



The prison diary as a site of anachronistic carceral truth-making: the case of Mohamedou Ould Slahi

يوميات السجن كموقع لإنتاج حقائق عقابية غابرة: قضية
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Le journal de prison comme un espace de construction de vérités carcérales anachroniques: le cas de Mohamedou Ould Slahi

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ملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة أدب السجن باعتباره مجالاً يكشف عن حقائق عقابية غابرة. ومن أجل بناء إطارنا النظري، اعتمدنا بشكل واسع على الأدوات المفاهيمية للمؤرخ والفيلسوف ميشال فوكو، لا سيما مفهوم "الأوليات التاريخية" وذلك لدراسة الأرصدة المعرفية للممارسات العقابية الحديثة، ومفهوم "الاستمرارية التاريخية" التي يخضع لها السجناء في العصر الحالي بشكل منهجي. نعتبر كتاب "يوميات غوانتانامو" (2015) لمحمدو ولد صلاحي نموذجاً تحليلياً مناسباً لاختبار فرضياتنا. إن تفاعل هذه المذكرات مع السجلات العقابية الأمريكية السابقة يتحدى فرضية الانقطاعات المعرفية في الفكر العقابي الغربي، كما أشار إلى ذلك فوكو في كتابه المراقبة والعقاب: ولادة السجن (1975).

كلمات الدالة: السرد العقابي؛ يوميات السجن؛ ميشال فوكو؛ محمدو ولد صلاحي؛ "يوميات غوانتانامو" (2015).

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore prison accounts as sites of archaic carceral truths. To theorize our inquiry, we have drawn extensively on the conceptual tools of historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, such as the concept of "historical a priori" to excavate the epistemic genealogies of modern-day carceral practices, and the notion of "historical continuum" to which present convicts are systematically subjected. We consider that Mohamed Ould Slahi's *Guantanamo Diary* (2015) is a pertinent corpus against which our hypotheses are examined. The memoir's engagement with prior American carceral registers challenges the assumption of epistemic discontinuities in Western carceral thought, as Foucault postulates in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).

Keywords: carceral narrative; prison diary; Michel Foucault; Mohamedou OuldSlahi; *Guantánamo Diary* (2015).

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'analyser les récits carcéraux en tant que sites de vérités carcérales archaïques. A cet effet, nous avons exploité les outils conceptuels de l'historien et philosophe Michel Foucault, en l'occurrence le concept d'"a priori historique", afin d'explorer les généalogies épistémiques des pratiques carcérales contemporaines, ainsi que la notion du «continuum historique», auquel les détenus actuels sont systématiquement soumis. Nous considérons que *Les Carnets de Guantánamo* (2015), de Mohamedou Ould Slahi constitue un corpus pertinent pour évaluer nos hypothèses. L'engagement de ce récit avec les anciens registres carcéraux américains remet en question l'hypothèse des discontinuités épistémiques dans la pensée carcérale occidentale, comme l'a postulé Foucault dans *Surveiller et Punir : Naissance de la Prison* (1975).

Mots-clés: récit carcéral; journal de prison ; Michel Foucault; Mohamedou OuldSlahi; *Les Carnets de Guantánamo*(2015).

Introduction

The existing scholarship on Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantánamo Diary* and U.S. carceral practices is profuse and multifaceted. Therefore, it is mandatory to provide a literature review of the prior research which has been undertaken thus far on this topic, albeit a condensed one, given the restrained space allotted to us in this context. Hitherto, there has been a dual approach involving Americentric and ethno-religious-centric strands.

The Americentric approach is amply sustained by scholars such as Erin Trapp. Trapp opines that Ould Slahi's diary is largely defined by the cultural logic of late capitalism, i.e., a document of an ongoing American struggle (Trapp, 2016, p.70). Similarly, Kennedy identifies the dynamics of the Latin American *testimonio* in its interstices writing that *Guantánamo Diary* is an exemplary text for showing how older traditions of testimony are being refashioned" (Kennedy, 2021, p. 893). Likewise, American critic Sturken exposes the general amnesia in the U.S. regarding the victims of Guantánamo under the semblance of an "intense memorialization" of 9/11 (Sturken, 2022, p.18).

The second approach is conversely more engaged with the ethno-religious dimension of U.S. carceral practices in connection with 9/11. For instance, Mc Heimech argues that "Mohamedou Ould Slahi would invoke the figure of the African Muslim slave in his own handwritten autobiography, which



was published as *Guantánamo Diary*” (McHeimech, 2017, p.175). Islamologist Maha Hilal equally writes that “this imperialist violence further underpins the human rights abuses at Guantanamo, as the U.S. has waged war on, colonised, and occupied numerous Muslim-majority countries since 2001” (Hilal, 2025, para. 15). In tandem with this perspective, yet one tinged with race-centric resonances, anthropologists Beliso-De-Jesús, Pierre, and Junaid supply an analogous argument. These scholars contend that “Ould Slahi’s story illuminates shifting forms of racialization in narratives that circulate in very different public spheres” (Beliso-De-Jesús, et al., 2025, p. 306).

This abridged, yet reasonably representative, literature review visibly elicits an enduring research gap that prior canonical scholarship has failed to address. The subtle epistemological dynamics that operate within U.S. intramural institutions such as Guantánamo is an issue which, to the best of our knowledge, has been thus far unresolved.

Accordingly, this paper strives to fill this continuing research vacuum by hypothesizing the ways in which a prima-facie pedestrian carceral account such as Ould Slahi’s diary emerges as a repository for anterior discursive networks, revealing by the same token the formative epistemologies of the U.S. militaro-carceral apparatus in the aftermath of the alleged Global War on Terrorism. As we investigate Ould Slahi’s atypical carceral trajectory, we shall draw extensively on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (2017), namely his neologisms such as “historical a-priori” and “historical continuum.” It is a theorizing which is likely to divulge unanticipated truths around the U.S.’s retaliatory actions against incriminated identities such as Ould Slahi, using extremely punitive technologies inspired from anterior archaisms, to say the least.

To sift through the most pertinent episodes of Ould Slahi’s intramural experience is crucial in order to gather a sense of the true conditions of his incarceration as a prime suspect, allegedly embroiled in one of the most complex geopolitical imbroglios. In the aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. mobilized daunting punitive technologies against him while in Guantánamo, by virtue of some idiosyncrasies that incriminated him as an Arab, Muslim, African. Therefore, to do a Foucauldian genealogy and archeology of Guantánamo as a military-carceral institution is likely to unearth the ways in which a detention facility _and its detainees such as Ould Slahi _ are deeply sedimented in a-priori punitive dogmas.



1. Guantanamo: U.S. carceral geographies

1.1 Institutional genealogies

To draw an institutional affiliation and lineage between the Guantánamo Detention Center and anterior geographies of containment is likely to expose the epistemologies that codify Guantánamo as a military-carceral institution exceptionally constructed for a predominantly African population. This reactivates a dormant carceral apparatus, namely the slave plantation. Rowlandson argues that there are analogous features between the slavery plantation and Guantánamo Detention Center, writing: “The detainees of Guantánamo Bay detention Center share much with the slaves who over a century before lived and worked in the lands of Eastern Cuba” (Rowlandson, 2010, p. 217).

In this excerpt, Rowlandson corroborates the enduring legacy of subjugating practices like slavery, a practice which validates Foucault’s “carceral continuum” (1977, p. 297). Accordingly, it is tantamount to saying that hitherto there has been no hiatus between past and present U.S. carceral practices. Albeit extralegal and antiquated, the epistemological continuum that fuels Guantánamo, that the War on Terror has elevated to a quasi-dogmatic truth, is an expedient for the United States, granting it disproportionate punitive prerogatives. To wage an unprecedented and unilateral retributive war on predominantly African citizens in the aftermath of 9/11 was one such entitlement. Its objective was to concretize an agenda around a new geopolitical order as Ould Slahi’s memoir testifies.

1.2 The carceral construction of a neo-slave identity

In his prison diary, Ould Slahi exposes in minute and harrowing details the conditions of his incarceration, emphasizing the geographical dimension of his captivity. Indeed, he was literally abducted from his home in Mauritania in a very similar way countless slaves had been captured in their respective African countries during the Transatlantic slave trade. By virtue of his geographical appurtenance, Ould Slahi was coerced into enacting similar parts, concomitantly embracing Africa’s dark history of enslavement, advocating by the same token the role of a spokesman on behalf of innumerable indentured Africans. At one point of his diary, he addresses his captors arguing: “You’re holding me because your country is strong enough to be unjust. And it’s not the first time you have kidnapped Africans and enslaved them” (Ould Slahi, 2015, pp.211-212). In another episode of his account, Ould Slahi further draws analogies with the African slave virtually assuming



his status as a neo slave, writing: “I often compared myself with a slave. Slaves were taken forcibly from Africa, and so was I” (2015, p. 314).

Ostensibly, the African dimension of his identity as a Mauritanian is in a great measure responsible for his quasi-enslavement in Guantanamo. Ould Slahi confirms these assumptions declaring:

The reality was that many of us were first and foremost African. We were born in African countries, our citizenship was that of African nations, we were handed over or surrendered by our own African governments to the U.S., and we shared the common experiences of Africans. Gitmo was a place of African detention (2020, p. 403).

This statement typifies Ould Slahi’s affiliation to an indelible carceral tradition, revealing affinities with the autobiographical accounts of enslaved Africans in America. Goyal bolsters these inferences explicitly as she establishes correlations between anterior and contemporary carceral writings. She notes that “reading *Guantánamo Diary* in relation to a genre seems to echo the African-American slave narrative” (Goyal, 2017, p.69).

2. Guantanamo: an archeology of the site

2.1 The neo-slave plantation

Albeit a discursive formation produced in an entirely distinct historical context, Ould Slahi’s narrative emerges from an epistemic location that displays conspicuous similarities with the slave plantation. Indeed, perceiving correspondences between a carceral geography such as Guantánamo Bay Detention Center and its genealogical ancestry, or its historical a priori, is likely to expose disquieting truths on an obsolete space of confinement. Its direct implications on present carceral institutions such as Guantánamo documents in substantial proportions Foucault’s historico-carceral continuum. In this connection, sociologist Wacquant makes similar parallels as to how the slave plantation still constitutes a historical a priori and substratum underpinning contemporary U.S. carceral networks. In this context, Wacquant makes an unapologetic critique of the U.S. as a punitive state, speculating that there is a lineal bond between the plantation and modern U.S. carceral institutions. He asserts that “slavery and mass imprisonment are genealogically linked” (Wacquant, 2002, p.41).



2.2 The genealogies of the self

Establishing a syncretic connection between an anterior captivity system such as the slavery plantation and contemporary U.S. prison is a yielding approach. Indeed, this method can account for a myriad of incongruous practices perpetrated and perennialized in Guantánamo Detention Center wherein Ould Slahi was wrongly detained for more than 14 years without trial. As a matter of fact, he identifies the plantation as his foundational matrix, defining himself as a neo- slave in the process. Although stated laconically and obliquely, it is yet an unequivocal reference to the slave plantation that Ould Slahi alludes to writing that “slaves were suddenly assigned to somebody they didn’t choose, and so was I. And when I looked at the history of slaves, I noticed that they ended up an integral part of **the master’s house** [emphasis mine]” (Ould Slahi, 2015, p. 403).

3. Guantanamo: the somatic dimension of the U.S. military-carceral apparatus

3.1 The implementation of anachronistic carceral technologies

Construed as a neo-plantation, Guantánamo Bay Detention Center is ostensibly a carceral institution which is likely to provide a *modus vivendi* replete with physical and mental pain. Degrading psychological as well as physical torture experimented on its precarious detainees is a quotidian carceral *modus operandi*. Indeed, a paraphernalia of daunting carceral technologies were used against “special” prisoners such as Mohamedou Ould Slahi.

Foucault lays bare the body-centric dimension of these punitive technologies, conceptualizing the somatization of carceral practices in neologisms such as biopolitics and biopower. For him, the body is always at stake when it is compromised in a network of powerful political maneuvers, thus constructed in biopolitical terms. In this vein, Foucault further declares that “in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body. It is directly involved in a political field” (1977, p. 25).

Therefore, how potentially subversive biopolitical identities such as Ould Slahi are handled to catalyze normative comportment is a matter which is directly connected to the biopolitical modes of containment that activate within the carceral apparatus. To mention him again, Foucault evinces the ways in which biopolitical selves constitute systematic targets in carceral states, which is incontestably the case of the U.S., arguing that when “the



body is directly involved in a political field, power relations have an immediate hold upon it” (1977, p. 25). In the same context, he identifies punitive practices like torture as a way to implement biopower (Foucault, 1977).

3.2 The corporeal normalization of a nonconformist identity

Foucault’s approach is indubitably a convenient conceptual apparatus likely to systematize the ways in which adamant identities such as Ould Slahi constitute the privileged target of a systemic biopower. While in Guantánamo, Ould Slahi was quasi-ritually subjected to the most appalling corporeal torture programs as a mode of punishment by the U.S. military-carceral apparatus because he was allegedly implicated in a convoluted geopolitical conflict. As a consequence, a variety of punitive technologies were systematically applied to him, denying him the most basic human needs. He writes that he was exposed to “a litany of psychological and sexual humiliations including death threats, threats to his family, mock kidnappings and rendition” (Ould Slahi, 2015, p. x). Then he expressly addresses his readers, saying: “You don’t know how terrorizing it is for a human being to be threatened with torture. One becomes literally a child. An Arabic proverb says: ‘waiting on torture is worse than torture itself.’ I can only confirm this proverb” (2015, p. 112). Later in his account, he further reveals that “the torture squad was so well trained that they were performing almost perfect crimes, avoiding leaving any evidence. Nothing was left to chance” (2015, p.114). At this point, he resolves to indict the U.S. carceral apparatus explicitly, likening his captors to a horde of criminals.

As he details the callousness of the biopower technologies used against him while detained in Guantánamo, Ould Slahi declares that at one point during his special interrogation: “I was put through a simulated kidnapping. I was taken on a boat and threatened to be thrown overboard. After that, I was severely beaten and packed in ice to prevent bruising” (1915, p.483). He also recollects that “the beating party would go on for the next three or four hours before they turned me over to another team that was going to use different torture techniques” (1915, p.484). He evokes these prolonged episodes of his biopower ordeal, along with the verbal technologies that literally degraded him to zoomorphic status. His captors would ruthlessly designate him as a captive who “looks like a dog, walks like a dog, smells like a dog, barks like a dog, must be a dog” (2015, p.120). He likewise reports that this verbal abuse “sounded awful. I know I am not a dog, yet I must be one” (2015, p.121). These are ostensibly punitive corporeal procedures which



illustrate the leverage of biopower technologies in stripping detainees of their humanness, redefining them in alternate corporeal identities.

Moreover, Foucault writes that the production of carceral identities “has never functioned without a certain additional element of punishment that certainly concerns the body itself: the rationing of food, deprivation, corporal punishment, and solitary confinement” (1977, p.16). Ould Slahi vouches for these claims as he reminisces that more biopower technologies were used against his famished and debilitated body such as, to name but a few, sleep deprivation, sexual molestation and dietary manipulation, including restricted access to food and water. He recounts: “You cannot imagine how happy I was to be able to decide the time and the amount of water I could drink” (Ould Slahi, 2015, pp. 639-640).

These poignant testimonies exemplify how body-centered carceral technologies can effectively transcend the limits of an already jeopardized biopolitical identity like Ould Slahi, both as an African and a Muslim.

4. Guantánamo: a faith-centric carceral system

4.1 A site for Islamophobia networks

From a U.S. perspective, the religious substratum that underlies these biopolitical identities like Ould Slahi and the presumed Global War on Terrorism waged against him thoroughly justifies the heavy mobilization of lethal biopower technologies. Indeed, since 9/11 the religious-centric resonances of this conflict have instigated a multitude of hostile attitudes and practices against Muslims, a phenomenon known as Islamophobia. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, the notion refers to an intense “hostility or prejudice towards Islam and Muslims” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 2023). Criminologist and Hate Studies Chris Allen provides a more elaborate definition, as he construes Islamophobia as “an ideology that sustains and perpetuates negative meanings about Muslims and Islam” (Allen, 2011, p.190). Similarly, political theorists John Lechte and Saul Newman argue that the Muslim is a “body who may not only pose the threat of contamination in a physical sense through disease, but also weaken the cultural integrity of the nation, **spreading the virus of Islam** or terrorism [emphasis mine]” (Lechte & Newman, 2013, p.14).

Accordingly, the prolific and eclectic literature that addresses the notion and practice of Islamophobia, as well as the virulent anti-Muslim propaganda that has characterized America since 9/11, divulge the ways in which U.S. de facto power has been demystified. It shows, particularly, how the U.S. has



instrumentalized this event to trade the assumption that Islam, and its corollary, political Islam, are anti-Western ideologies, and are thus likely to emerge as hazardous proselytizing powers and uncompromising geopolitical contenders. Therefore, it is imperative to stymie its [Islam's] "infectious" spread. Muslim Studies Uzma Jamil makes comparable estimations surmising that the West has clearly "normalized the idea of Muslims as threats to Western societies" (Jamil, 2017, p.175).

By virtue of his Muslimness, and his presumed involvement in the 9/11 bombings, Mohamedou Ould Slahi epitomizes such a threat, with his religious motivations allegedly compromising the U.S. political, geopolitical, and geostrategic agendas. To retaliate against him, the U.S. used a vast array of biopower technologies while he was incarcerated as a high-value Muslim captive in Guantánamo.

4.2 Muslimness behind bars

In *Guantánamo Diary*, which is virtually an archive of anti-Islamic discursive formations, Ould Slahi chronicles his carceral torment in a high-security detention facility exclusively designed for hypothetically "dangerous" Muslims like him. Although he was collateral damage of the "War against Terror," his highly visible profile as a Muslim in the post-9/11 context granted him the status of a high-risk detainee. Consequently, he was detained in a secret location within the prison, where he was exposed to a variety of discretionary punitive measures, the aim of which was basically to efface his idiosyncratic identity as a Muslim. He was aware from the outset that there was a detrimental anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S., which was transposed into Guantánamo Detention Center. He wrote that there was a "highly electrified environment against Muslims" (Ould Slahi, 2015, p.282). How he managed to negotiate his Muslimness in such an extremely anti-Muslim carceral environment was commensurate with the carceral epistemologies that categorized Muslim detainees like him in typologies rife with vindictive, Islamophobic resonances. Indeed, in the explosive context of post-9/11 America, Islam and terrorism were inextricably part of the same equation.

How these notions co-impact each other in a carceral environment like Guantánamo Detention Center is a matter that Ould Slahi remembers vividly as one of his captors declares: "To me, you meet all the criteria of a top terrorist. When I check the terrorist check list, you pass with a very high score" (Ould Slahi, 2015, p.192). Islamologist Maha Hilal traces these enunciations to their epistemological matrix arguing that "regardless of how clearly, or

not, the term [Muslim] itself is defined, it is deeply rooted in Islamophobia” (Hilal, 2022, p.21).

Conclusion

We have examined the multidimensional character of Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* (2015) as a repository of carceral discursive formations that strive to validate Foucault’s hypotheses about the modern prison as a historical continuum of an historical a-priori, i.e., anterior captivity sites. Through these Foucauldian conceptual lenses, we have endeavored to bring epistemological correctives, debunking the erroneous belief that the West has relinquished archaic carceral practices. Our findings regarding Guantánamo Detention Center bely these assumptions while they undergird our premises in displaying striking correlations with former intramural discursive formations _ correlations that Ould Slahi’s atypical custodial experience amply exemplifies as he embodies a three-dimensional identity: Muslim, Arab, and African.

The religious, ethnic and civilizational epistemologies in which idiosyncratic identities like Ould Slahi are codified function as the catalyst which has ignited U.S. wholesale carceral enterprise in the aftermath of 9/11, providing the U.S. with ample legitimacy to implement unparalleled punitive practices in Guantánamo. Its objective was prima-facie to overpower Muslim’s anti-American mindsets, or so it was believed. However, one may reasonably conjecture as to how the U.S. rationalizes the current production of anti-Muslim epistemologies, which continue to fuel rising Islamophobia on a global scale, now that “Muslim terrorism” is no longer a threat. It is clear that although the U.S. strives to euphemize its anti-Muslim discourse and trade itself under the veneer of a politically correct state, its anti-Muslim sentiment has taken critical levels, creating the conditions that sustain a hostile rhetoric towards Muslims within and outside the U.S., the aim of which is obviously to muster more predatory geopolitical power.

However, for Ould Slahi, the moment is not one of vindictiveness, because for religiously disparate communities to co-exist in an indulgent togetherness is the cause that he strives to plead for, using his personal carceral trajectory in Guantánamo as an exemplar. Although Ould Slahi is still subject to the duty of reserve, he travels the world, hosting conferences to counter and dismantle the matrices and proxies of Islamophobia, exposing Guantánamo as a dismal and uncanny carceral institution.



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