

COMMENTARY

Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* and Prison Writing from Africa

Daniel Roux 

If the unvarnished power of the state has a face, then it is the prison. When the mask of cultural hegemony slips, we encounter the walls of the penal institution, its barbed wire, and its blankly functional architecture, mute and unseeing. A prison is one of the most concentrated modalities of state power. By definition, a prison is a zone of exclusion; it defines the normal, everyday civic sphere by defining a site of exception. A prison has its own distinctive logic and temporality, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's words, "dull, mundane, monotonous, tortuous in its intended animal rhythm of eating, defecating, sleeping, eating, defecating, sleeping" (1981:116). It is a world of boredom, isolation, and fear. Nonetheless, because of its close proximity to state power, the prison also offers a sharp-edged reflection of the operation of power in a society. As Michael Hardt observes, "Those who are free, outside of prison looking in, might imagine their own freedom defined and reinforced in opposition to prison time. When you get close to prison, however, you realize that it is not really a site of exclusion, separate from society, but rather a focal point, the site of the highest concentration of a logic of power that is generally diffused throughout the world" (1997:66). Or as Robben Island prisoner Michael Dingake remarked in his 1987 autobiography, "Prison is the heart of oppression in any oppressive society" (1987:228).

In repressive regimes, the prison accordingly emerges as a site where state power is both clearly visible in its most coercive dimension and also where the precepts and strategies of opposition are formulated. Indeed, one of the fundamental strategies is to make visible the invisible space of the

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prison, to disclose the logic of power that animates the state and its institutions. In the history of African prison writing, the voices that have emerged from prison, such as Nelson Mandela, Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, Nawal El Saadawi, Ruth First, and Dennis Brutus—random names picked from the vast chorus of voices from all over the continent—formulated the blueprint for a free society and a new sense of citizenship, communality, and belonging. Indeed, the prison became a laboratory for a politics of emancipation and a new national identity in Africa, from the colonial to the post-colonial period.

Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* can in certain ways be read as an exemplary twentieth-century African prison memoir. First of all, he treats the prison as a contained reflection of the world outside:

I was in a different and smaller arena, an arena for whom the only audience was ourselves and our oppressors. We regarded the struggle in prison as a microcosm of the struggle as a whole. We would fight inside as we had fought outside. The racism and repression were the same; I would simply have to fight on different terms. (1996:464)

The “I” that opens the paragraph immediately becomes a “we”; if this is Nelson Mandela's story, it is also the story of a people. If the work of the Benthamite panopticon is to isolate and individualize (an enlightenment ideal in any case almost impossible to realize in the overcrowded prisons all over Africa), the work of the prisoner is to resist that “I,” to turn the prison into a space of community and solidarity. In Mandela's case, the community that he invokes eventually extends to even the prison warders, preparing the way for a process of forgiveness and reconciliation that would eventually become the foundation of post-apartheid citizenship in South Africa. The meager resources of prison, its limited range of actors, its predictable routines, its brief moments of respite, act as building blocks for imagining a form of freedom that is ultimately collective, with the nation at its core. This freedom arises through resistance and antagonism but is also always mediated by the material reality of prison itself, that is, the specter of the prison follows the dream of liberation like its shadow. Under such conditions, there is something synecdochical about imprisonment. The prisoner is a stand-in for a class of people. In Ngūgī's perspicacious formulation, political detention “is not only a punitive act of physical and mental torture of a few patriotic individuals, but is also a calculated act of psychological terror against the struggling millions” (14). The tradition of African prison writing is animated precisely by such an understanding of the prison as a theater of struggle for the reinvention and liberation of a nation.

Mohamedou Ould Slahi's remarkable *Guantánamo Diary*, a compelling account of his detention in the U.S. Guantánamo Bay military prison located in Cuba, reiterates many of the dominant themes of African prison writing while also marking a notable departure from some of this genre's more general preoccupations and stylistic characteristics. In certain respects, it

marks a distinctive break from the twentieth-century African prison memoir and its nationalist orientation, testifying to a new deterritorialized global reality. In other ways, it belongs to a venerable parallel history and expression of African identity rooted in the experience of slavery and forced expatriation. In Ould Slahi's memoir, we find an arresting convergence of two traditions that speak to the current order of power in the world. While the book is a powerful work of personal testimony, a scathing indictment of Western imperialism, and a great work of literature, it is also a significant, even crucial, addition to the corpus of African prison writing.

In many respects, it reiterates many of the established practices and features of writing by political detainees. The material reality of the prison itself invokes the exigent need for human company, a basic desire that inevitably accrues a political dimension. "Our individuality," Ould Slahi remarks, "didn't matter as much as the fact that we were poor and from countries that lacked the political will to stand up for us and demand our release" (2017:560). Insofar as Ould Slahi's story is also a collective one, it is the story of people who are effaced by the West, the mass of people, mostly Muslim, who blend into a faceless collective from the vantage point of the wielders of power. His demand for personal recognition—"What those people are saying about me is not correct, it is wrong, and here I am" (658)—is, in the context of this memoir, a universal demand for the recognition of a basic shared humanity. This insistence on self-identification is coupled with the explicit aim of revealing the abuses of human rights occurring at Guantánamo Bay. These abuses, in turn, are understood as the hidden kernel of the pervasive language of democracy and human rights in the West, the concealed zone of exception that provides the basis for neoliberal concepts of freedom:

In the so-called free world, the politicians preach things such as sponsoring democracy, freedom, peace, and human right: What hypocrisy! Still, many people believe this propaganda garbage. (Ould Slahi 2017:568)

However, if we turn to seminal works of African prison writing, it becomes clear that Ould Slahi is in fact engaged in a different kind of project. This is expressed first of all in the writing itself, the rich characterization, the remarkable, almost Proustian inclusion of even the most peripheral details, and especially the sustained attempt to inhabit the point of view of the guards and interrogators to give life to their theory of mind. None of this is, of course, entirely unique in prison writing, but what sets Ould Slahi's memoir apart is that this is the primary energy driving the narrative and providing it with its dramatic power. The conventional register for African prison writing involves *bildung*—a narrative of personal growth and development that finally achieves a social dimension. While *Guantánamo Diary* is punctuated by moments of insight and growth, it leaps around in time, eschewing a straight-forward chronology and avoiding the teleological impulse that animates writing such as Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. For Ould Slahi to

fully reveal himself involves a reciprocal revealing of his imprisoners. Early on in the memoir, Ould Slahi makes a powerful observation:

One of the aspects of Guantánamo that I found most disrespectful and insolent to us as human beings was the way they came to see us as nameless, sometimes even faceless, and said “I’m here to interrogate you and ask you questions and you don’t know who I am, I can do anything to you without your being able to identify me.” They were so busy hiding themselves they couldn’t see the most basic things about the men they were questioning. (2017:564)

In other words, in an almost Levinasian sense, this revelation involves first of all unmasking the other, and encountering the face behind the disguise. This can be read as a central ambition of the memoir—one that is echoed, interestingly enough, in the fact that the book was published first of all in a heavily censored form, with almost all identifying details blacked out, and finally in unredacted form in 2017. The publishing trajectory of the memoir mirrors the drama of concealment and unmasking that is so central to Ould Slahi’s narrative.

Speaking about a very different context, the scholar Sarah Nuttall remarks about intimacy:

Intimate life, or intimacy, is never only about selfhood, self-exploration, or self-scrutiny. It always involves another—someone who, having been brought into the sphere of trust, can be talked to and is disposed to listening. It is always a matter of disposition and reciprocity. At the same time, until recently, the sphere of the intimate only existed in relation to that which had to be guarded against, or concealed from the public. (2017:18)

If the domestic space has traditionally been private and concealed from public scrutiny, Ould Slahi manages to transform the forced intimacy of the prison, its sinister concealment from the public world, into the foundations of what we can call a *home*—a space where, in the most barren soil imaginable, intimacy can be nurtured and grown. The reciprocity that allows for intimacy is quite different from the reciprocity and identification that generates the collective identity and solidarity characteristic of earlier African prison memoirs. One can refer to it as a politics of intimacy, one tailored to a world where liberation struggles are increasingly becoming detached from the idea of the nation.

In his *Critique of Black Reason*, the critic Achille Mbembe remarks that “the transnationalization of the Black condition was a constitutive moment for modernity, with the Atlantic serving as its incubator” (2007:15). In this sense, at least since the fifteenth century, African identity has been marked by forced displacement, diasporic movements, and homelessness. In one striking passage, Ould Slahi compares his predicament to that of the slave:

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. (2017:5355)

Indeed, the logic of slavery mapped seamlessly onto the current world order, characterized by the increasing deterioration of national politics into a more global politics of risk, where the transnational surveillance of unruly bodies becomes a transnational endeavor facilitated by zones of enclosure like refugee camps and prisons, such as Guantánamo. Mbembe provides a powerful and apt description of the ways in which the neoliberal world order is assembled from improvised aspects of the age of slavery:

Culture, predation, extraction and asymmetrical warfare converge with the rebalkanization of the world and intensifying practices of zoning, all of which point to a new collusion between the economic and the biological. Such collusion translates in concrete terms into the militarization of borders, the fragmenting and partitioning of territories, and the creation of more or less autonomous spaces within the borders of existing states. In some cases such spaces are subtracted from all forms of national sovereignty, operating instead under the informal laws of a multitude of fragmented authorities and private armed forces. (2017:3)

This, then, is the world into which Ould Slahi disappeared. As a Muslim, as an African, his imprisonment is essentially biopolitical. He belongs to what Zygmunt Bauman refers to as a "surplus population" (2004:38), in particular, a transnational, itinerant group of individuals who are flagged as a security risk, irrespective of their personal biographies or motivations. Back in 1987, when Barbara Harlow discussed the memoirs of political detainees, she could claim that their accounts of imprisonment were "conditioned by the ideal of that larger collective struggle in which they wrote" (38). This is certainly true of the well-known African prison memoirs of the twentieth century. But it fails to describe Ould Slahi's predicament or his project in the post-September 11 world.

Ould Slahi's collective is a much more amorphous, complex entity. His "collective struggle," if it exists at all, arises from the global conditions of late capitalism, and refers, essentially, to the misidentified, misunderstood, and misrecognized. His Mauritanian nationality renders him vulnerable, but his struggle is not exclusively for Mauritanian independence from foreign interference. Rather, it is an insistence on *visibility* in a system that renders him invisible. Indeed, it is an appeal to universal visibility, not grounded on an appeal to a determinate political agenda, a sense of solidarity, a shared history, and a specific cultural or national identity, or even a particular place. Instead, it is an appeal to intimacy. Intimacy can be distinguished from commonality.

To provide an example, during his incarceration, Ould Slahi forms a close friendship with one of his interrogators, a military intelligence non-commissioned officer who calls herself Amy. At one point, Amy hides the fact

that she is going on a holiday with her boyfriend from Ould Slahi. He confronts her about her deception, and she defends her decision by saying, “I figured we had a close relationship, and I thought it would hurt you if you knew I went on vacation with my doctor boyfriend and was enjoying Montreal while you’re stuck in here” (2017:6120). Picking up on the ambivalence of the phrase “close relationship,” Ould Slahi responds, “Do you think I’m looking forward to a relationship with you? I’m not! For Pete’s sake, you are a Christian woman who is engaged in a war against my religion and my people!” (2017:6120). In other words, Ould Slahi underscores their irreconcilable differences, reminds her that she is, in fact, his enemy, and that they share little common ground. In this context, Ould Slahi both challenges and reconfigures what is referred to, almost by rote, as collectivity. Intimacy does not really make a claim on commonality. For Ould Slahi, intimacy is a condition for selfhood, and the retention of selfhood—of subjectivity—is not only necessary for survival, but a primal political act. Intimacy involves the full recognition of the other, without demanding a shared world.

Ould Slahi’s memoir ultimately offers a scathing indictment of Western imperialism and racism, providing an unforgettable exposé of the brutality and illegitimacy of Guantánamo. It also offers a frightening picture of the web of international cooperation at the highest level that sustains this prison. His predicament stems from a long history of African displacement but is also uniquely contemporary. Ultimately, he does not offer an ideal, or a political programme, but rather an appeal for the recognition of his full humanity and complexity, based on the conditions of intimacy that the contemporary world order incessantly erases in order to reproduce itself, but that are paradoxically present in the world of the prison. In this sense, *Guantánamo Diary* marks a complex and deeply moving epistemological shift in African prison writing.

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