EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Guantánamo Diary and African Studies

The Mauritanian citizen Mohamedou Ould Slahi was kidnapped and illegally detained for fourteen years, first in Jordan, then in Afghanistan, and finally at Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, from 2002 until October of 2016. During the first years of his incarceration, Slahi learned English from his captors and torturers. Slahi wrote a prison diary, a form of memoir, in 2005 in English, the first of its kind. While initially seized by the U.S. military, it was subsequently declassified in 2012 by the U.S. government with extensive redactions. First excerpted in *Slate* magazine, the 466-page work, edited by Larry Siems, was published as *Guantánamo Diary* in January 2015, and it became an immediate international bestseller. A digitization of the handwritten manuscript is available online. A complete unredacted text, restored by Slahi himself from memory, appeared in print in 2017. The publisher's website includes interviews and new stories, along with an animated documentary. A feature film version is slated to appear in late 2020.

I first became aware of Slahi's ordeal during a fellowship year at the Kroc Institute for Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana. Students in an international studies course read *Guantánamo Diary* and, along with faculty, organized a panel featuring, among others, Slahi's editor, Siems, and Slahi himself live via satellite from Nouakchott. To a packed theater, Slahi delivered an extraordinary plea for understanding and forgiveness. I left the theater overwhelmed with grief at the horrific human rights violations he had experienced courtesy of my government, but equally astonished at his capacity for compassion and reconciliation. I contacted Siems and then reached out to Slahi via email, keen to bring his story to a wider African studies audience.

The *African Studies Review* convened a special forum at the 2018 61st Annual Meeting in Atlanta to revisit this important work from the perspective of interdisciplinary African studies. My first point of scholarly engagement intersected with Slahi's experience of coerced removal and exile. At the time, I was completing a book with Nathan Riley Carpenter on the history and present of exile in Africa (Carpenter & Lawrance 2018). The second entrée

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for me, and I think for many readers with an African studies background, is the seamlessness with which Slahi himself ties his experience of kidnapping, illegal detention, and other coercive processes to the rich history of the enslavement of Africans by Americans and Europeans. In the 2017 edition, Slahi relates a conversation with one of his incarcerators.

> "Are you ready to work with us? Otherwise your situation is gonna be very bad," the man continued.
> "You know that I know that you know that I have done nothing," I said.
> "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."
> "African tribes sold their people to us," he replied.
> "I wouldn't defend slavery if I were in your shoes," I said.

Informed by these two interwoven strands of thought, I conceived of a panel of Africanist scholars reflecting on *Guantánamo Diary* as Africanists. The Atlanta panel, which you can view in its entirety as supplementary material on our webpage [https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/teaching-africa] and on the ASR YouTube channel [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr59IqPyj9tCvmY-H3lfiQw], featured the American historian Erin Pettigrew, the Canadian historian M. Ann McDougall, a Mauritanian-American graduate student Abbass Braham, and Slahi himself, via Zoom, discussing his work and fielding questions from the audience.

I, and surely many others, learned a great deal from this panel. Notably, Guantánamo, it turns out, is not only a Muslim, Arab, and Middle Eastern prison, it is also a detention facility for many Africans in addition to Slahi. During the panel and the wider discussion that followed, panelists and audience members collectively observed that in public commentary and debates there appeared to be a deficiency of materials with which to contextualize and teach *Guantánamo Diary* as a work of non-fiction by an African. Cognizant that Slahi and his story are routinely framed within debates considered Middle East and North African studies, Islamic studies, or within the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism, the panelists and I decided more ought to be done to instantiate the work's significance vis-à-vis interdisciplinary African studies.

Like many American citizens, I have a deep-seated sense of revulsion at my government's role in the illegal incarceration and torture of Africans. With this and other considerations in mind, I embarked on my own trip to Mauritania in July of 2019. I wanted to meet Slahi, not because I doubted his story, but rather because I wanted to experience in person the compassion he so effectively broadcast digitally. After a day of talking, sharing tea, meeting friends, and touring the national museum, I was entranced (see Figure 1). Slahi graciously agreed to write about the many other Africans in Guantánamo and the shameless role of African governments in enabling illegal U.S. operations. He shared my enthusiasm about bringing to light the stories of other Africans, and saw value in facilitating Africanists keen to use

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Figure 1. Author and Slahi in Slahi's office, July 2019.



Guantánamo Diary in the classroom. Insofar as the responsibility for most of his experience lies with the United States government and its citizenry, who, at the time of writing, continue to permit the operation of a prison and military base in an enclave of a sovereign nation, the Republic of Cuba, in violation of international law, it behooves Africanists to bring his story to the attention of our students and colleagues.

In the commentaries that follow, as an accompaniment to Slahi's original essay, a dynamic group of writers showcase critical dimensions of Slahi's remarkable diary. Erin Pettigrew reflects on the betwixt and between place of Mauritania in African studies and the role of authoritarian African governments in the proliferation of human rights abuses throughout the continent. Abbass Braham recounts the history of Mauritania prior to and since September 11, 2001, Slahi's post-incarceration experience, and the place of Islamism in Slahi's narrative. Kris Inman contextualizes the place of Africa and Africans within global counterterrorism operations, revealing the importance of hearsay "evidence" and how flawed intelligence and legal structures incarcerated Slahi and continue to imprison many others. And Daniel Roux demonstrates how to read Slahi's memoir alongside the vast corpus of African prison diaries, highlighting the way that Slahi transforms the forced sinister intimacy of prison "into the foundations of what we can call a home—a space where, in the most barren soil imaginable, intimacy can be nurtured and grown." Our hope is that these essays, the vibrant panelists discussions from Atlanta, the voluminous materials on the publishers' websites, the new

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feature film, and a syllabus on the Teaching Africa space on the ASR website, will stimulate Africanists to share the unequivocally African story of *Guantánamo Diary* with new readers for decades to come.

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