UNDERSTANDING GUANTANAMO THROUGH ITS PARALLEL WITH SLAVERY

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Abstract

There are tangible and unsettling links between the age of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the peculiar nature of capture, transportation and detention of terror suspects in the War on Terror. 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. They are mostly racially distinct from their captors, with different languages, different cultures and religions. As with the imported slaves, they have been transported to Cuba against their will, chained, bound and shackled and sensorially deprived. They are deliberately separated from kin in order to prevent bonding in captivity, housed in barracks, overlooked by guards in a watchtower, deprived of legal rights, labelled barbarous, and are brutally punished if perceived to dissent. Above all, they are denied their basic identity, their names, their background, and their voice.

In this article I chart the parallel conditions, examining the echoes of the Atlantic Slave Trade in the process of capture and incarceration in today’s conflict. This will lead to a discussion of a discordant Marxian model of production within this slave system, which will in turn lead to a reflection on the particular dimension of Guantánamo Bay and Gitmo Detention Center as prominent markers of a US imperialist venture in Cuba.

Keywords: Cuba, Cuba–US relations, Bush, Obama, Guantánamo, detainees, slavery, terrorism, torture
Introduction

Whilst the Atlantic Slave Trade finally came to an end in the last decades of the nineteenth century, slavery nevertheless continues today throughout the globe. Amnesty International, which campaigns against the varieties of modern slavery, claims: ‘It is estimated that there are currently at least 12 million men, women and children in slavery around the world. The modern face of slavery includes forced labour, sexual slavery, child labour, bonded labour, forced marriage and descent-based slavery’ (AI 2008). Slavery, as Hannah Arendt would suggest, is the cornerstone of both colonialism and imperialism (King 2008), and thus critics of globalisation and free market economy, such as John Pilger or Noam Chomsky, compellingly liken such economic processes to a form of imperialism owing, amongst other factors, to the slavery and bondage that they produce. Modern slavery is generally understood as a process within a system of production – whether the goods produced be running shoes, electronic appliances or sex – and as such can be viewed through a Marxian critique of the capitalist model of surplus value, where the worker is enslaved to an ever-expanding system of production. Thus most features of modern slavery can be approached as representative of similar models of labour and production as those of the plantation economics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and thus modern enslaved people are figurative descendants of the enslaved Africans, or, as Pilger (2001) says of Indonesia and its bonded workers: ‘[This is a country] where the old imperialism meets the new.’

However, not all features of slavery in today’s world correspond to this economic model, and thus one important area may have been overlooked. There are tangible and unsettling links between the age of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the peculiar nature of capture, transportation and detention of terror suspects in the War on Terror. This peculiar situation also brings together the old with the new imperialism, but unlike Pilger’s description of globalised economics, it is a slavery based upon a different model, and is central to the unique relationship of Guantánamo Bay to a century of US-Cuban relations.

Only very few people have identified the detention of terror suspects at ‘Gitmo’ (Joint Task Force Guantánamo, JTF-GTMO) as an instance of slavery. One such association appeared in the UK media in 2005, when Clare Short (MP), Moazzam Begg (former Gitmo detainee), Clive Stafford Smith (human rights lawyer), Mark Thomas (comedian and activist) and others staged a protest outside the Birmingham factory of Hiatt & Co., a firm that had made ‘nigger collars’ for
shackling slaves in the nineteenth century, and oversize handcuffs that can be linked to ankle cuffs for the restraint of captives in Guantánamo (and elsewhere) in the twenty-first. Begg, as reported in the *Guardian*, highlighted this analogous situation:

> When I was in Guantánamo Bay, one of the things I pointed out to my lawyer was how it was ironic that these shackles were made in England, just like me and him. It was very bizarre. Those shackles would often cut into my arms and legs and make me bleed. It was those very same shackles I saw being used by American soldiers in Bagram airbase to hang a prisoner from the ceiling. It said ‘Made in England’ on there too. If these cuffs are used to shackle people up to the tops of ceilings or cages and then [those people are] beaten, it calls into question what those shackles are actually being used for. (Gillan 2005)

Begg also reflects on the historical parallels on a Stop the War meeting at Goldsmiths University London (available on YouTube), in which he identifies his own detention at Guantánamo as akin to the captivity of slaves there over a century before.

> When the phenomenon of captivity and detention in the War on Terror is understood as a simple by-product of legitimate ‘just’ wars, the victims can be easily written off as enemy combatants and therefore legitimately detained. A disturbing and sinister light is cast upon this circumstance when viewed as a modern descendant of the Slave Trade. This is encapsulated by the (un-named) author of an article in the journal *Unbossed*:

> We’ve concentrated on the epi-phenomena of this system of detention, the indefinite captivity, torture, secrecy and so forth, while forgetting that there is also the phenomenon itself that needs to be understood. There isn’t any way around the unpleasant fact that the phenomenon of a world-wide network which exists to capture, sell, transport, hold, and abuse without remit large numbers of innocent men cannot be described as a prison system. It is instead a classic system of slavery. That is an observation so basic that most of us, certainly I, have failed to note it at all. (2006)

> A historical link is thus established: La Bahía de Guantánamo, explored by Columbus, pirate base during the seventeenth century, harbour for the 3,000 invading British troops intent on taking Santiago in 1741, slave and sugar trading port in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the landing base for the US battalion of Marines in 1898 – the echoes of colonialism, piracy, invasion, trade and slavery reverberate today. This peculiar relationship between Guantánamo Bay,
Gitmo, abuse and torture, and Cuban-US relations has been surprisingly under-explored. To date one of the most informative and comprehensive analyses of the peculiar geo-political location of Guantánamo Bay and the detention centre is Amy Kaplan’s 2005 article ‘Where is Guantánamo?’ (See also Lievesley 2006 and Reid-Henry 2007.) Kaplan charts the evolution of the Bay from its original enforced lease, through its role throughout the turbulent early decades of the twentieth century, its role as a holding facility for Haitian and Cuban refugees, to its present position as a detention facility for captives of the War on Terror. The word of which even Kaplan is judicious in her use – owing to the rhetoric often attached to it, and the emotive reactions it engenders – is imperialism: ‘Until recently, the notion of American imperialism was considered a contradiction in terms, an accusation hurled only by left-wing critics. Indeed the denial of imperialism still fuels a vision of America as an exceptional nation, one interested in spreading universal values, not in conquest and domination’ (2005: 832). Not wishing to enter the millennial debate about the conceptualisation of imperialism, one attribute of imperialism that becomes immediately apparent in an analysis of the geo-politics of Guantánamo Bay is slavery. In this article I will attempt to defend the opening hypothesis – that certain aspects of capture, transportation and incarceration of terror suspects are akin to features of slavery – by charting the parallel conditions. This will lead to a discussion of the discordant Marxian model of production within this slave system, which will in turn lead to a reflection on the particular dimension of Guantánamo Bay and Gitmo Detention Center as prominent markers of a US imperialist venture in Cuba.

Capture for Bounty

Just as the Europeans did not plunge into the interior of Africa to capture people for slaving, but mostly traded for people already enslaved from raiding parties by Arabs and other African nations (Blackburn 1998: 95–114), so too were many of the detainees of Guantánamo captured for bounty and sold to the US ground forces, often outside of the arena of combat. Civil rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith transcribes the verdict of one of his clients held at Gitmo, Ahmed Errachidi:

‘I was not “captured”. […] I was in a car going to Lahore so I could get a plane out. We were stopped by the Pakistanis. […] There was an American who was speaking English, which I understood. They were talking about prisoners. The Pakistani had a small case and I heard them counting out money. Imagine the feeling of being sold, and becoming his!
Later an Arab-American military policeman in Bagram told me that I had cost them five thousand dollars. I am a hostage and traded commodity.’ (Stafford Smith 2007: 168)

Murat Kurnaz, a German resident who endured years of captivity at Guantánamo, testified to the European Parliament about his experiences: ‘They [the Pakistani police] caught me and sold me to the Americans for 3000 or 5000 dollars’ (Europarl.com 2006). Lastly, former president of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf, boasted in his memoirs of having received large sums of bounty money for the delivery of ‘suspects’ to the US military. Stafford Smith writes in the New Statesman:

One interesting nugget involves Pakistan’s sale of hundreds of stray Arabs to the Americans, for shipment to Bagram air force base and on to Guantanamo Bay. Many of my clients in Cuba insist that, far from being captured on the battlefield in Afghanistan, they were grabbed in Pakistan and flogged to the Americans, like slaves at auction. Predictably enough, for five years the Bush administration has remained very quiet on this issue, but Musharraf’s book sheds new light. ‘Many members of al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan and crossed the border into Pakistan,’ he writes. ‘We have played cat and mouse with them […] We have captured 689 and handed over 369 to the United States. We have earned bounties totalling millions of dollars. Those who habitually accuse us of “not doing enough” in the war on terror should simply ask the CIA how much prize money it has paid to the government of Pakistan.’ (Stafford Smith 2006)

An important relationship with the Atlantic Slave Trade is here established. In both cases the captors set out to capture people simply for the pay-off, unlike earlier forms of slavery in which the enslaved had been defeated in battle. Blackburn notes this distinction: ‘One might say that many Roman slaves were sold because they had been captured, while many African slaves entering the Atlantic trade had been captured so that they might be sold’ (1998: 10). US military personnel working in Guantánamo and other holding facilities are trained to believe that all detainees are enemy combatants – terrorists – picked up on the battlefield. Erik Saar, who worked as a translator in Gitmo, recalls an MP unit commander: “Always remember,” he would say, “you guys should feel privileged to be here guarding this scum. These men are the worst of the worst. This place is reserved for those terrorists who either helped plan 9/11 or were planning future attacks against us when they were apprehended”’ (Saar and Novak 2005: 74). Numerous other
sources now reveal that most of the detainees at Gitmo were Arabs in Afghanistan or Pakistan sold simply for bounty.

Whilst in captivity prior to transportation, the captives are separated from friends and kin – dividing language, religion, culture, homeland, even race – as an initial exercise in breaking bonds between them, and thus reducing cohesion of resistance. Bagram Air Base, Kandahar, and other holding facilities housed men in specifically mixed environments. The journey from initial capture to detention still in the home territory is often very long, and frequently the captives are subject to torture and abuse. A dominant factor of captivity in both historical cases is the enforced notion that the captives will never again see their family, village or community. In the slave-trading port of Ouidah, in Benin, captives were forced to march around the ‘Tree of Forgetfulness’ prior to being held in the dungeons in preparation for the Atlantic crossing. The objective of this tree-circling was to enforce amnesia – especially so that the spirit would not pine for home.

Slave traders rounded up men, women and children, at times trapping them with nets. Their catchment area stretched deep into Africa, even as far as Ethiopia and Sudan. Once caught the slaves were forced to walk in chains, hundreds of miles to Ouidah. Once there, they were subjected to a brutal process of brainwashing. Taken down the slave route that I followed, they were made to walk around a supposedly magical tree called the Tree of Forgetfulness. Men had to go round it nine times, women and children seven. This experience, they were told, would make them forget everything – their names, their family, and the life they had once had. As if this was not enough, the slaves were then locked into a dark room, built to resemble the hulk of a ship. In the local language this room was called Zomai, meaning literally: ‘There, where the light is not allowed.’ Its foundations are still visible and the place still seems to exude evil spirits and terror. (Branford 2006)

Captives in the War on Terror have reportedly been drilled with the same sense of forgetfulness, forced to accept the reality of their permanent captivity. Begg, interviewed in the 2007 film documentary Taxi to the Dark Side, describes this process of enforced amnesia: ‘I certainly believed that I was going to spend the greater part of my life and perhaps even face execution, which was what I was told quite often.’
Extraordinary Rendition – Atlantic Transportation

The captives from both historical periods are bound and transported across the Atlantic in brutal conditions, often chained, manacled, beaten and sensorially deprived. Whilst images are well known of the brutal interior lower decks of the Atlantic slaving vessels, and were indeed importantly disseminated to encourage support for Abolition, today numerous now well-known photographs testify to the harsh conditions the victims of Extraordinary Rendition were subjected to in their long hauls across the globe. The captives, unknowing, are then taken to the tropics; indeed, the bay of Guantánamo was a principal entry port for the slaving vessels in the eighteenth century. Once in Cuba, the captives (slaves or detainees) are stripped (if they are not already nude), examined, and re-clothed in the new uniform of captivity – the sackcloth trousers to work in the cane fields, the orange jumpsuits for incarceration in Gitmo. The deliberate mixing of language, culture and ethnicity continues. Blackburn (1998: 22) records the staggering mix of African people in plantations and mills in the New World (in addition to the degrees of mestizaje, or mixed African, American and European blood). The detainees of Guantánamo at one stage represented 46 different countries, and numerous different and mutually unintelligible languages (Greenberg 2007).

Once in captivity, slaves/detainees are housed in barracoons, chained, manacled, overlooked by a watchtower, guarded by dogs, punished for infringements, abused. In the barracoons, living conditions are harsh, mosquitoes, rodents, and disease are rife. Saar (2005: 33) talks of the ‘platoons’ of banana rats that infested Gitmo, covering the ground in their droppings. The captives are different from the captors, in terms of race, language, religion and nationality. Note in particular how the relationship between the US guards and military police at Gitmo follows the language tradition of racial hatred. Saar again recalls an MP berating him: “What the fuck is wrong with you; are you one of them detainee lovers?” (Saar and Novak 2005: 73), an expression that evokes ‘Indian-lover’ or ‘nigger-lover’ from the US past. The detainees, like the African slaves, are treated as children or simple primitives (detainees in Gitmo are offered Disney movies and McDonald’s Happy Meals as rewards for collaboration in interrogation.) This perception of the African slaves as barbarous, uncivilised and primitive underwrote the brutality of the slave trade, reflecting Luis de Sepúlveda’s sixteenth-century justification of the earlier enslavement of the native Caribbean peoples:
How are we to doubt that these people, so uncultivated, so barbarous, and so contaminated with such impiety and lewdness, have not been justly conquered by so excellent, pious, and supremely just a king as Ferdinand the Catholic was and the Emperor Charles now is, the kings of a most humane and excellent nation rich in all varieties of virtue? War against these barbarians can be justified not only on the basis of their paganism but even more so because of their abominable licentiousness, their prodigious sacrifice of human victims, the extreme harm that they inflicted on innocent persons, their horrible banquets of human flesh, and the impious cult of their idols.

When the enslavement of the indigenous Americans declined and the African system was enlarged, the same principles of the barbarous slave were employed. Jackson (2007) analyses the official language of the War on Terrorism as sharply indicative of a mentality of ‘othering’ the enemy and rendering him savage and barbarous:

The images from these notorious cases reveal the myriad of ways in which the public discourse about terrorism was translated by individual soldiers into specific instances of abusive behaviour. For example, the extreme forms of shackling seen in the images of the initial Guantánamo Bay prisoners (in some cases, bound and shackled to gurneys, detainees were wheeled to interrogations; in others they were tightly shackled, blindfolded, and muzzled) were officially justified on the grounds that these were such dangerous individuals that they had to be restrained in this fashion for the safety of those guarding them. General Richard E. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that they were such a threat because given half a chance they ‘would gnaw through hydraulic lines in the back of a C-17 to bring it down’. Similarly, Donald Rumsfeld told reporters on a visit to Guantánamo that the prisoners there were ‘among the most dangerous, best-trained, vicious killers on the face of the earth’. (2007: 362)

Jackson further outlines other instances of this discourse of dehumanising the enemy:

[…] the US ambassador to Japan stated that the 11 September 2001 attacks were ‘an attack not just on the United States but on enlightened, civilised societies everywhere. It was a strike against those values that separate us from animals – compassion, tolerance, mercy.’ […] President Bush reaffirmed this formulation when he stated that: ‘By their cruelty, the
terrorists have chosen to live on the hunted margin of mankind. By their hatred, they have divorced themselves from the values that define civilisation itself.’ (2007: 362–3)

The importance of this particular parallel is to highlight the means by which capture, transportation, abuse and the denial of basic human rights can be altogether facilitated by depicting the captive not only as mere enemy, but as murderous, evil, uncivilised – not altogether human – encapsulated by Jackson’s reflection on the photos of abuse at Abu Ghraib: ‘The sub-human terrorists were discursively remade as a squirming mass of parasites or cancerous cells; they ceased to be individuals and their humanity dissolved’ (2007: 363). In captivity, slaves/detainees suffer disorientation, homesickness, despair. They have no defence, and no means of understanding the roots of their captivity. Escape is impossible. Suicide is common.

Slaves/detainees are still transported even after the supposed end of the ‘trade’. Walvin notes that ‘the maritime slave trade was abolished in 1807 by the British and the Americans (earlier by the Danes), yet despite abolition an estimated three million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic, mainly to Brazil and Cuba, after abolition’ (2006: 70). Saar notes that ‘on May 1, President Bush stood on an aircraft carrier with a big banner hung behind him declaring MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. […] That month, two more flights left the island carrying a total of eighteen detainees home. But another one arrived bringing new captives; I wasn’t sure how many were on board, but I heard there was a net gain’ (Saar and Novak 2005: 230). Reuters, soon after Obama took office, reported on the sharp rise of abuse at Gitmo:

Abuse of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay has worsened sharply since President Barack Obama took office as prison guards ‘get their kicks in’ before the camp is closed, according to a lawyer who represents detainees. Abuses began to pick up in December after Obama was elected, human rights lawyer Ahmed Ghappour told Reuters. He cited beatings, the dislocation of limbs, spraying of pepper spray into closed cells, applying pepper spray to toilet paper and over-forcefeeding detainees who are on hunger strike. (Baker 2009)

Despite Obama’s 2009 executive order pledging to close Gitmo within a year, in September 2010 there remain 174 detainees in Gitmo (Worthington 2010), countless others in other secret prisons around the world, and a continuation of the practice of rendition. Indeed, just as the shipment of slaves to Brazil and Cuba rose in the closing years of the trade, so certain elements of the rendition and detention linked to the Bush era have continued or even increased since Obama took office. Worthington (2010) summarises this issue:
Two mainstream newspaper articles revealed the extent to which President Obama has, over the last 17 months, conspired with senior officials and with Congress to maintain the bitter fruits of the Bush administration’s torture program – and its closely related themes of arbitrary detention and hyperbole about the perceived threat of terrorism.

Habeas Corpus

The initial denial of the writ of habeas corpus in Gitmo ironically echoes the denial of any defence principle with the slaves who inhabited the same territory over a century before. Whilst the early detainees were held in secret, with no charges, with no rights and protections afforded by the Geneva Conventions (before human rights lawyers successfully campaigned for habeas corpus), so one can argue that the body is denied – a rejection of the Great Writ. Slaves in Cuba either took the names of their masters or were labelled according to their supposed origin: ‘Mi padrino se llamaba Gin Congo’ says the Cimarrón, Esteban Montejo (Montejo and Barnet 2010: 64). Slaves were bought and sold and put to work like livestock, families were separated, pregnant women were forced to toil right into the last month, newborns were treated only as future labourers, exhaustion was punishable, and so on. In Gitmo, many detainees were initially kept in wire cages, biological functions such as bowel movements were in public view, sleep and feeding denied or strictly controlled. In particular, in captivity, the nature of the abuse often takes the form of sexual abuse. Whilst many writers have analysed the particular relationship between general physical abuse and sexual abuse in the US treatment of detainees, Allan Uthman (2009) viscerally examines the sheer horror of this abuse:

What’s so sick about it is that the sexual nature of the torture seems so unnecessary. I mean, even if we were going to torture them, we could have stuck to waterboarding, pulling some fingernails or just beating the shit out of them. But menstrual blood smeared on their faces? Ass rape? What kind of people do that? What possible purpose does that serve that outweighs becoming known as the country that ass-rapes people? We couldn’t get enough answers, or false confessions, or whatever we were looking for, from regular brutality? We had to go all BDSM on these people?
As Blackburn recognises, the sheer wastefulness (abuse and loss of life) of Atlantic slavery was nevertheless still within the confines of economic profitability. That being the case, what are the ends that are justified by the means of secret incarceration and abuse at Gitmo? Whilst the parallels between these two historical episodes, as demonstrated, are legion, one fundamental issue lies distinct – the concept of *productivity*.

**Productivity**

Slaves worked the cane harvest, the mills, the docks, the coffee plantations, the domestic duties, etc. What is the *product* of the Gitmo detainees? A fascinating, if slightly disjointed study by Susan Willis entitled ‘Guantánamo’s Symbolic Economy’ deals particularly with the idea that the detainees of Gitmo are working on the ‘Intel Harvest’ – they are the producers of intelligence:

Guantánamo manifests a distinctive form of labour control. Whereas slavery forced labour out of humans that were defined as chattel, and the wage system turned a worker’s labour power into a commodity to be traded in the marketplace, by extension, the security industry extracts the raw material of intelligence out of humans who are less than chattel; who have no status, except that of the infinitely detained. In terms of a cost/benefit analysis, one can hardly imagine a more profitable mode of production. Outside of investments in infrastructure (the chainlink fence, shackles, concrete floor), and minimal outlays for service and maintenance (hoods and jumpsuits, interrogators, Muslim diets), intelligence is basically free for the taking. Once procured, it feeds the exponential growth of the American appetite for security, and that of an industry to supply it. Unlike prisoners in a penal colony, the Guantánamo detainees are not meant to be productive in the traditional sense. They are not there to fell trees, pick cotton, break stones or build roads. Nor will they ever compete with inmates on the mainland who earn pennies sewing jeans and operating call centres. Shackled to the floor, the detainees are farmed for intelligence […]

(2006: 124)

Willis’s article harrowingly describes a process by which the Gitmo detainees are providing a commodity that ‘is cycled into the various agencies and institutions which produce security both in a material sense, along with infrastructures of personnel and weaponry, and as an
ideology that suffuse our daily discourse’ (124). Waste, like gushing oil wells, is not important; neither is quality: ‘It is unimportant if detainees babble, admit to anything, give false or conflicting information. What matters is to corner the market, drive out competition, be the world’s dominant supplier’ (125). Thus, according to this model that Willis delineates, the ‘intelligence system’ conforms to the principles of the market, providing a purchasable commodity. Whilst even the least cynical amongst us could not fail to see that security information is a global commodity, bartered and traded, accentuated as a marker of alliances and curtailed as a threat of dispute (David Milliband’s refusal to investigate possible MI5 collusion in torture is a good example of this) and oiling the cogs of modern international relations, a stark element of this intelligence when derived from torture is, conversely, its lack of value. Indeed, the price paid for the mostly worthless information is huge – a point expressed also by Erik Saar:

I felt as if I had lost something. We lost something. We lost the high road. We cashed in our principles in the hope of obtaining a piece of information. And it didn’t even fucking work. […] What the fuck did I just do? What the fuck were we doing in this place? […] Most of America was asleep, but I was wide awake, defending freedom, honor fucking bound. There was no honor in what we had just done. We were grasping, and in doing so we had spit on Islam. Our tactics were way out of bounds. What we did was the antithesis of what the United States is supposed to be about. (Saar and Novak 2005: 228–9)

A different model of analysis from the economic model of the Atlantic Slave Trade is thus presented. Does the parallel with slavery break down at this point, therefore? Owing to the fact that no useful product is generated, that the detainees neither labour in the mines like the native New World peoples at the time of Las Casas, nor build the US railroads like the unfortunate Chinese Coolies, one could suggest that the systems are different and the parallels are merely happenstance. This, however, overlooks two striking features that bridge this slave production, intelligence commodity relationship: firstly one can examine the relative centrality of the slave economy to colonial domination of key mineral and agricultural commodities in earlier centuries, and the role of rendition, incarceration and interrogation in securing domination of geo-strategic interests today. Thus Willis’s assessment that ‘The CIA, FBI, NSA, Pentagon and other agencies compete for access to intelligence as capitalist enterprises compete for other sorts of raw materials’ (2006: 125) convincingly equates the product ‘intel’ (and, it must be added, fear and loathing) with, say, Caribbean sugar or Chilean copper. Secondly one must not overlook the fundamental role of power
Torture and slavery have something in common. They are expressions of a power that admits no restraint on itself. They issue from the instinct for domination, hardened by a savage self-protectiveness. Yet a slave might always assert his freedom by choosing to die. This last resort has been denied to the Guantanamo prisoners. If they refuse to eat, they are force-fed intravenously. We keep them alive, and starve them of justice, and kill them by inches. Is this done to prevent their becoming martyrs? But they are already martyrs from the terms of their imprisonment. The force-feeding is really the last refinement of state coercion and cruelty.

Slavery is the exercise of power, whether it be enslavement of the enemy following their defeat in war, or the purchase of slaves through economic might. Where these analogies are drawn between slavery and detention, the base motivating force behind both processes is the exercise of power. This, fittingly, brings us back to the initial area of analysis concerning Amy Kaplan’s examination of Guantánamo Bay as a focal point of US imperialist design: ‘Guantánamo lies at the heart of the American Empire […] The use of Guantánamo as a prison camp today demands to be understood in the context of its historical location. […] Its legal – or lawless – status has a logic grounded in imperialism, whereby coercive state power has been routinely mobilized beyond the sovereignty of national territory and outside the rule of law’ (2005: 832). Nothing about Guantánamo, as Kaplan argues, has been left to chance. The excruciatingly confusing concerns of ‘ultimate sovereignty’, the grey nature of extraterritorial legality, the ‘limbo’ (as Judith Butler, 2002, famously described it) in which the prisoners are located outside of national jurisdiction yet not protected by international law or Geneva protocol, are all intricately tied to Guantánamo’s position vis-à-vis US-Cuban relations during the War on Terror.

Cuba

Given, therefore, the visible associations with the era of slavery, why is it significant that these ‘worst of the worst’ prisoners captured and incarcerated should be held, precisely, in Guantánamo, Cuba, and not on sovereign territory of the US or of its allies? Kaplan, again, highlights a
significant racial issue that arises when considering this precise location, outlining the base’s recent history as a holding facility for refugees from both Haiti and Cuba:

The current prisoners not only first literally inhabited the camps built for the Haitian and Cuban refugees, but they also continue to inhabit the racialized images that accrued over the century in the imperial outpost of Guantánamo: images of shackled slaves, infected bodies, revolutionary subjects, and undesirable immigrants. The prisoners fill the vacated space of colonized subjects, in which terrorism is imagined as an infectious disease of racialized bodies in need of quarantine. […] Stereotypes of the colonized, immigrants, refugees, aliens, criminals, and revolutionaries are intertwined with those of terrorists and identified with racially marked bodies in an imperial system that not only colonizes spaces outside U.S. territories but also regulates the entry of people migrating across the borders of the United States. (2005: 840)

History is summoned to the present, therefore, and the detainees of Guantánamo significantly embody numerous characteristics of the threatening enemy: the slave, the revolutionary, the immigrant, the asylum seeker. The enemy is importantly not in a distant country, pertaining to a distant conflict, but is menacing the very sovereign territory – *inimicus ad portis*. He is, furthermore, in Cuba, and, as I argue in a *Guardian* piece of 2009, numerous news articles across the US have repeatedly implied that Guantánamo is either somehow a Cuban prison, or that the detainees are fortunate to be incarcerated by the US *as a means of protecting them from Cuba* (Rowlandson 2009). The prison cell is thus within a prison building, within a prison camp, within a prison territory, within an allegedly hostile and thus prison island of Cuba. This island is itself imprisoned within a crippling embargo in a shark (and now oil and dispersant) infested sea. The endless walls enclosing the detainees thus serve to isolate them from international law, from human rights protocol and from contact with friends and family, all the while maintaining them at a threateningly close distance from the US shore. It becomes clear how significant it has been that the detainees have been held in Guantánamo, Cuba, and not elsewhere.

George W. Bush, in his State of the Union Address on 29 January 2002 concentrated on Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the terrorist-sponsoring states of the ‘Axis of Evil’. On 6 May 2002 John Bolton gave a speech entitled ‘Beyond the Axis of Evil’, in which he added three more members to this group of ‘rogue states’: Libya, Syria, and Cuba (BBC, 6 June 2002). Bolton defined these nations (with no degree of irony) as ‘state sponsors of terrorism that are pursuing or who have the potential to pursue weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or have the capability to do
so in violation of their treaty obligations’ (BBC, 6 June 2002). Later, in January 2005, Condoleezza Rice reiterated Cuba’s rogue position as an ‘outpost of tyranny’ alongside Myanmar, Belarus and Zimbabwe. Cuba’s smooth transition from Cold War enemy to War on Terror enemy reveals a deeper and more pervasive transition of Guantánamo Bay, and the Gitmo detention facility from the slaving port of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to the slaving port of the twenty-first. ‘Destiny’, writes Borges, ‘takes pleasure in repetition, variants, symmetries’, and the dying gaucho of the tale ‘The Plot’ evokes the dying Caesar. Two historical periods, one spanning nearly four centuries and the other, not yet a decade, centred on the geographical location of Guantánamo, Cuba, may be seen as curiously parallel. The latter period may even be seen as a repetition, variant or symmetry of the other.

Note

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References

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1 Journalist Andy Worthington has dedicated many years now to attempt to shed light on the holding facilities beyond Gitmo: see category tab ‘Extraordinary rendition and secret prisons’ on his extensive website: http://www.andyworthington.co.uk/.