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FINDING HUMANITY AFTER DEHUMANIZATION:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF MEMOIR IN NARRATING THE HUMAN RIGHTS
VIOLATIONS AT GUANTÁNAMO BAY

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of memoir within the larger dialogue concerning the human rights violations committed at Guantánamo Bay. Memoirs have always held an important place within human rights narratives, and the personal histories written by former Guantánamo detainees contribute an essential individual component to conversations about the injustices of the facility. Although several other detainees have come forward with memoirs, this thesis specifically evaluates *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* by Moazzam Begg and *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantánamo* by Murat Kurnaz. Both men were detained without charge and released, albeit after enduring years of abuse, isolation, and poor living conditions.

Despite the emphasis on the unique ability of memoir to connect the audience with the perspective of the work's subject, this thesis does not argue for memoir as the most effective form of human rights narrative. Instead, the memoir should be viewed as one part of a larger conversation. Memoir accomplishes much that other forms of narrative cannot, but the genre also has many of its own limitations. Evaluating memoir alongside other contributions to the dialogue of human rights advocacy enables participants to gain a fuller understanding of abuses. Given the indefinite status of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility as of 2012, memoirs and other works of human rights narrative must continue to be read and understood for successful advocacy.

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Introduction

Guantánamo Bay received its first 20 prisoners on January 11, 2002. One of the results of the War on Terror started after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the detention facility remains open and operational today. At its highest capacity, the facility housed a total of 779 prisoners.¹ The detention of these prisoners operates beyond the United States legal system; located in ambiguous legal territory, the lack of international legal jurisdiction allowed for detention at the will of the executive administration. These detainees were categorized as illegal enemy combatants, a new designation previously unrecognized by the international legal system. Throughout the facility's short history, many allegations of human rights violations have been brought to light. The legal ambiguity of the detention center allowed for inhuman treatment of the prisoners, as the lack of inmate legal status protected the facilitators of human rights violations. These violations of human rights were justified by political rhetoric and the concept of national security.

Despite the efforts of human rights advocacy groups, Guantánamo remains open today. An evaluation of the federal government's legal maneuvering is necessary to understand how purposefully the inmates of Guantánamo were incarcerated and inhumanely treated. Beyond the legal and moral conflict surrounding the facility, however, an additional level of analysis must be performed. The detainees at Guantánamo Bay were often essentially anonymous to members of the American public. While some information about the detainees is accessible to the general public, most detainees have been unable to represent themselves due to their detention, fear of persecution, or other obstacles. Media and political representations of the detainees range from condemnatory to sympathetic, yet the detainees themselves are often given little individuality and agency. As some prisoners have been released from the facility, several former detainees

have published memoirs of their experiences and incarceration. These memoirs contribute to the larger dialogue opposing the extralegal and inhumane actions of the United States government, as well as the body of work concerning human rights violations. The examination of the memoirs written by detainees provides great insight into their experiences at the detention facility, while also providing firsthand accounts of the systematic regime of dehumanization. These memoirs provide a perspective that is lost in the Senate committee hearings and media coverage of the detainees, allowing readers to consume the individual's perspective and experience apart from the often politically-mediated media coverage.

The memoirs of Guantánamo Bay detainees represent an attempt to regain the agency stripped by the actions of the administration. The commitment of their experiences to written memoir enables detainees to overcome the dehumanization perpetuated by the staff at Guantánamo Bay. Memoirs are not the sole genre utilized by survivors of Guantánamo Bay and critics of the detention facility – other media include books of poetry like *Poems from Guantánamo* and documentaries such as *The Road to Guantánamo*. This thesis will not evaluate the parts that other forms of human rights narrative play in the greater dialogue concerning Guantánamo. Instead, this thesis attempts to examine the role of memoir and its unique contribution to advocating on behalf of the Guantánamo detainees and the restoration of agency and identity to the often anonymous survivors. The detainees of Guantánamo are separated from their target audience by cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and language barriers; many stereotypes and misconceptions of Muslims and Middle Eastern peoples distance Western audiences from the detainees. By providing a highly intimate perspective into the personal histories of their authors, memoirs can work to break down these stereotypes.

In light of the National Defense Authorization Act signed into law on January 31, 2011², it is more important than ever to understand what happened and continues to happen at Guantánamo Bay; among many other provisions, the act indefinitely extends the detention of prisoners at the facility. In addition to examining the institutional rhetoric surrounding the establishment and continual operation of the facility, the human aspect of the story must also be evaluated. There exists a plethora of information regarding the detainees at Guantánamo; the *New York Times* maintains a roster of currently and formerly held detainees.³ Former prisoners have taken to the media to speak about their time in the facility. Many advocacy groups have compiled reports of the abuses committed at the detention center. Memoirs are one part of a much larger conversation, but they are an important one.

This thesis evaluates the merits of the form of memoir. Since the administration began releasing prisoners, many have come forward and committed their experiences to the written word. Two of these prisoners, Moazzam Begg and Murat Kurnaz, wrote the memoirs *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar* and *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantánamo*, respectively. These two writers use their personal stories to expose the realities of prisoner incarceration at Guantánamo Bay, but also to give the reader a personal connection to the ordeals of the inmates.

Moazzam Begg, the author of *Enemy Combatant*, was seized from his home on suspicion of an association with al Qaeda. After spending time at Bagram and Kandahar, he was held at Guantánamo without charge until 2005. Murat Kurnaz, the author of *Five Years of My Life*, spent five years at Guantánamo without charge. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany personally contributed to securing Kurnaz's release. Both former detainees experienced abusive interrogation methods, degradation, and inhumane living conditions. After their release from

Guantánamo, Begg and Kurnaz became active advocates; Begg spoke against the London subway attacks, and Kurnaz testified at several committee hearings about the abuses he suffered while in American custody.

These memoirs are two small contributions to the growing body of work produced by Guantánamo Bay detainees. To evaluate these memoirs is not to present them as representative works of the communal experience; rather, an examination of these works is useful for understanding the role memoir plays within the dialogue of human rights advocacy and narrative. Comprehensive reports detailing the human rights violations at Guantánamo cannot provide much insight on the individual experiences of detainees, and these memoirs lack the breadth and scope of institutional criticisms. Each aspect of the dialogue concerning Guantánamo Bay occupies a unique place within the narrative. This thesis will examine how the memoirs by Moazzam Begg and Murat Kurnaz participate in the greater conversation about Guantánamo Bay, and define the unique role of memoir in human rights narrative.

The Detention of Prisoners at Guantánamo Bay

The opening of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility was the first of many legally questionable, and even extralegal, actions on the part of the federal government. Guantánamo Bay was specifically chosen for its strategic location and legal status. In *The Guantánamo Files*, Andy Worthington says, “A territorial anomaly, leased from Cuba since 1903, Guantánamo was specifically chosen as a prison for those captured in the “War on Terror,” because it was presumed to be beyond the reach of American courts.”⁴ The isolation from the United States legal system allowed the administrators of the facility to withhold basic rights from the inmates such as the right to habeas corpus and a fair trial. Karen Greenberg writes, “In essence, this anomalous patch of territory was a no-man’s land for justice.”⁵

The period after the September 11th attacks is defined by inflammatory rhetoric on the War on Terror and national defense. This rhetoric extended to the detention of the Guantánamo prisoners; the government justified its detention procedures by classifying the detainees as illegal and enemy combatants. These terms are unrecognized by international legal bodies. Worthington writes that “Rumsfeld stated, unequivocally, ‘They will be handled not as prisoners of war, because they’re not, but as unlawful combatants. Technically, unlawful combatants do not have any rights under the Geneva Conventions.’”⁶ In writing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Donald Rumsfeld said that “The United States has determined that Al Qaeda and Taliban individuals...are not entitled to prisoner of war status” and that they were to be treated “in a manner consistent with the principles of the Geneva Conventions of 1949...only to the extent appropriate and consistent with military necessity.”⁷ The administration actively attempted to minimize the influence of the Geneva Conventions, and the classification of the detainees as

illegal enemy combatants allowed the administration to justify their actions through the lack of legal influence and precedent.

Not only did the new classification of “illegal enemy combatant” prevent the recognition of the detainees by international legal systems, this new category also contributed to the dehumanization of Guantánamo Bay inmates. Worthington writes that “On a visit to Guantánamo on January 27, [Rumsfeld] claimed that the prisoners were among ‘the most dangerous, best-trained, viscous killers on the face of the earth.’”⁸ Any examination of the circumstances of many detainees shows that Rumsfeld’s statement is at best hyperbolic, and at worst a complete lie. However, demonizing the detainees was necessary for the administration to justify its actions. Worthington says,

“By the time Guantánamo was set up two months later, however, the definition of an “enemy combatant” had mutated beyond recognition, as the administration, pursuing the skewed logic that had prevailed from the start of “Operation Enduring Freedom,” decided to ignore any distinctions between Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners, and to regard everyone who came into their custody as an “enemy combatant.”⁹

By creating an entirely new and internationally invalid designation, the administration successfully succeeds in casting the detainees as a group of “others.” Even terms like “prisoners of war” elicit sympathy, but the term “enemy combatant” and its iterations automatically create an opposition between the general public and the detainees.

The legal ambiguity of Guantánamo Bay led to the rampant torture, forceful interrogation methods, and inhumane living conditions at the facility. Worthington writes, “Not only was Guantánamo now the most oppressive of prison environments, but those who refused to

cooperate-or were unable to cooperate, because they had no information-were subjected to horrendous abuse.”¹⁰ Human rights groups like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Center for Constitutional Rights have asserted that the federal government has violated the Geneva Conventions and denied the Guantánamo detainees any legal status.

Even governmental organizations have compiled evidence against the methods used at Guantánamo Bay. An inquiry by the Federal Bureau of Investigation conducted in 2004 found that “nine employees...observed such treatment” which was described as being

“aggressive mistreatment, interrogations or interview techniques of GTMO detainees by representatives of any law enforcement, military or Bureau personnel which were not consistent with Bureau guidelines.”¹¹

Throughout the report, the nine employees provide shocking descriptions of what they saw at the detention facility – visual confirmations of abusive treatment were called positive responses. The first positive respondent says of the detainees being interviewed, “Most times they had urinated or defecated on themselves, and had been left there for 18, 24 hours or more...On another occasion...the detainee was almost unconscious on the floor, with a pile of hair next to him. He had apparently been literally pulling his own hair out throughout the night.”¹² The respondent later describes the treatment as “not only aggressive, but personally very upsetting.”¹³ Perhaps most important, the respondent continues, “It seemed that these techniques were being employed by the military, government contract employees [redacted].”¹⁴ This confirms the institutionalized regime of violence in place at Guantánamo, and the Bureau’s officials make great pains to distance themselves and their methods from the Department of Defense.

Many positive responses also detail the use of stress positions and extended stays in rooms with very high or low temperatures. Respondent six writes, “The detainee was wearing leg

irons and was handcuffed with cuffs chained to his waist. [Redacted] advised the chains were adjusted to form the detainee to stand in a “baseball catcher” position. The detainee was being questioned by two military officers.”¹⁵ These stress positions force detainees to carry their body weight using only a few muscles, leading to enormous pressure and strain. Respondent thirteen writes of the use of temperature control, “The technique was to leave a detainee shackled in an interrogation room for an extended period of time, twelve hours or more, and either turn the air conditioner to its lowest possible temperature or off...this was only used for the difficult techniques who would not cooperate.”¹⁶ These methods of coercion were often more effective than other abuses; they often leave few physical marks, but successfully wear down the detainee through physical and mental strain.

The stresses described by the first positive respondent are consistent with the accounts of other Bureau respondents. Additionally, many respondents describe systematic abuses that capitalize on cultural differences. Respondent three states, “At one point, one of the interrogators placed a Koran in front of number [redacted] while number [redacted] was seated in a chair. The interrogator then straddled the Koran, at which point the detainee became very angry.”¹⁷ The interrogators purposefully take advantage of the religious belief of the detainees by desecrating an incredibly important aspect of their faith.

The sensitivities of the detainees are further exploited; positive respondent eighteen writes, “A detainee alleged a female guard removed her blouse and, while pressing her body against a shackled and restrained detainee from behind, handled his genitalia and wiped menstrual blood on his head and face as a form of punishment.”¹⁸ This form of sexual humiliation works to psychologically dehumanize the detainees. An interview with a translator working at the facility indicates that these situations did not involve real menstrual blood, saying,

“One thing she additionally did in order to humiliate him and also to make him feel unclean was wipe what was red ink on his face, but it was done in a way that he believed it was menstrual blood.”¹⁹ Positive respondent five gives a similar account and writes,

“He heard a rumor about a male detainee being dressed in female clothing with make-up applied, who was given an involuntary lap dance from a female prison guard at the direction of military interrogators [redacted]. The rumor indicated this was a tactic used to break the detainee down and gain his cooperation.”²⁰

These two positive responses both exhibit the purposeful humiliation and degradation of the detainees. Aside from the physical abuse they experienced, many detainees were also subjected to psychologically damaging acts of degradation. These acts have the potential to continually cause mental harm to the detainees through constant reminders of sexual violation.

The FBI compiled its Guantánamo Bay Detainee Inquiry in 2004, but The International Committee of the Red Cross also compiled its own evidence of physical and mental abuse during inspections in 2003. The Red Cross submitted their findings in reports to the administration that detailed accusations of psychological and physical abuse. A *New York Times* article by Neil Lewis states, “The report of the June visit said investigators had found a system devised to break the will of the prisoners at Guantánamo...through “humiliating acts, solitary confinement, temperature extremes, use of forced positions.”²¹ These accounts gave the public insight into the detention conditions at Guantánamo, but also emphasize the administration’s responsibility for such an institutionalized regime of torture. Lewis quotes the report as saying, “The construction of such a system, whose stated purpose is the production of intelligence, cannot be considered other than an intentional system of cruel, unusual and degrading treatment and a form of torture.”²² The report condemns the institution of systematic torture at the facility; Guantánamo

Bay represents purposeful and continually-justified dehumanization in the name of obtaining intelligence.

It is important to note that the Red Cross Report, along with many other institutional accounts of the detainees, was meant to remain confidential. The confidentiality surrounding the facility and its prisoners further necessitates forms of narrative that bring humanity and identity to the detainees. This secrecy also perpetuates the anonymity of the detainees, which is an essential step in dehumanizing them. Memoirs confront the anonymity imposed onto the detainees by asserting the individual humanity of their authors and regaining the agency lost throughout the detention at the facility.

Even after the release of government memos granting the authority to torture, the facility remained open and the perpetrators were not held accountable for their actions. A 2002 memo from General Counsel William J. Haynes II to the Secretary of Defense grants the authority to use the following abusive techniques: waterboarding, medical stress, inducing fear by using false threats to the detainees' families, using detainees' phobias against them, 28 hour periods of interrogation, stress positions, and deprivation of religious items, among others.²³ Another 2002 memo from John Yoo, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, argues that members of al Qaeda and the Taliban militia cannot claim the protections of the Geneva Conventions due the lack of nation-state status on the parts of both entities. Yoo writes, "We conclude that these treaties do not protect members of the al Qaeda, which as a non-State actor cannot be a party to the international agreements governing war. We further conclude that these treaties do not apply to the Taliban militia."²⁴ The memo represents the purposeful manipulation of legal and political terminology to exempt the detainees at Guantánamo from the protections afforded by the Geneva Conventions.

The Obama Administration's release of the torture memos issued during the Bush administration actually indicates a release of responsibility for the authorization and execution of the torture regime. A *Guardian* article quotes a statement from President Obama, "'In releasing these memos, it is our intention to assure those who carrying out their duties relying in good faith upon the legal advice from the department of justice that they will not be subject to prosecution.'"²⁵ The institution continues to justify its actions and distance itself from the illegal and inhumane actions committed at Guantánamo Bay. The article continues by quoting Attorney general Eric Holder as saying, "'It would be unfair to prosecute dedicated men and women working to protect America for conduct that was sanctioned in advance by the justice department.'"²⁶ Again, the human rights violations at Guantánamo are represented as necessary and justified in the name of national security.

Ironically, this protection of Guantánamo's perpetrators came after President Obama's attempt at closing the detention facility. In an executive order dated January 22, 2009, President Obama dictates,

"The detention facilities at Guantánamo for individuals covered by this order shall be closed as soon as practicable, and no later than 1 year from the date of this order. If any individuals covered by this order remain in detention at Guantánamo at the time of closure of those detention facilities, they shall be returned to their home country, released, transferred to a third country, or transferred to another United States detention facility in a manner consistent with law and the national security and foreign policy interests of the United States."²⁷

Despite President Obama's executive order for the closure of the facility, Guantánamo Bay remains open and operational today. In fact, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)

signed into law for the fiscal year of 2012 prohibits the use of Department of Defense funds to transfer or release Guantánamo detainees to the United States or other foreign countries.²⁸ This provision effectively bans the further transfer of detainees who would otherwise have been cleared for release. Despite opposition from the ACLU,²⁹ the Virginia House of Delegates³⁰, and even his own reservations concerning provisions in the act, President Obama signed the bill into law on January 31, 2011. In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Generals Charles Krulak and Joseph Hoar write, “Not only would this bolster Al Qaeda’s recruiting efforts, it also would make it nearly impossible to transfer 88 men (of the 171 held there) who have been cleared for release. We should be moving to shut Guantánamo, not extend it.”³¹ Even after widespread media coverage and societal awareness of the injustices at the detention facility, it appears that the closure of the facility is far from imminent.

Despite public awareness of the injustices committed at the facility, living conditions have not improved. According to the lawyers of several high-profile detainees remaining at the facility, “some of the food, medicine, and hygienic items given to the prisoners has not been certified as halal, as required for observant Muslims.”³² The *New York Times* reports that 171 detainees still remain at the facility, and the new provisions outlined in the 2012 NDAA will prohibit the transfer or release of these prisoners. Prisoners like Hajiakbar Abdulghupur have been cleared for release as “the government has said it would “serve no useful purpose” to continue to try to prove that any of these 17 men were enemy combatants,”³³ yet they remain incarcerated at the facility. Even with waning support for the War on Terror and public awareness of the conditions at Guantánamo, the detention center will most likely remain open indefinitely.

Textual Analysis

In *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantánamo* and *Enemy Combatant: My Imprisonment at Guantánamo, Bagram, and Kandahar*, Murat Kurnaz and Moazzam Begg present their personal histories and experiences within the Guantánamo Bay detention facility. Both men, European citizens with families, were detained without charge and subjected to numerous human rights abuses within the facility. Throughout the two memoirs, Kurnaz and Begg attempt to expose the human rights violations committed at the Guantánamo Bay detention facility while confronting the loss of agency resulting from these abuses. The memoirs enable Kurnaz and Begg to articulate their experiences after being stripped of their ability to represent themselves, as well as form a rapport with the reader through providing an intensely personal perspective on their experiences. This writer-reader relationship encourages readers to move past a superficial and sympathetic understanding of their ordeal to an intimate, empathetic recognition of the abuses they suffered. By establishing commonalities with the reader, detailing the realities of life within Guantánamo Bay, and contradicting commonly held perceptions of both detainees and Muslims, both Kurnaz and Begg reassert their individual humanity and create a personal connection with the reader. The form of memoir facilitates these specific goals with greater effectiveness than any other genre of human rights narrative.

From the beginning of both texts, Kurnaz and Begg begin to create a personal relationship with the reader through describing universal life experiences. The two writers spend a large portion of their respective memoirs discussing their lives before their incarceration at Guantánamo Bay. Their narration encompasses many ordinary events in life, including employment and relationships. These shared aspects of humanity establish common ground and allow the reader to immediately begin the process of empathizing with the writer. The

peacefulness of their lives before their detention in Guantánamo Bay also forms a stark contrast with the abuses and living conditions they later encounter.

Childhood memories can be a highly effective method of encouraging empathy on the part of the reader. The simplicity of childhood can be incredibly evocative, and both Begg and Kurnaz use childhood recollections in their narratives. Begg describes his childhood memories of his father, “My father often told me about his childhood and how he had been among the best athletes at school...He instilled in me a sense of justice and a desire to help others that became guiding principles for the rest of my life”⁴⁸ Regardless of cultural and socioeconomic differences, many readers can likely identify with Begg due to the common theme of looking up to one’s father. Begg continues, “We were regularly treated to visits to Warwick Castle and Blenheim Palace...His own father had strongly disapproved of going to the cinema when he was a child, but my father used to take us very often.”⁴⁹ These details of his relationship with this father, as well as his father’s character, give the reader a fuller understanding of Begg’s upbringing and family life. The recollections of childhood experiences can evoke similar memories in the reader; even if the particulars differ greatly from Begg’s upbringing, the fondness he feels for his father can inspire similar thoughts from the reader.

Kurnaz mainly focuses on the simplicity of his childhood. He describes an early friendship, saying, “Back then I also had a Chinese friend whose parents ran the Chinese restaurant at the end of our street. We played together. He’d speak Chinese and I’d speak Turkish, bas kids we didn’t need a common language to understand each other.”⁵⁰ The ease of befriending other individuals as a child comes through quite clearly here – children with few, if any, assumptions about others or predispositions are less restricted by differences like culture and language. Kurnaz continues, “I thought about my grandfather’s village, Kusca. My grandfather

grew hazelnut trees there...As a child, I used to play every summer amid the trees. When I was hungry, I'd pluck a few nuts from the branches and crack them open."⁵¹ This wholesome memory enforces the idea that despite the possible cultural and ethnic differences, Kurnaz has similar experiences as many of his readers. Though these memories of hazelnut trees may be different from other recollections of time spent with grandparents, the short glimpse into his relationship with his grandfather is undoubtedly an image that many of his readers can identify with. Kurnaz continues, "My mother had a sister and two brothers who still lived in the village; we had a big family. I often went swimming with my uncle in the Black Sea. Or sometimes I'd get up on his tractor, and my uncle would let me steer. It was a nice life."⁵² Kurnaz shows that his upbringing was very simple, yet rewarding. While his individual experiences may have differed from the reader's, the goodness of childhood remains a constant and identifiable theme. Kurnaz represents his family life as loving and compassionate, which allows the reader to connect with his upbringing; these details show that Kurnaz's earlier life is not so far removed from that of the reader's, which works to undermine the distance between the reader's experience and Kurnaz's story.

Both Begg and Kurnaz discuss their personal development and perspectives about work, social life, and identity. These concepts are important in any culture and any society, and they allow readers to gain a great deal of insight into shared motivations. Kurnaz writes, "For the first time since I had arrived in Pakistan, I was wearing my shiny black Hugo Boss overcoat...I wanted to look stylish in Koran school and on the street."⁵³ Most readers can personally identify with the desire to impress others with name brands and fashionable clothes. Kurnaz continues, "most of the time I just wore T-shirts and my KangaROOS-brand hiking boots."⁵⁴ Kurnaz's preoccupation with brand names establishes a stronger rapport with his reader – it also shows the

ordinariness of his daily concerns such as his desire to fit in with the rest of society, which forms an even greater contrast with his incarceration and treatment in Guantánamo Bay later in the memoir.

Begg identifies with his reader by discussing employment and education, two other concepts that readers can easily connect with; however, he juxtaposes these universal desires with an assertion of his Muslim identity. He writes,

“I got a job in the Department of Social Security. At the same time I began studying law part-time at university. It was the time of the First Gulf War and I began to feel a lot more politically conscious, because of what was happening to Muslims in Iraq. I bought a Palestinian scarf, and wore it round my neck, ostentatiously, to show my solidarity with the best-known Muslim issue.”⁵⁵

Begg portrays himself as a working man with a desire to better himself through education, while simultaneously reasserting his pride for his Muslim identity. This detail contradicts misconceptions of Muslims as being defined by religious extremism;^{56 57} the often misunderstood Muslim identity is clearly framed by more universally understood concepts of attaining employment and education. Begg simultaneously connects with his audience and gives the reader a way to separate the Muslim identity from societal and cultural misrepresentations.

Begg continues by describing his experiences as a working man interested in marrying. He says, “When my father opened the restaurant, and made me an active partner, the work hours were long and unsociable, but a girl I was seeing and wanted to marry helped to counter that.”⁵⁸ Few readers could fail to identify with the restricting and tiring nature of work, as well as the encouraging nature of a relationship. Begg later describes of his marriage, “Marriage had totally changed my life; I felt ecstatic having someone of my choice to share it with me.”⁵⁹ Marriage

and relationships are easily relatable concepts, and Begg's description of his relationship with his wife forms an essential aspect of his personal history.

The two writers discuss misconceptions about the Islamic faith and the treatment of women. Begg clearly exhibits happiness with his marriage and his wife, Zaynab. He writes, "Zaynab and I constantly discussed the future and how long we should stay. I often asked her how was she really coping, was she happy?...I so wanted her to be happy, and to give her everything she needed for the house."⁶⁰ This directly contradicts commonly held stereotypes of Muslim men as caring little for the happiness of their wives. Begg's obvious concern for his wife can resonate with readers while simultaneously breaking down misperceptions of relationships within Islam. Similarly, Kurnaz says, "If I was going to be a good Muslim, I was no longer allowed to look at another woman. We refrain from doing this not out of a lack of respect for women, but because we hold them in such high regard."⁶¹ Kurnaz directly responds to misrepresentations of Muslim men by describing his motivations for his behavior; his religiously-mediated regard for other women provides a more nuanced understanding of his faith.

After substantial descriptions of their personal histories, Begg and Kurnaz narrate their experiences leading up to and during their detention at Guantánamo Bay. Their accounts of the treatment they endured at the facility correlate with findings from the Federal Bureau of Investigations' Guantánamo Bay Detainee Inquiry and the Physicians for Human Rights *Broken Laws, Broken Lives* report. But more importantly, Begg and Kurnaz punctuate their narratives of injustice and torture with compelling personal details that can resonate with the audience. Their descriptions of interrogation methods and living conditions undoubtedly bolster the efforts of human rights advocacy groups and other organizations to document the actions of the United States government. However, they also function by providing an extremely personal account of

the communal Guantánamo experience. While few readers in their target audience could directly identify with the ordeals of detention in Guantánamo, the foundation of a writer-reader relationship and the consistent personal perspective enable readers to gain a fuller, empathetic understanding of the conditions at Guantánamo.

Kurnaz's incarceration starts with a police checkpoint, where policemen detain him due to confusion over his Turkish citizenship and German residency. After brief detentions at Pakistani jails and the Kandahar military base, Kurnaz gets transferred to Guantánamo Bay. He learns, "I'd been sold, for a bounty of \$3,000, to the Americans. That's what the Americans themselves told me in one of the endless interrogations in Guantánamo Bay."⁶² According to a 2006 report by Mark and Joshua Denbeaux, this practice was common in acquiring detainees. They cite a flyer used in Afghanistan, "Get wealth and power beyond your dreams....You can receive millions of dollars helping the anti-Taliban forces catch al-Qaida and Taliban murders. This is enough money to take care of your family, your village, your tribe for the rest of your life."⁶³ The financial incentive and hyperbolic promises made in these advertisements likely encouraged baseless allegations against some detainees. The report further describes other factors leading to detention, including possession of Casio watches and the use of guest houses.

The reasons for Kurnaz's detention are clearly consistent with the arbitrariness in detaining Guantánamo prisoners described by Denbeaux and Denbeaux, accentuating the injustice of his time in Guantánamo. He describes his first couple days,

"I didn't know we were in Cuba. I had no ideas what rules applied here. The rules were constantly changing anyway, and you'd get punished for breaking them...Every time I unknowingly broke a rule or, because they had just invented

a new one, did something I shouldn't have, the IRF team would come and beat me.”⁶⁴

Aside from the fear experienced from suddenly becoming a prisoner, Kurnaz is thrown into the confusion due to the random and cruel policies at Guantánamo.

Kurnaz gives a brief description of Abdul Rahman, one of his first acquaintances in the camp who is missing both legs. He writes, “He said he had been held at Bagram, where he had been exposed to extreme cold...That's why he had frostbite in his fingers and legs. American doctors had amputated his legs at a military field hospital.”⁶⁵ Abdul's story is particularly tragic even within the context of Guantánamo, especially given his personal history. Kurnaz continues describing Abdul, saying, “I learned that, like myself, he was newly married...I asked him if his wife knew he had lost his legs. Of course she didn't – I should have known better...We talked about sports a lot. Abdul said he liked playing soccer.”⁶⁶ Abdul's new marriage – something that should bring great happiness – instead only serves as a cruel reminder of his reality. Even his wife knows nothing about his current state and physical suffering. His love of sports, and soccer in particular, almost acts as a cruel joke. These normally enjoyable aspects of life have become resigned to his past, as Abdul's present and future are defined by his time in Guantánamo and American custody.

Begg also describes his first experiences at Guantánamo and his reactions to the other detainees. He says of detainee processing, “I was past a state of shock, I couldn't believe all this was happening to *me*...I was tripped onto the ground to the prone position again. This time I felt knees pushing hard against my ribs and legs, and crushing down on my skull simultaneously.”⁶⁷ His physical abuse begins from the very beginning of his time at the facility, leaving him confused and physically worn. He continues, “The barber sadistically enjoyed his job, and as he

saved off my beard with a machine, he commented, 'This is the part I like best.' I...realized that he *knew* the beard was an important symbol of Muslim identity."⁶⁸ This systematic cruelty targets the Muslim identity of the detainees, stripping an important aspect of their faith and further demoralizing them. Begg continues to describe the effects of their treatment on the other detainees, saying

"The most humiliating thing was witnessing the abuse of others, and knowing how utterly dishonored they felt. These were men who would never have appeared naked in front of anyone, except their wives; who had never removed their facial hair, except to clip their moustache or beard; who never used vulgarity, nor were likely to have had it used against them. I felt that everything I held sacred was being violated, and they must have felt the same."⁶⁹

The psychological effects of this treatment are much worse than the physical abuses, as fundamental aspects of the detainees' identity have been purposefully stripped from them. Even though removing facial hair and nakedness cause no physical harm, these actions attack the Muslim identity of the detainees.

Begg and Kurnaz discuss the basic living conditions during their detention and their inability to interact with others and take care of themselves with any decency. They pick up on the universal shame of performing basic bodily functions without any privacy. Kurnaz writes, "Almost all the prisoners got up and made use of the bucket. It was humiliating. Whether we were young or old, religious or not-we all had to strip naked to do our business in the bucket because we were wearing nothing but overalls."⁷⁰ This description of performing necessary functions emphasizes the systematic dehumanization of the detainees. Across most cultures and societies, urination and defecation are intensely private acts. The fact that the prisoners had to

perform these bodily functions without any dignity allowed to them already indicates the psychological impact that their detention must have had. Additionally, many Muslims are highly sensitive about nakedness in front of others as demonstrated in Begg's narration. The prisoners had to deal with the filth and unhygienic practice of using a single toilet bucket, but also with the psychological difficulty of stripping naked in front of other detainees. Begg writes, "I noticed too that a whole cell of ten, or more, prisoners shared one bucket as a toilet. I dread that."⁷¹ His personal disgust and fear of using the communal bucket indicate his mental state during his detention, and allow the reader to indirectly experience some of that discomfort.

Kurnaz relays examples of the sexual humiliation that the detainees were subjected to by the guards. He writes, "Female soldiers often came and watched when we went to the toilet...the women cracked stupid jokes about our private parts."⁷² Aside from the embarrassment of using a bucket in place of actual toilet facilities, the detainees had to deal with the sexual insults of the female guards. He continues, "They had a bucket of cold water, which they poured over my head. The women stood in a circle around me with their weapons and laughed. I was ashamed, but I wasn't voluntarily naked. I don't want to repeat what they said, although I remember most of it."⁷³ The shame of lacking a dignified way to perform basic functions compounds greatly when combined with the taunting of the female guards. As cultural and religious customs make many of the detainees especially sensitive to sexual humiliation, this kind of treatment could be as damaging as other forms of physical abuse.

Begg and Kurnaz also attempt to familiarize themselves with the guards at the facility. They both relate their efforts to understand the guards and their situation, as well as form relationships with the guards. Kurnaz writes, "The soldiers had to assume I was a terrorist, if that's what they had been told. If that was true, they had a good reason to beat me. Although it

was unjust, I could understand them.”⁷⁴ Kurnaz concedes that he can understand the motivation behind the cruel treatment he had to endure at the facility. This acknowledgement also functions by removing the blame from the direct perpetrators of the abuse. Instead, the attribution of blame is shifted to those who told the guards that the detainees are terrorists. By shifting responsibility from the guards to the administration, he effectively represents the problem as stemming from the institutional level. Kurnaz continues, “I didn’t think the guards were acting on their own accord, just to be evil. People higher up had drawn regulations so that they could one day say that there had been rules, clear and fair, but no one would ever find out about the one...rule.”⁷⁵ He recognizes that a bureaucracy of torture exists, and the guards are only pawns for the higher levels of administration.

Begg writes of the guards, “Often they would refer among themselves to things I could easily relate to, and I would then be sure to mention them. It was a way of forcing some normal human relations.”⁷⁶ Begg displays a desire to form a relationship with his guards by finding common ground with them – just as he establishes commonalities with his readers by describing his childhood and personal history. This attempt at familiarization again allows readers to connect with Begg’s experience, as all relationships and human interactions must be formed on some kind of shared ground. However, Begg continues, “But over the months, between Kandahar and both our transfers to Bagram, I saw Cody become desensitized, and accept the demonizing process of regarding us as subhuman.”⁷⁷ Like Kurnaz, Begg recognizes that an institutional regime of dehumanization and torture have corrupted the guards. Begg and Kurnaz also successfully place the reader’s attention onto the larger problem of institutionalized torture.

Begg says of one of the guards, “he didn’t go into detail about exactly what he did, but he mentioned that he slapped him around a few times, and that they did things to this person that he

was ashamed of, that he wished he'd never done in his life.”⁷⁸ The blame lies not necessarily with the individuals, but with the systematic destruction of the detainees' humanity. The institution causes people to do what they normally would not. Begg continues, “I didn't press him, but I thought about it afterwards, and wondered whether all these things would affect the rest of his ordinary American life, which I would never know about.”⁷⁹ Aside from gaining the emotional support of the reader, Begg also emphasizes the disconnect between the guards and the detainees. The guards may also experience psychological effects due to their actions at Guantánamo, but these effects must be viewed in the larger context of the violations committed at Guantánamo. However, Begg's consideration of the psychological effects on the guard represents the humanity he maintained even in the facility. Like Kurnaz, Begg acknowledges the humanity of the guards and their status as individuals. This acknowledgement reasserts the humanity of Begg and Kurnaz; despite their experiences at Guantánamo, they still show compassion and identify with the guards of the facility.

As with the descriptions of living conditions at Guantánamo, the recollections of torture, interrogation methods, and censorship all corroborate existing accounts from human rights advocacy groups. Instead of insisting on the existence of torture and inhumane treatment, Begg and Kurnaz focus on the emotional impact of these actions. They also emphasize the psychological influences of their physical mistreatment, as well as the use of torture to deprive the detainees of agency and articulation.

Kurnaz describes the interrogations as repeated sessions using similar or identical lines of questioning. These repetitive sessions indicate that what the detainees actually said did not matter, as their words were ignored. Kurnaz says of his sessions, “Where is Osama? Are you part of Al Qaeda? Are you a Taliban? They kept repeating the same questions.”⁸⁰ As his answers do

not prove sufficiently satisfactory to the interrogators, his voice is essentially stripped from him. He vocalizes, but his words have no meaning to the interrogators. He continues, ‘I was on edge, beginning to lose tolerance and patience with the perpetually asking me the same questions, and giving me no answers.’⁸¹ The imbalanced relationship between the interrogator and the detainee is also made extremely clear in Kurnaz’s description of the interrogation sessions. The interrogator holds all the power; the continual and repetitive lines of questioning are maintained regardless of how a detainee answers to the questioning, yet the detainee cannot receive any answers to his questions. Despite Kurnaz’s cooperation, he receives no answers to his questions despite being expected to continually answer to the same lines of questioning.

Additionally, the voices of detainees were stripped by psychological intimidation. Fear of punishment or retribution prevents detainees from speaking to each other, which further worsened the mental health of the prisoners. Kurnaz writes, “I didn’t try to speak to any of the other prisoners. If you spoke, you would have been beaten even more, so none of us did.”⁸² Essentially, the detainees had to suffer in silence for fear of physical punishment. Without a community to offer support, each detainee then becomes isolated and fearful – furthering the psychological damage of their treatment.

Begg writes of a time that the detainee in his neighboring cell, Animal, attempted to talk to himself. He says, “As the rules did not allow talking of any sort within the cells, some MPs found it perfectly appropriate to punish Animal for just that.”⁸³ With certain punishment waiting for detainees who spoke without authorization, the prisoners were rendered speechless. Apart from the physical limitations of silence, this also dehumanizes the detainees by stripping them of the basic human ability to converse with others and participate in the communal recognition of suffering. Animal is particularly dehumanized – a “harmless Afghan tramp, clearly in need of

psychiatric care,”⁸⁴ his nickname given to him by the guards indicates their attempts to dehumanize him. Animal experiences further dehumanization by being punished for using the basic human ability of speech. By restricting speech, the guards deprive the detainees of an essential human capability. Readers may find it difficult to empathize with this particular point, as few of the audience members have had any experience with receiving physical punishment as a consequence of talking. However, this aspect of their treatment at Guantánamo also exposes aspects of the living conditions that often receive little other attention. The risk of being punished for talking may be less physically scarring than the other abuses suffered at Guantánamo, but the mental and psychological toll undoubtedly affects the detainees to a great deal as well. The no-talking policies enforced by the guards bring greater attention to the other ways in which detainees were dehumanized and oppressed at Guantánamo Bay.

The feelings of isolation experienced by detainees were compounded by the inability of the prisoners to communicate with their loved ones and the outside world. Letters were censored, which further stripped detainees of their ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Kurnaz writes,

“The officer held my letter in his hand. He showed it to me and then hit me. He said: ‘That kind of stupid letter will never get to your home... We’re not stupid... If you want to write a letter home, you have to write it differently. ‘I’m doing fine. I feel all right. Don’t worry. That sort of thing, you understand?’”⁸⁵

Even when attempting to communicate with his loved ones, Kurnaz is prohibited from actually expressing himself in any way. The guards dictate what can and cannot be said, robbing the detainees of any agency and ability to articulate. By controlling the flow of information in and out of the facility, the guards effectively mediate the detainees’ relationship with the world

outside of Guantánamo. The detainees cannot even represent their suffering truthfully. This has a considerable psychological toll on the prisoners of the facility; even their loved ones cannot know the truth of their incarceration, which makes the detainees powerless and isolated.

Begg recognizes how the censorship of letters violates his rights, as well as the importance of communicating by writing to his wife. He writes, ‘I was not just writing a letter for the sake of it, I was thinking hard about the impact, mainly on my wife, of every sentence, every word of advice I was giving her. If it got censored, or stopped, or just put aside because someone had decided that they did not want it to go through, I felt it was a right violated.’⁸⁶ Due to the restrictions on what he can and cannot say, Begg understands that every aspect of his written communication to his wife must be carefully thought out. This emphasizes the isolation of the detainees to the reader – the audience is forced to confront the reality that day to day communication for a free person is markedly different from the communications of an interned detainee. Again, the censorship of letters has little, if any, physical harm on the detainees. However, Kurnaz and Begg bring attention to the mental effects of losing the ability to communicate freely.

Throughout their memoirs, Kurnaz and Begg emphasize the loss of agency as a result of the actions the administration and their experiences at the Guantánamo Bay detention facility. A major component of this loss of agency remains the inability to articulate their experiences while detained at Guantánamo. As the detainees were unable to communicate with each other and their loved ones during their incarceration, the healing process necessitates a reassertion of individual voice. Even after their release from the facility, the two writers still encounter many obstacles in their healing process. Both Kurnaz and Begg struggle with reconciling the ordeal they faced in Guantánamo with their reintroduction to freedom.

When Begg learns of his coming release, he immediately responds, “I don’t believe you.”⁸⁷ After years of deception from interrogators and guards, Begg’s distrust is justified; he cannot easily accept his freedom due to his experiences at Guantánamo Bay. Upon confirmation of his release, he says, “I was preparing myself as best I could; it all felt so unfamiliar, thinking about the future, instead of just each day. I went through my papers, and some I ripped up, because there were things I’d written down that I didn’t want the Americans to have.”⁸⁸ Begg feels a sense of ownership over his words, and fears that the Americans will continue to exert control over him if they have access to his personal thoughts. This refusal to leave any of his thoughts with American custody represents an important step for Begg in reclaiming his agency and voice.

One of the most poignant moments in Begg’s memoir is his reunion with his family. After finally embracing his wife and children, he writes of his youngest son, “Then I saw my little son for the first time ever. It was quite strange to see him – my son who’d never known a father. I was never an outwardly emotional person, but I was tumultuous inside then.”⁸⁹ Begg fears that his son will be afraid of him, as he is a complete stranger to the child. This memory puts Begg’s time in Guantánamo into an even more tragic perspective – he completely missed the birth and early childhood of his youngest son.

Kurnaz responds to the news of his freedom with a reaction similar to Begg’s. He recalls, “I’d witnessed this trick before. Prisoners would be brought to a plane, and they’d get in, having been told they were being flown home. Then they would be taken back to their cages. It was a way of breaking them psychologically.”⁹⁰ Like Begg, he refuses to believe any words of good news after all his experience with deception. He also encounters a similar desire to maintain his agency; an officer attempts to coerce Kurnaz into signing a confession of association with al

Qaeda and the Taliban by saying that he cannot leave without signing. Kurnaz refuses, thinking, “After all the years, the interrogations, the torments, and the deaths, I was supposed to sign something affirming my guilt and exonerating them...I didn’t sign anything.”⁹¹ Even under the threat of losing his freedom again, Kurnaz refuses to concede to the Americans. He prioritizes maintaining his agency over the possibility of remaining a detainee at Guantánamo.

After their release, both writers encounter issues with misrepresentation and moving forward. Kurnaz writes,

“All I did was tell people what happened to me, and I was happy that someone listened. But since then, it seems as though I constantly have to defend myself against accusations of being a terrorist – even though both the Americans and Germans who interrogated me in Guantánamo, as well as the prosecutors in Bremen, all concluded that I was clearly innocent.”⁹²

Even after regaining physical freedom, the detainees of Guantánamo must struggle with having their identities be misrepresented by the media and society. As a result, the healing process must consist in part of efforts to reclaim the agency stolen by the actions of the government, as well as correcting misconceptions informed by media representations and government actions. He continues,

“It’s important that our stories are told. We need to counter the endless reports written in Guantánamo itself. We have to speak up and say: I tried to hand back my blanket and got four weeks in solitary confinement. We have to tell the world how Abdul lost his legs and how the Moroccan captain lost his fingers. The world needs to know about the prisoners who died in Kandahar. We have to describe

how the doctors came only to check whether we were dead or could stand to be tortured for a little longer.”⁹³

Kurnaz recognizes that the detainees of Guantánamo must come to terms with their incarceration and correct the misrepresentations of their detention. In addition, he believes that the detainees have to actively regain the voices they lost while they were imprisoned at the detention facility.

Begg takes a similar view as Kurnaz, and also discusses the misperceptions of their time as detainees. He refuses to accept any further loss of his individual voice. He writes,

“Looking at the media coverage I found quite often that the people who they brought in were frustratingly unrepresentative. I felt I had a lot of insight into some of the things that they were talking about and I wanted to speak out. I had to educate people. This was not a time to stay quiet. So I regularly spoke to the media in the hope of creating a little understanding.”⁹⁴

Speaking the truth about his detention at Guantánamo and retelling his story represents a critical moment in Begg’s recovery. Due to the ordeal he experienced during his detention, there still existed a risk of remaining silent or not being able to articulate his experiences. Begg’s desire to advocate on behalf of his fellow detainees also shows his engagement with the larger dialogue concerning Guantánamo Bay.

Despite his dedication to raising awareness about the conditions at Guantánamo, Begg does display some hesitation about speaking for and with the Muslim community. He writes,

“Almost everybody I was speaking to was saying now was my time to speak to people. I also felt I must address the Muslim community about what I felt was the way forward for us here in Britain. But I held back too, because I didn’t really

know. I didn't know what the way forward was. But in the short term I did know that it was not planting bombs on trains.”⁹⁵

Begg's uncertainty regarding the future of the Muslim community indicates his reassertion of his Muslim identity, as well as his ability to rejoin the community after his ordeal. Because of his experience as a detainee at Guantánamo, the community looks to Begg for leadership and advocacy.

At the end of his memoir, Kurnaz speaks directly to the audience and tries to encourage empathy with the prisoners at Guantánamo. He says,

“Maybe you can picture my situation like this. Right now I'm sitting in my room with everything I need...But what would happen if someone locked the door and imprisoned me? How long would someone last in this room? Twenty-four hours wouldn't be a problem, and maybe a week wouldn't be too bad either. But months? Perhaps you can imagine then how difficult it is for the prisoners still being held in Guantánamo.”⁹⁶

Throughout the memoir, Kurnaz offers his personal perspective on his detention at Guantánamo. This direct appeal, given at the end of his story, attempts to mobilize the audience by creating a scenario through which the readers can begin to understand the suffering of Guantánamo detainees. Although forward, Kurnaz ends his memoir by challenging readers to evaluate their freedoms – freedoms that were stolen from the detainees. After establishing a relationship with his audience and giving them personal insight into his time at the facility, Kurnaz reminds readers that they should not maintain a distance between the events of the memoir and the freedoms of their lives. It is this distance, perpetually present in other forms of human rights narrative, which the form of memoir attempts to destroy.

The Role of Memoir

Memoirs are life narratives of an individual. While all memoirs provide insight into an individual's life experiences, some also participate in larger dialogues. Throughout literary history, memoir has been an important part of human rights advocacy. Texts like *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* provide an intimate and personal perspective to human rights violations which are often so large in scope as to detract from the suffering of individuals. Historical events like the enslavement of African-Americans and the Holocaust are made much more immediate and personal when mediated by the experiences of an individual who experienced the atrocities firsthand.

Simply narrating human rights violations in terms of statistics, events, and numbers can desensitize an audience from the reality of human suffering. While the human toll of genocide is invariably shocking, facts and figures can actually be counterproductive and overwhelm the reader or viewer. Personal accounts allow individuals to indirectly experience injustice, which is essential to gaining true awareness on the part of the audience. In cases of human rights violations, empathy is much preferable to sympathy. A sympathetic audience may express regret and sorrow as a result of consuming a narrative of a particular event, but an empathetic audience will often be far more invested in the outcome of the event due to the intimacy of understanding the event.

In narrating their experiences, the detainees of Guantánamo aim to raise awareness of their suffering and reestablish their humanity. Memoirs are particularly well equipped for this purpose; the form allows the author to provide an intensely personal perspective of their time in the facility. The commitment of these personal experiences also inherently necessitates a reassertion of agency, as narrating personal histories requires the use of the writer's voice. Other

forms of media and literature have their merits for advocating the humanity of their subjects, but the memoir allows its subjects to bridge many divides between the medium and its audience. As many of the Guantánamo Bay detainees have cultural, racial, religious, and socioeconomic differences with the American public, it is essential for the chosen medium to encourage the audience to empathize with the subject.

Throughout Guantánamo's existence, many forms of narrative have attempted to describe the ordeals of its detainees. *Lidless*, a play by Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig, imagines the future encounter of a detainee with one of his interrogators.⁹⁷ Poems from detainees themselves were published in a collection titled *Poems from Guantánamo*.⁹⁸ Fiction writer Dan Fesperman wrote a novel, *The Prison of Guantánamo*.⁹⁹ Other accounts include nonfiction works such as *The Guantánamo Lawyers: Inside a Prison Outside the Law*, edited by Mark Danbeaux.¹⁰⁰ All of these forms provide different perspectives into the environment at Guantánamo and the suffering of the detainees. The fictional narratives allow writers and readers alike to explore the psychological implications of detention at the facility, while nonfiction accounts provide insight into the realities of detention. The poems represent the artistic expression of the detainees – a unique perspective that cannot be captured in other forms of narrative.

Photography in particular has been an effective tool for raising awareness about the conditions at Guantánamo. Photographic essays are simple, accessible, and easy to understand; they can speak a great deal about their subjects without overwhelming the reader with contextual information like other kinds of narrative. However, this lack of context also represents one of photography's downsides. Without any substantive information about the subject of a photograph, the public may be unable to fully comprehend its significance. Notable photos include:



Figure 1. “Military Police wheel a detainee to an interrogation room at Camp X-Ray in February 2002.” Source: *Time*.¹⁰¹



Figure 2. “Detainees held at the Guantánamo Bay detention centre.” Source: *The Guardian*.¹⁰²

Visually striking, these photographs depict the horrors of inmate life at Guantánamo. Despite their clear emotional appeal, the audience knows little to nothing about the men shown in these

photographs. They are clearly suffering, but these snapshots primarily encourage sympathy on the part of the viewer. Susan Sontag writes in a 2004 *New York Times* opinion piece about photos taken at Abu Ghraib, “There are a lot more photographs and videos that exist,” Rumsfeld acknowledged in his testimony. “If these are released to the public, obviously, it's going to make matters worse.” Worse for the administration and its programs, presumably, not for those who are the actual -- and potential? -- victims of torture.”¹⁰³ The medium of photography is incredibly useful for quickly and effectively expressing the visual realities of a situation to a large and general audience; the administration’s reluctance to release images to the public indicates their awareness of the influence that photography can have. However, photographic works can fail to be comprehensively informative. As a result, photographs are often found in a series or as supplements to written texts. Like many other forms of human rights narrative, photographs should not be viewed in isolation. Individual photographs cannot provide much detail about their subjects, which makes them less useful in examining individual experiences.

Other attempts at narrating the realities of detention at Guantánamo Bay are often similarly insufficient in their ability to intimately connect readers with the experiences of detainees. Many accounts from human rights advocacy groups focus on the torture regimes used at Guantánamo Bay in order to emphasize the failures of the administration to uphold basic human rights. These accounts are critically useful on an institutional scale, but often lack essential personal narratives that allow the general public to truly empathize with the detainees.

The Physicians for Human Rights report, *Broken Laws, Broken Lives*, details the medical and psychological impacts of the torture methods experienced by detainees. The report states,

“This report tells the largely untold human story of what happened to detainees in our custody when the Commander-in-Chief and those under him authorized a

systematic regime of torture. This story is not only written in words: It is scrawled for the rest of these individual's lives on their bodies and minds. Our national honor is stained by the indignity and inhumane treatment these men received from their captors."¹⁰⁴

The report undoubtedly humanizes the suffering of the detainees in ways that are absent from other representations found in the general media. However, a significant limitation of the report is its very focus – the report specifically evaluates the medical and psychological toll of torture. On an institutional level, the examination of systematic medical complicity in the torture of the detainees is horrifying and highly moving. On a personal level, it may be difficult to connect with a great degree of intimacy to the detainees profiled in the report. An essential aspect of understanding the experiences of the detainees is moving beyond pity and understanding the suffering that they had and have to endure.

The report describes the effects of torture in medical terms. It states of one of the detainees, Amir, "The physical symptoms Amir described and findings on physical examination strongly support Amir's report of torture and ill-treatment. The ongoing physical effects of his abuse include headaches, dizziness, musculoskeletal symptoms, and decreased sexual drive."¹⁰⁵ The focus on medical terminology may prevent the general reader from forming any significant personal connection with Amir. Many people are already aware that the administration authorized torture and other methods of physical and psychological arm to be inflicted upon the detainees at Guantánamo – the Physician's Report only confirms this. The report lacks a fuller human quality that would encourage the engagement of the reader with the experiences of the detainees.

A significant barrier to this empathy formation is the absence of detailed personal information of each of the profiled prisoners. The report condenses Amir's personal history to several sentences:

“Amir is an Iraqi man in his late twenties who spent some time as a refugee in another country when he was a child. After the Iran-Iraq war, his family returned to Iraq, where he received an elementary-school education. At the time of his arrest, Amir made a living as a salesman. He was the sole provider for his family, which consisted of his mother, his younger brother, his younger brother's wife, and their three children. He was also engaged to a long-time neighborhood friend whom he married shortly after his release from detention.”¹⁰⁶

The report attempts to give information about Amir's personal history, but cannot provide much more than a brief introduction due to its objective. In many ways, the report accomplishes a great deal – the medical details of the detainees fully support the reports of torture and inhumane treatment at the facility, and the analysis of the writers establishes the illegality and moral repugnance of the torture regime. However, the format and language of the report are less suitable for narrating the full human aspect of the detainee experience at Guantánamo Bay.

Even shorter individual narratives can be less effective than the fullness of the memoir. In a *New York Times* editorial, Guantánamo Bay detainee Lakhdar Boumediene wrote of his experience as a Guantánamo detainee. Despite the insight gained into his personal life and detention experience, 1,059 words of text are not nearly enough for Boumediene to establish a lasting rapport with his audience. He writes of his treatment,

“I was kept awake for many days straight. I was forced to remain in painful positions for hours at a time. These are things I do not want to write about; I want

only to forget. I went on a hunger strike for two years because no one would tell me why I was being imprisoned. Twice each day my captors would shove a tube up my nose, down my throat and into my stomach so they could pour food into me. It was excruciating, but I was innocent and so kept up my protest.”¹⁰⁷

Boumediene’s account is, no doubt, sobering and nauseating. His ordeal undoubtedly expands on existing knowledge of the interrogation and coercion methods utilized at Guantánamo Bay.

However, the piece only gives an introduction into Boumediene’s experiences at Guantánamo.

Many members of the audience may already be superficially aware of the techniques to which detainees were subjected. More importantly, Boumediene’s account may be more poignant and

personal with a greater amount of detail. He says, “I share my story because 171 men remain there. Among them is Belkacem Bensayah, who was seized in Bosnia and sent to Guantánamo

with me”¹⁰⁸ and “In 2008, my demand for a fair legal process went all the way to America’s

highest court.”¹⁰⁹ These points create interest on the part of the reader, but stop short at

presenting a truly personal account of these events. What kind of daily life did Boumediene have

to endure at Guantánamo? Who is Bensayah? And how did Boumediene go about demanding

due process? These are the details that enable a reader to move beyond sympathy into empathy.

Boumediene’s piece definitely does its part in breaking down the anonymity of Guantánamo

detainees, but a full memoir would allow the audience to engage with his story directly and gain

a fuller understanding of his life and experiences.

Imperfections exist in all forms of human rights narratives. Just as short opinion pieces and medical reports fail to fully capture the human story of detainees, memoirs have their own limitations. By nature of their form, memoirs focus on the story of an individual. Despite the personal connection that this genre fosters between the survivor and the reader, the individual

focus can be detrimental on a larger scale of institutional inquiry. Even the *Broken Laws, Broken Lives* report states, “the non-random selection and the small number of former detainees evaluated do not permit generalizations of PHR’s findings to all detainees in US custody.”¹¹⁰ Memoirs do not necessarily represent the communal experience of Guantánamo Bay detainees. The genre also lacks the legal and medical gravity of accounts like the Physicians for Human Rights report or findings from the American Civil Liberties Union. However, each form of human rights narrative has its advantages, disadvantages, and place within the larger context of human rights advocacy.

The memoir occupies a unique role within this context by enabling readers to gain a highly intimate knowledge of an individual’s personal history and experience within the detention facility. Memoirs cannot provide a broader understanding of the political, legal, and moral aspects of the facility’s administration and inception. These personal histories should not be read in isolation, as they fail to represent the entirety of the communal experience at Guantánamo. Instead, memoirs must be evaluated within the existing dialogue concerning the facility. These narratives are useful for gaining perspective into individual histories and experiences, and are one of the most effective forms for encouraging an audience to empathize. Memoirs facilitate this process by using first person narration to recount intimate details of an individual’s experience. Intensely personal details can be lost in third person narration due to the greater distance between the narrative and its audience.

Memoirs are often written by individuals who have experienced some monumental event, but they have a unique purpose beyond a simple account of major events. The memoirs written by the Guantánamo Bay detainees function not only as contributions to the ongoing struggle against systemic oppression and justice, but also as personal histories. The memoirs undoubtedly

bolster the efforts of groups advocating the closure of the Guantánamo Bay detention facility. However, the narratives offer a way for the reader to empathize and identify with their writers. The form of memoir enables the reader to gain insight into the mind and life of the subject. Regardless of cultural and ethnic differences, all humans share some commonalities. Descriptions of childhood events, career aspirations, and family life allow the reader to move past preconceptions of the subject; the reader can empathize with these near universal experiences and come to view the subject as a complex individual with a unique sense of humanity. The writer and reader may be strangers to one another, but the commitment of personal history to the form of the memoir allows for a shared experience.

Fittingly, Schaffer and Smith write that “It was a memoir that spurred the adoption of the Geneva Convention of 1864...The memoir provided an affective springboard for subsequent debates about just and unjust wars, leading to the foundation of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the adoption of the Geneva Convention.”¹¹¹ *Un Souvenir de Solferino (A Memoir of Solferino)*, written by Henry Dunant, details the author’s experience with the aftermath of the Battle of Solferino. The memoir’s descriptions of poor medical conditions and the suffering of soldiers inspired the International Committee for the Relief of Wounded Soldiers – the precursor to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the group that organized the conference responsible for the Geneva Conventions.¹¹² The same International Committee of the Red Cross has been involved in advocating the legal rights of the prisoners at Guantánamo, while the Geneva Conventions are cited in every attack on the interrogation and incarceration procedures at the facility. Schaffer and Smith continue, “Survivor narratives tell stories of abuse through which narrators turn themselves from victims to survivors through acts of speaking that shift attention to systemic cause of violation.”¹¹³ This ability of memoirs to

connect an individual's struggle with the larger issue of systemic human rights violations enables the medium to be particularly effective in combating the dehumanization of the victims and the actions of the offending party.

Due to their personal and descriptive nature, memoirs are also highly effective in relaying episodes of torture and inhumane treatment. Joseph Slaughter writes, "As a human rights violation, torture is paradigmatic in its implementation as a tool to destroy a speaking subject. Human rights violations target the voice, and therefore, the voice should be the focus of international rights instruments."¹¹⁴ As memoirs enable the subject to provide his or her perspective and experience, the voice is restored through the act of writing the memoir. Schaffer and Smith continue describing memoirs by writing, "The primary gain comes with the legitimizing of individual loss and suffering and the embedding of the individual story in a larger story of human rights violations for the purposes of building a case and motivating action."¹¹⁵ The memoir then acts as a way for the audience to understand the full extent of the subject's suffering. By eliciting empathy from the audience, the subject is able to regain the agency and humanity stripped by the actions of the government. Memoirs connect with the audience by presenting the subject as an individual and fellow human being, and overcome the dehumanization of torture and other human rights violations.

As inhumane treatment and other violations of human rights strip the voices of victims, reclaiming and using the voice successfully is instrumental in the recovery process of the victim. The memoir becomes a critical point for each individual victim attempting to recover from the ordeal of a human rights violation. Gigliotti writes, "The inability of witnesses to adequately articulate their experiences to listeners and readers can sometimes consign the impact of perpetrator crimes to a perpetually unspeakable condition."¹¹⁶ For every detainee at Guantánamo

that successfully found recovery and closure through writing the memoirs, there may be others who are still unable to come to terms with the human rights violations experienced at the facility. This critical point becomes especially important, as the inability of some witnesses and survivors to articulate their experiences can impede efforts to raise awareness and recognition. Memoirs are particularly useful in this scenario; the commitment of experiences to written word may help in the healing process, while the individual's sense of ownership over the work can encourage the reestablishment of agency.

Boumediene writes in his *New York Times* piece, "These are things I do not want to write about; I want only to forget."¹¹⁷ His experience at Guantánamo, while horrifying, must be committed to paper in order to raise awareness and understanding of the ordeals that all the detainees faced. Boumediene found the ability to write about his time at Guantánamo, which hopefully helped in his healing process. However, how many other current and former detainees may struggle to articulate their experiences? What can be done to prevent the further psychological damage that may be caused by an inability to reconcile the reality of Guantánamo Bay?

Memoirs, then, fill a void left by other forms of human rights narrative. By enabling writers of memoir to overcome stereotypes and misperceptions, they facilitate an easier relationship with the audience. Their ability to provide intimate details about personal experiences further encourages the audience to empathize with the subject of the memoir. Lastly, memoirs function as methods for survivors of human rights violations to reassert their identity and agency. Memoirs must be examined within the greater context of human rights narratives, not as the single most effective genre of narrative. These works of personal history have unique attributes that enable them to contribute in a particular way. Evaluating the memoirs written by

detainees is essential for advancing the cause of rights and reparations for Guantánamo Bay survivors, but also for understanding how to aid in the healing process of these individuals whose rights have been violated.

Conclusions and Looking Forward

The commitment of detainee experiences to memoir represents a vital aspect of their healing process. Some survivors may, regrettably, lack the ability to articulate their ordeal in written or any other form. For the time being, the existing memoirs and other narratives will have to speak on behalf of the silent detainees and those still being held indefinitely at Guantánamo Bay. The epilogue to *Five Years of My Life* suggests a critical point: Baher Azmy, Kurnaz's lawyer, writes, "A genuine remedy for Murat's suffering may never come, but the telling of his remarkable story might represent an important start."¹¹⁸ Survivors of human rights violations may never truly heal from the abuses they suffered. However, coming to terms with their ordeals and advocating on behalf of others can help survivors to regain their agency.

The memoir must act as an effective agent and advocate for the survivor of human rights violations. In doing so, the form creates a writer-reader relationship that provides readers with highly personal insights into the author's suffering. The audience may often feel disconnected with cases of abuse and torture; media representations fail to capture the human element of the prisoners, and the audience can lack a full understanding of the crimes being perpetuated. The memoir presents the reader with that essential human quality, allowing the reader to truly empathize with its author.

Moazzam Begg recognizes the necessity of forming a personal connection with the reader by establishing universally understood similarities. He writes in the prologue to his memoir, "One of the most ambitious aims of this book is to find some common ground between people on opposing sides of this new war, to introduce the voice of reason, which is so frequently drowned by the roar of hatred and intolerance."¹¹⁹ This sentence is, perhaps, the most important in his entire memoir. Individual memoirs cannot encompass the entirety of an institutional problem.

Instead, they provide readers with an often overlooked perspective into the personal experiences of individuals made anonymous by media representations, misperceptions, and the actions of perpetrators and oppressors.

Baher Azmy ends his epilogue to Kurnaz's memoir with a reminder of its place within the larger dialogue concerning Guantánamo Bay. He writes, "Murat's memoir, along with other accounts of U.S. government actions in Guantánamo-which would otherwise remain secret or deeply distorted – provide vital testimony to a profound injustice; this book represents one small but important strike against unchecked power."¹²⁰ Memoirs inherently lack the reach of comprehensive inquiries. They cannot provide powerful legal arguments against the administration's actions. Instead, they are one aspect of the larger human rights narrative. Memoirs play an essential and unique role in bringing individual humanity into the conversation about human rights. One small strike against the power of the government can do little, but many smaller strikes can play their part in weakening excessive power.

Despite the prevalence of information regarding the abuses at Guantánamo and the injustices of detention, the facility will remain open indefinitely under the provisions of the National Defense Authorization Act. Even though many of the current detainees have been cleared for release, they will remain there indefinitely until further action is taken to secure their freedom. The political process cannot be relied upon to bring these detainees justice; President Obama ordered the closure of Guantánamo one year from January 22, 2009. More than three years later, detainees at Guantánamo still have no certain status.

Human rights narratives must continue to be read. Each form of narrative has its own role in advocating on behalf of the oppressed. Individuals can only begin to comprehend the entirety of these violations by participating in all aspects of the conversation. Memoirs cannot function in

isolation by providing the personal component. By understanding the role of memoir within the larger dialogue concerning the human rights violations at Guantánamo Bay, individuals can effectively navigate the grander narrative. Hopefully, this understanding can lead to greater advocacy and representation for the former and current detainees of Guantánamo Bay. As long as the facility remains open, there can be no closure for the many who suffered at the hands of the American government. Even when the facility can finally be shut down, the healing process for these detainees has no sure end. Reparations can never truly be made after systematic degradation and abuse; instead, memoirs and other forms of human rights narratives must continue to reassert the humanity of those who have been dehumanized.

Footnotes

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- ³ “The Guantánamo Docket.” *The New York Times Online* and *NPR*.
- ⁴ Andy Worthington, *The Guantánamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison*. (Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2007) p. xii.
- ⁵ Karen Greenberg, *The Least Worst Place: Guantánamo’s First 100 Days*. (USA: Oxford Press, 2009) p. 19.
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- ⁷ Op. cit., Greenberg, p. 121.
- ⁸ Op. cit., Worthington, p.127.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 126.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 192.
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- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
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- ¹⁷ Ibid.
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- ¹⁹ Erik Saar, Interview. [democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org), 4 May 2005.
<http://www.democracynow.org/2005/5/4/inside_the_wire_a_military_intelligence>
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- ²⁸ “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2012.”
- ²⁹ “President Obama Signs Indefinite Detention Bill Into Law.” *American Civil Liberties Union*.
- ³⁰ Conor Murphy, “Virginia attempts to nullify National Defense Authorization Act.” *The Washington Times*.
- ³¹ Charles C. Krulak and Joseph P. Hoar, “Guantánamo Forever?” *The New York Times*. 12 December 2011.
- ³² Charlie Savage, “Guantánamo Conditions Slip, Military Lawyers Say,” *The New York Times*. 24 February 2012.
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- ⁵⁰ Murat Kurnaz, *Five Years of My Life: An Innocent Man in Guantánamo*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). pp. 128.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 82-3.
- ⁵² Ibid., p. 84.
- ⁵³ Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁵⁵ Op. cit., Begg, p. 44.
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- ⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 109.
- ⁶⁷ Op. cit., Begg, p. 111.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 112.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 112.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 55.
- ⁷¹ Op. cit., Begg, p. 123.
- ⁷² Op. cit., Kurnaz, p. 78
- ⁷³ Ibid., p. 78
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 50
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 180
- ⁷⁶ Op. cit., Begg, p. 124.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 125.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 223.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 223.
- ⁸⁰ Op. cit., Kurnaz, p. 58.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., p. 230.
- ⁸² Ibid., p. 49.
- ⁸³ Op. cit., Begg, p. 145.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 146.
- ⁸⁵ Op. cit., Kurnaz, p. 68.
- ⁸⁶ Op. cit., Begg, p. 219.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 346.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 348.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 369.
- ⁹⁰ Op. cit., Kurnaz, p. 218.
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- ⁹² Ibid., p. 236
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 236.
- ⁹⁴ Op. cit., Begg, p. 382.
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INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

Teach For America
Operations Coordinator – Corps Communication
Summer 2010

- Published and distributed the weekly Inform Newsletter to approximately 700 corps members and Institute staff
- Managed the Corps Communication Center, Institute Information Board, and Weekly Calendar

Weiser LLP
Marketing Internship
Summer 2009

- Collaborated with tax and audit partners to write proposals to prospective clients
- Produced functional and visually engaging firm-wide newsletters and presentations

WORK EXPERIENCE

Wild Cactus
Crew Leader (promoted Fall 2009)
2008-Present

- Supervise student employees and train new hires while providing efficient customer service
- Work 15 hours a week, on average

Pennsylvania State University – Residence Life
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Pennsylvania State University Alumni Association

Lion Ambassador

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- Promote values of tradition, service, and excellence through tours and projects
- Supervised a budget of 2,000 dollars as retreat committee sub-head
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The Daily Collegian

Lead Designer

2010-Present

- Design layouts and visual elements for a daily publication with average circulation of 20,000
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Bassoon and Flute Player

2009-Present

- Rehearse and perform advanced wind literature

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- Intermediate French
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