, I wouldn't know the sweetness of sleeping: interrogation 24 hours a day, three and sometimes four shifts a day" (218 [2015]). During the same period, he gives an example of how "humiliation, sexual harassment, fear, and starvation was the order of the day until around 10 p.m. The interrogators made sure that I had no clue about the time, but nobody is perfect; their watches always revealed it" (233 [2015]). In both examples, Slahi recreates the regularity of the clock and calendric time in order to organize and make legible his experience to himself and his readers. When that experience is placed in its

larger context, however—when readers see the coupling of torture and indefinite detention without charge—the justifications for his treatment are erased. If the body is the receptacle of truth, then torture reveals that there is nothing to prosecute; if torture does not produce truth, then it cannot be rationalized, even by the utilitarian standards of the ticking bomb scenario.

Indeed, it is perhaps the biggest irony of Slahi's story that it is both because he did not commit a crime and because he "broke" under torture that he could not be charged with a crime: his involuntary confessions led not to charges and prosecution but to his lead prosecutor's withdrawal from the case, thereby trapping Slahi, like many of the current detainees at Guantánamo, in the no-man's-land of indefinite detention. Carceral (if not narrative) time for Slahi is epochally broken by torture, introducing a new age, *anno torturae,* if you will, into his otherwise ordinary human lifespan with an accompanying new subjectivity. He asserts that,

> [t]o make a long story short, you may divide my time in two big steps.
>
> (1) Pre-torture (I mean that I couldn't resist): I told them the truth about me having done nothing against your country. It lasted until May 22, 2003.
> (2) Post-torture era: where my brake broke loose. I yessed every accusation my interrogators made. I even wrote the infamous confession about me planning to hit CN Tower in Toronto based on SSG advice. I just wanted to get the monkeys off my back. I don't care how long I stay in jail. My belief comforts me. (xviii [2015])

Several paradoxes emerge in this description. Most importantly, truth is associated with a relatively more benign "pre-torture" phase in which the subject, interestingly, "couldn't resist" (telling the truth). This formulation turns the official rationale for torture in the context of national emergency—acquiring geopolitically significant truths from a subject trained or inclined to resist delivering them—on its head. Significantly,

Slahi's truth does not signify total innocence in the context of the politics informing the US-led war on terror—he freely admits to training with al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 1991 and 1992—but rather innocence of plotting or acting against the US, with whom he would have been geopolitically aligned as an al Qaeda member in those years. Indeed, he offers no resistance to sharing this truth until a Special Projects Team at Guantánamo subjects him to what Siems characterizes as "one of the most stubborn, deliberate, and cruel interrogations in the record" (xvi [2015]). At that point Slahi begins to lie by affirming all accusations against him and facing the resulting cognitive dilemma:

> I have never felt as violated in myself as I had since the Department of Defense Team started to torture me to get me to admit to things I haven't done. You, Dear Reader, could never understand the extent of the physical, and much more the psychological, pain people in my situation suffered, no matter how hard you try to put yourself in another's shoes. Had I done what they accused me of, I would have relieved myself on day one. But the problem is that you cannot just admit to something you haven't done; you need to deliver the details, which you can't when you hadn't done anything. . . . You have to make up a complete story that makes sense to the dumbest dummies. One of the hardest things to do is to tell an untruthful story and maintain it, and that is exactly where I was stuck. (232 [2015])

The paragraph's several shifts in voice signal a common trope of torture as unrepresentable, untranslatable: "You, Dear Reader, could never understand the extent of the physical, and much more the psychological, pain people in my situation suffered, no matter how hard you try to put yourself in another's shoes." Refusing the wager of literary empathy, Slahi backs out of the "I" voice in which he began the paragraph, an "I" that seems to promise access to the extremity of torture—not confined to physical pain or sensation but rather a total experience of the violations caused by the Department of Defense team that tortured him "to get [him] to admit to things [he] hadn't done." "I have never

felt so violated in myself," he begins, and readers might be forgiven for thinking that they will hear an account of the torture experience that most often falls short of representability beyond cultural texts like *24* that treat it as triumph within that metonym of national emergency, the ticking bomb scenario. Instead, Slahi's focus widens to "people in my situation," redirecting focus at the moment of truth to the mass of voiceless others contained by the same system. While the narrative nods to the literary *testimonio* in its direct address to the reader and its impulse to speak on behalf of a collective, it opts to testify not to the subjective vertigo of torture but rather to the objective vertigo of the state's dizzying rationales for torture as they emanate from both the space-time of national emergency and the time-space of the imperialist legacy that brought it into being—in this particular time, at this particular place, visited upon this particular person.

**III. Exigency and Empire**

Slahi reminds us that for the George W. Bush administration and its judicial, Congressional, military, and international allies, housing captives from the war on terror at Guantánamo Bay beginning in 2002 constituted a necessary practice in a moment of national emergency. Coded in the language and logics of securitization and cultural difference, "indefinite detention," "extraordinary rendition," and "enhanced interrogation," among other euphemized techniques, aim to assemble already identified ideological enemies who engaged in asymmetrical warfare and to glean from them actionable intelligence to thwart future breaches of public safety. This rationale posits the 9/11 attacks as an interruption of a normative history of legal warfare between recognized states and the distinction between civilians and combatants upheld by international humanitarian law. President Bush's memo of 7 February 2002 argues that "this new paradigm—ushered in not by us, but by terrorists—requires new thinking in the law of war." This statement implies a temporal split between the progressive history of modernity which finds its apotheosis in international humanitarian and human rights laws, even as it elides the history of empire and racism in the formation of those laws.

Although the administration's binary language of "us" and "terrorists" asserts ostensibly immutable, antagonistic identities, Lisa Stampnitzky's recent analysis, *Disciplining Terror: How Experts Invented "Terrorism,"* reminds readers of how the meaning of the term has developed from the 1970s to the present.[5] Whereas "terrorism" initially referred to political violence that was often ascribed to states, Stampnitzky notes that its current meaning has stabilized "around three core axes: politicization, rationality, and morality" (7). As states amassed disciplinary power, that power was legitimated in part through the redefinition of terrorism as an implicitly irrational and immoral form of political violence, one that challenged the state's monopoly on power (10). This redefinition, in turn, implicitly authorized political violence by the state in the name of securitization. Stampnitzky argues that the meaning of "terrorism" changed further after the September 11, 2001 attacks, when the term became rhetorically coded as immoral and irrational to the point of incomprehensibility as a result of what she describes as the "politics of *anti-knowledge*, an active refusal of explanation itself" (187; emphasis in original). This refusal by the US and its allies to see the attacks, horrific and abominable as they were, as anything other than irrational and incomprehensible silenced critical debate about the catalysts for the attacks as well as the kinds of responses they might engender by encapsulating two distinct temporal frames: whereas the "us" in dominant US political discourse emphasized how the present moment of emergency interrupted the steady progress of modernity, the "terrorists" were simultaneously cast out of history—without motive, reason, or claim to the future. As but one of myriad examples, an undated US government documented titled "The War on Terrorism at Home and Abroad" quotes Bush's speech to the American people on 9/11, in which he describes the motive for the 9/11 attacks as irrational and ahistorical, devoid of material or political rationale or aspiration: "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." Similarly, it claims a historically grounded yet paradoxically indeterminate timeline of response by locating the war on terror in relation to a predecessor with which "the American people" were only too familiar, the Cold War: "This broad-based and

sustained effort will continue until terrorism is rooted out. The situation is similar to the Cold War, when continuous pressure from many nations caused communism to collapse from within. We will press the fight as long as it takes. We will prevail" (Bush, "The War"). The rhetoric of US exceptionalism and securitization allows for a paradoxically indefinite temporality while insisting upon a linear narrative that must end in triumphant climax for the US, as did, the dominant narrative goes, the Cold War.

In the context of these paradoxical temporal frames, the (re)activation of the Guantánamo Bay naval base as a prison camp on the edge and as guardian of both empire and law exemplifies the combination of sovereign and biopolitical power used to reassert the global reach of the imperialist western nation-state. The prison's liminality is central to its mission of holding, disappearing, and disciplining those deemed terrorists prior to investigation, charges, or legal decisions. The torture memos, for instance, demonstrate the process. A. Naomi Paik describes it as "the savvy deployment of the law to produce new categories of subjects and flexible modes of governance" (156)—e.g., the US government's reduction of prisoners to anonymous, rightless captives and its disavowal of the Geneva Conventions' legal obligations. This reading of legal strategy has a temporal dimension in that it countermands the arguments of exigency and exceptionalism that mask the longstanding role the Guantánamo Bay naval base has played as a gatekeeper of US imperial interests and deny the political subjectivity of detainees.[6]

Although familiar images of the first Guantánamo detainees—wearing shackles, goggles, masks, earmuffs, and orange jumpsuits and housed in steel cages—seem to reinforce that narrative of immediacy and the temporary state of emergency, Slahi's conceptualization of his political status continually references longer histories of racialized, geopolitical exploitation. He forcefully condemns Mauritania for betraying its own legal sovereignty at the behest of the US by handing over one of its citizens without charge or trial. This betrayal of sovereignty operates as a chronotope on both macro-political and micro-individual scales, such that Slahi's narrative captures the operations of global politico-military hegemony through what Siems calls "an empire with a

scope and impact few of us who live inside it fully understand" (xlvii [2015]). Slahi is well aware of the extent to which his indeterminate status rests upon his position in the early twenty-first century as a citizen of Mauritania, which he critiques throughout his testimonial as a corrupt, poor, "third-world" (92 [2015]), postcolonial dictatorship that has reduced the power of law in direct proportion to the bloating of the power of the Chief Executive. These passages work in complicated ways. In his critique of Mauritania, Slahi reinforces dominant narratives of historical development that culminate in the modern nation-state and the rule of law; however, he also recounts his gradual recognition of the US' aberration from those norms (evident in the abusive treatment he experiences) as well as how the US' racialized, geopolitical exploitation of Mauritania has fueled its corruption.

In an example that presages his later renditions to Jordan, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo, Slahi recounts being held in Dakar, Senegal as he was traveling back home after years of living in Germany and Canada. Describing the interrogation room in Dakar, Slahi carefully documents the trappings of power and government (as opposed to law) he found there, which happens to also be the office of the Director of Security: "The room was large and well-furnished: leather couch, two love-seats, coffee table, closet, one big desk, one leather chair, a couple of other chairs for unimportant guests, and, as always, the picture of the president conveying the weakness of the law and the strength of the government" (92 [2015]). Significantly, at this point in his journey, Slahi still distinguishes between countries in the global landscape by using a taxonomy that tracks those that follow the rule of law and those that do not—a chronotope of the everyday neoimperialist world, to be sure. For him, "[i]f this cause is enough to hold you, you can seek professional representation; if not, well you shouldn't be arrested in the first place. That's how the civilized world works, and everything else is dictatorship. Dictatorship is governed by chaos" (94 [2015]). At this point, for Slahi, the mythical chronotope of American democracy that circulates in the global sphere still holds some currency, however dubious, and therefore, some cause for hope. He writes: "I wished they had turned me over to the US: at least there are things I could refer to there, such as the law"

(92 [2015]). This hope is tempered by the reality of global geopolitics in the moment of the war on terror, as Slahi is quick to add: "Of course, in the US the government and politics are gaining more and more ground lately at the cost of the law" (92 [2015]).

Notwithstanding his acknowledgment of the US' increasing mobilization of governmental power rather than law, Slahi's reliance on the idea of the US as a democracy grounded in the rule of law can be enhanced with readings of the slippage between governmentality and law enacted upon subjects like him not as an aberration from the myth of progress associated with US democracy but rather as a constitutive norm. For Wilderson, whose notion of "objective vertigo" captures structural as opposed to performative or spectacular violence, "Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence" (3). Taking as a given—rather than a deviation or emergency—the denial of human status to Black and brown people by dominant western culture, Wilderson explains that those recognized as human within the law are subject to "contingent violence, violence that kicks in when s/he resists (or is perceived to resist) . . . disciplinary discourse. . . . But Black peoples' subsumption by violence is a paradigmatic necessity, not just a performative contingency" (3–4). What Slahi fails to note in his narrative is the more general point about the law's racial biases advanced by Wilderson and others: given Slahi's racialized identity (Arab/Muslim/African/Mauritanian), the chronotopes of law and democracy to which he appeals were never designed to recognize him as a person before the law but rather to "manufacture terrorists through the protocols of detention" (Feldman 36).

Slahi's narrative does, however, map his shifting perceptions, understandings, and experiences of the US as the keeper of the rule of law and human rights and invites his readers to accompany him through the slow destruction of those myths of democracy and due process, or of the US as author and guardian of human rights. Describing his rendition from Senegal to Mauritania at the behest of the Americans, he exclaims:

> It was the first time that I shortcut the civilian formalities while leaving one country to another. It was a treat, but I didn't enjoy

> it. Everybody seemed to be prepared in the airport. In front of the group the interrogator and the white guy kept flashing their magic badges, taking everybody with them. You could clearly tell that the country had no sovereignty: this was still colonization in its ugliest face. In the so-called free world, the politicians preach things such as sponsoring democracy, freedom, peace, and human rights: What hypocrisy! Still, many people believe this propaganda garbage. (85 [2015])

Slahi identifies all at once the failures of the postcolonial state (by which he means that the fundamental lack of sovereignty of so-called independent states in the post-independence global landscape essentially renders Mauritania a perpetually colonized space) and the failures, hypocrisies, and abuses of the putatively democratic super-power USA. The phrase "magic badges" used repeatedly by Slahi to refer to the identification cards flashed by agents of US power—before which officials up to and including the Mauritanian president shrink and capitulate—signifies the unjust but quotidian operations of geopolitical power, of neocolonialism, linked directly to the injustice of the "exceptional" war on terror. In a recent interview with Michael Bronner, Deddahi Ould Abdallahi, the former head of State Security in Mauritania who acquiesced to US demands to arrest Slahi so that he could be sent to Jordan (and beyond) for violent interrogation, takes that acquiescence for granted. After confirming that he found Slahi innocent of any crime, Abdallahi notes that "it was difficult if not impossible not to deliver him to the US, taking into consideration the agreements between our two countries" (Abdallahi). To the question as to whether, given Slahi's innocence, torture, and subsequent release, mistakes were made, Abdallahi responds: "No. There were no mistakes" (Abdallahi).

In Slahi's testimonial, the chronotope of postcolonial Mauritania is manifest in the economic and social life of average citizens; significantly, even the perception of global inequity is conditioned by the distribution of global power and privilege. On his rendition flight from Senegal to Mauritania, Slahi notes that the officials rendering him appreciate the view of beautiful beaches as they approach the airport, just like the

tourists in Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, oblivious to the precarity of the inhabitants below: "My company seemed to have a good time checking the weather and enjoying the beach we had been flying along the whole time" (87 [2015]). Slahi, on the other hand, records a different view: "Through the window I started to see the sand-covered small villages around Nouakchott, as bleak as their prospects. . . . The suburbs of Nouakchott appeared more miserable than ever, crowded, poor, dirty, and free of any of life's crucial infrastructures" (87 [2015]). The quotidian precarity of the so-called third world is both cause and condition for Slahi's transfer to Guantánamo, a point that he drives home in a direct address to the reader describing his second kidnapping and the renditions that followed:

> You should know, Dear Reader, that a country turning over its own citizens is not an easy deal. . . . Kidnapping me from my house in my country and giving me to the US, breaking the constitution of Mauritania and the customary International Laws and treaties, that is not OK. Mauritania should have asked the US to provide evidence that incriminates me, which they couldn't, because they had none. But even if the US did so, Mauritania should try me according to the criminal code in Mauritania, exactly as Germany does with its citizens who are suspected of being involved in 9/11. On the other hand, if the US says "we have no evidence," then the Mauritanian response should be something like, "Fu*k you!" . . . Don't get me wrong, though: I don't blame the US as much as I do my own government. (126 [2015])

As if to demonstrate the extraordinary power of the neoimperialist chronotope, Slahi identifies the site of greatest harm as the broken postcolonial state, whose failure is structurally linked to the hegemonic perpetrator state—though by no means does he excuse the US. On the contrary, descriptions of US torture chambers and interrogation spaces as open secrets made possible by the workings of global empire pervade Slahi's narrative, as when he describes his ride to the "secret, well-known

jail" (127 [2015]) in Mauritania, or his passage through the "secret gate" (139 [2015]) at the airport when he is rendered to Jordan for interrogation and torture at the behest of his American captors.

Significantly, Slahi's reference to secret gates and jails introduces another chronotope that recalls the dynamics of the points of no return—those fortresses, harbors, and docks through which enslaved African people were funneled into the transatlantic slave trade—that stain the west African coast: "The Mercedes was heading soundlessly to the airport. . . . At the secret gate, the Airport police chief was waiting on us as planned. I hated that dark gate! How many innocent souls have been led through that secret gate? I had been through it once, when the US government brought me from Dakar and delivered me to my government twenty months earlier" (Slahi 139 [2015]). And indeed, Slahi himself makes the comparison. He tells American interrogators in Guantánamo, "You know that I know that you know that I have done nothing. . . . 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" (212 [2015]). Later he elaborates: "I often compared myself with a slave. Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I. Slaves were sold a couple of times on their way to their final destination, and so was I. Slaves suddenly were assigned to somebody they didn't choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that slaves sometimes ended up an integral part of the master's house" (314). Indeed, the real and invented categories of enemy combatants, enemy noncombatants, detainees, Islamists, and—finally and most irrevocably—terrorists held in Guantánamo Bay bear the same "rebirth into a new subjectivity in which subjectification equals objectification" described by Christina Sharpe (building on the work of Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and others) as the foundational process of making and unmaking that is slavery (Sharpe 6). This is indeed the nexus of Wilderson's objective vertigo, "the sensation that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment [but] that one's environment is perpetually unhinged" (3).

To be sure, the history of slavery in relation to Slahi's subjectivity as a North African man captured, kidnapped, and held in the

twenty-first-century "New World" is complicated by the history of slavery specific to Mauritania, which was not part of the transatlantic trade per se but rather manifested one of the world's most intractable forms of bondage. Slavery in Mauritania is based on lineage and color, separating people of Arab and Berber descent from Black African peoples born into a chattel slavery; it was only abolished in 1992 (and continues outside the law, as it were).[7] And yet, as an uncharged, untried prisoner of the US, Slahi's choice to situate his captivity within the chronotope of African slavery in the Americas, the trope examined by Goyal and McHeimech, respectively, renders a crucial geopolitical statement of ongoing imperialist domination, driven home by his frequent description of himself as a commodity, a "package" (135 [2015]) delivered to various locales within the twenty-first-century US empire. Such passages shift the narrative frame from the clash of civilizations culminating on 9/11 in a state of emergency/exception to the long US history of legalized, imperializing, racial exploitation notwithstanding its cover narrative of freedom and equality.

This longer chronotope illuminates entanglements of time (emergency, empire, entrapment) that feed the momentum of the war on terror in domestic spaces, prison cells, rendition airplanes, and literary production. "Indefinite detention" and endless war are self-perpetuating because they have the capacity to produce the unfreedoms upon which they depend. Moustafa Bayoumi's reading of Slahi's story is instructive:

> Mohamedou Slahi does not produce commodities such as cotton in his degraded position at GTMO. Mohamedou Slahi *is* the commodity, forged and stamped by the War on Terror itself. His commodity form is of the inmate who is being interrogated, and it is almost endlessly reproducible, since he tells the same story to different interrogators for years on end. Each time he is forced to tell his story, no meaningful intelligence value is gained but surplus value is extracted from the War on Terror industrial complex. The infrastructure of the War on Terror produces Mohamedou Slahi, the commodity (not the man), every time it interrogates him, feeds him, observes him,

> or beats him. . . . And this transformation into a thing to be endlessly interrogated for years on end is what sustains GTMO and what drives Slahi nearly mad. (9; emphasis in original)

As Bayoumi so powerfully notes, the denial of legal rights and due process, the news and photo blackouts from the base, the initial failure to provide even the names of Guantánamo captives, the ban on releasing the full Senate Select Intelligence Committee Report on the CIA torture program, the destruction of video tapes that document violent interrogation at other CIA black sites, and the redactions that continue to mark Slahi's narrative all participate in what Bayoumi terms "the magical substitution of a national-security commodity for a man" (9). Such racialized commodification of persons, as we take pains to show, has evolved through the space-time of empire to that of emergency, fully intact. The same mechanisms of obscuring unjust systems and their impacts also remain in government rhetoric designed to other the object of discourse beyond recognition by citizens and onlookers.

**IV. Conclusion**

Slahi's individual testimony offers a human perspective on Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope as the mechanism that "makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins" (84), an idea confirmed in Paul Ricoeur's thesis: "[T]ime becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence" (52). Through its emplotment of one man's journey through a violent, international securitization network, Slahi's narrative also renders legible chronotopes that contradict the logic of national emergency tied to a single human lifespan: first, through the emphasis on the *longue durée* of American imperialism, including its leading role in the transatlantic slave trade, even as the book assumes a place in that history; and second, by dismantling the logic that sustains the ticking bomb scenario that takes place in the torture chamber. The book—as material object and artifact of the once-called, still-proceeding war on

terror, and as complex narration—puts pressure on the human lifespan to which the label "first-person testimonial" belongs. *Guantánamo Diary* destabilizes the temporal framing of national emergency, the proverbial ticking bomb, as well as the individual and/or legal progress which might conventionally frame the story, ground its meaning, and lead to its conclusion. In doing so, it exposes the hollow rationales that inform the conditions of its making and demonstrates the nexus of sovereign and biopolitical power that characterizes how the "securocratic state" (Feldman 40), in Alan Feldman's words, continually generates fuel for its own actions. Feldman notes that "[t]he manufacture of culpability and objective guilt at Guantánamo is immaterial insofar as it does not produce objects or tangible end products, but rather actions as ends in themselves" (36). Although Feldman refers to the disciplinary infraction system through which detainees are either further harmed or afforded necessities such as toilet paper or soap deemed "comfort items," his characterization applies equally to the self-reinforcing logic and proceduralisms upon which the camp is founded. Slahi is inscribed into this logic through the workings of purposeful projection and misrecognition, central to every one of the chronotopes he references: slavery, empire, and national emergency.

This brings us to the question of how we read the multiple temporalities of *Guantánamo Diary*, both when interpreting the text as literature and as a material artefact. In the first published text, Siems retains the redactions whose black bars regularly and often extensively interrupt Slahi's narrative, either wittingly or unwittingly telling their own story of the state's fears and priorities in the process. In the restored edition, author and editor print the redactions in greyscale and superimpose Slahi's reconstituted texts on top. The result is a complexly authored, layered account comprised of Slahi's story, the government's redactions, the editor's decisions and footnotes, and, lastly, Slahi's renarration. Together, these elements lay bare the ideological foundations that sustain(ed) Slahi's violent captivity. They also add another layered temporality to an already nonlinear narrative—one that begins with the second kidnapping which eventually results in his extended captivity

at Guantánamo, circles back to the first detention in Dakar and his two-and-a-half years back home in Mauritania, and concludes with the escalation of torture authorized by Rumsfeld and the compounded, quotidian violence that follows. This nonlinear structure is complicated for the reader by the uncanny experience of reading about events that have passed yet persist beyond the limits of the book and into the reading present. Although Slahi may have at last gained his release, he has yet to travel freely, and other captives who have recently undergone Periodic Review Board hearings continue to be held as "forever prisoners"—held in Indefinite Law-of-War Detention and Not Recommended for Transfer ("The Guantánamo Docket").

One of the ways that material grounding resurfaces in the text, however, is through the black bars of the military censors that seem designed less to protect the nation from an imminent threat than to reflect what Paik calls "the ambiguous temporality of the war" (217). Many of the redactions are internally inconsistent (not to mention illogical), suggesting different censors reading different chapters and/or changing standards for permissible information. Moreover, the redactions also highlight information available in the public sphere and, thanks to the text's extensive footnotes, made available to the reader. Thus, the redactions make visible a temporal disjunction—what is being denied has already been given—that echoes the absurdity found in other textual evidence from Guantánamo, such as the transcripts from the Combatant Status Review Tribunals established by the US Department of Defense in 2004 to determine whether or not detainees were enemy combatants. The 2017 restored edition renders the redactions translucent, allowing readers to discover much of the story Slahi wants to tell (although trauma and memory make complete restoration impossible) and the story the censors want to hide, as well as glimpse the ongoing tension between recovery and unfreedom. As Slahi writes in the new introduction to the book, "[r]epairing this broken text has been about seeing things that someone wanted hidden. Sometimes that someone was me" (li [2017]). This sentiment reminds readers that the process of turning a national-security commodity back into a man

cannot be limited to a single text but requires the continual negotiation and representation of the chronotopes that frame a life in the war on terror.

## Notes

1 See, for instance, Caruth, LaCapra, Holland, and Kleinberg for approaches to history as traumatic.

2 The North Carolina Commission of Inquiry on Torture (NCCIT), a nonpartisan and citizen-led transparency and accountability group, built on the work of a local activist group, NC Stop Torture Now, has been investigating and protesting the role of North Carolina-based Aero Contractors in the CIA program. Aero Contractors, operating two aircraft out of facilities in Smithfield and Kinston, NC, is known to have transported at least forty-nine of the 119 CIA prisoners identified in the Senate Select Intelligence Committee's torture report, including Slahi, who were kidnapped during the war on terror and brought either to CIA-run black sites or third party states for torture and interrogation. Because Aero Contractors used state infrastructure for its operations, NCCIT Commissioners consider the state liable for violations of international and domestic laws against conspiracy, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, and torture. See also North Carolina Commission of Inquiry on Torture.

3 This form of softer state power and surveillance experienced by former Guantánamo detainees who will never be free from state control, no matter where they are returned or repatriated after release, mirrors new experiences of state control in the use of house arrest monitored by GPS tracking and other devices in the US carceral system. See the concluding scenes of Duvernay's *13TH* for a discussion of such developments in the context of mass incarceration. See also Young and Petersilia as well as Miller and Alexander.

4 Whereas the UN Convention against Torture, and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984) defines torture as "severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental," in his memo of 1 August 2002 (one of the infamous torture memos), Assistant Attorney General Jay S. Bybee raised the threshold—since rescinded but in place during Slahi's torture program—to be intense physical pain, such as that experienced in organ failure or death, and mental injury of long duration. Both standards make prosecuting torture nearly impossible.

5 We are grateful to Joseph R. Slaughter for drawing our attention to Stampnitzky's argument in his talk "Hijacking Human Rights: Neoliberalism, the New Historiography, and the End of the Third World," Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, 31 January 2018. See also his essay of the same title in *Human Rights Quarterly*.

6 See, for instance, Kaplan, Lipman, and various essays in Walicek and Adams for more on the geopolitical and historical contexts of Guantánamo.

7 See Bales and Kousmate, respectively, for more on contemporary slavery worldwide and in Mauritania in particular.

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