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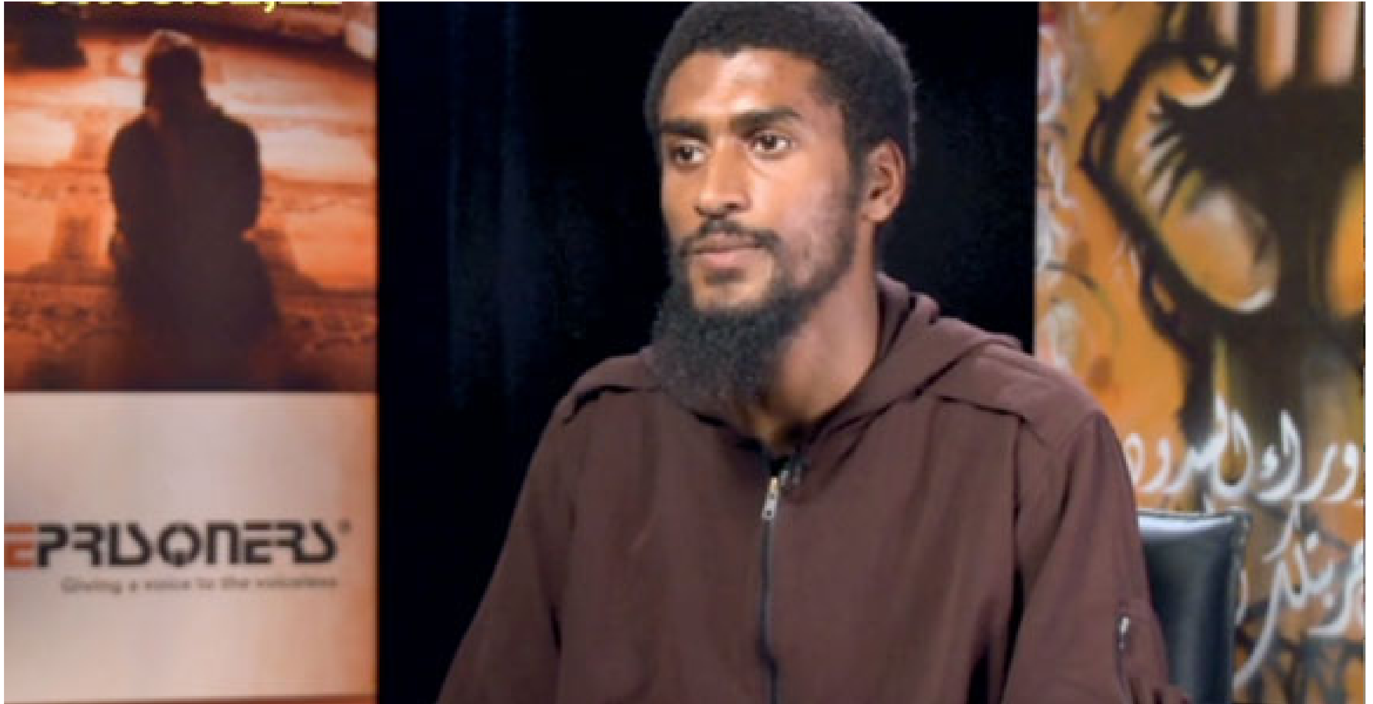

Still from *Selection from the Rule of Law Oral History Project*, courtesy of The Columbia Center for Oral History

Guantánamo: Seeing into the Dark Archive

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The term "archive" historically conjures up the immutable, the permanent, and the fixed objects of memory—that which has been saved, preserved, and classified within the known universe and in the canon of prior knowledge. Similarly, traditional oral history archives bank on the idea that transcripts and recordings can be controlled, edited, and even sequestered, allowing time for knowledge to migrate from one generation to another in a natural cycle. These controls have historically been rationalized under the banner of preservation, in which acidic paper and analog tapes must not be accessed or copied too many times lest they decay. Conversely, in the digital archive, copying does not degrade but in fact enhances recordings with voice and color correction; videos are subject tagged and searched and performances can be streamed live, mimicking the very act of creation. The excitement generated by this mimicry is connected to the contemporary utopian ideal of cloning, or recreation, in which endless repetition ensures life beyond the archive as well as within it, and memories of horrors fade into simulacra. The archive, in this context, also stands as a metaphor for the field of oral history that promises transformative change by bearing witness virtually and globally.

And yet, as we explore the more porous boundaries of the digital world, especially in the context

of oral history, some questions remain. Are not there still boundaries—of the imagination—that limit the transfer of the experience of trauma, as well as of torture? What about literal boundaries, such as when the revelation of intimate knowledge of torture in a climate of national security puts the interviewer and the narrator at risk? Within the field of oral history, can digital fluency and transparency address the internal crises of representation that occur when the body and the psyche have been robbed of expressive narrative, memory, and affect?

Since 2009, the Columbia Center for Oral History has been engaged in constructing an archive on the uses of Guantánamo Bay as a prison in the post-9/11 era, as well as U.S. policies of detention and rendition elsewhere. One of the explicit goals of the project is to digitally release the interviews close to the time of their capture. Thus far, we have collected over 150 hours of interviews with activist lawyers, judges, journalists, former military personnel, psychologists, guards, and a small number of former prisoners who are part of the London advocacy organization Cageprisoners**.**

As we move toward interviewing additional former prisoners in less safeguarded situations, we have encountered the contradictions of the democratic promise of the radical archive: not everything that we collect can be revealed. What we do collect is at times a repository of only partial speech and silences that are born from the subjects' necessary dissociation from extreme pain and suffering. The testimony we took from Feroz Abbasi in June of 2011, for example, is a subtle case study of what is hidden and what is revealed, even in an explicit description of torture.

Feroz Abbasi, designated as serial number 24 at Guantánamo, was born October 29, 1979 in Entebbe, Uganda. When he was eight years old his mother, social worker Zumrati Juma, brought him to London, where he was raised in a mixed Muslim and Christian household. At age 19, Abbasi decided to convert to Islam and move to Afghanistan, in part because he felt that he could not find work that would allow him to live a disciplined Muslim life—even as a street sweeper, his boss would not allow him to pray five times a day. He left for Afghanistan in 2000, and his family did not hear from him and was worried. Abbasi was picked up by the U.S. military in Kunduz in December of 2001 and transferred to the Kandahar airport, which doubled as a detention center. Here Abbasi was stripped naked, given an anal search, and transferred to Guantánamo on January 11, 2002.

The relationship between visibility and invisibility characterizes Abbasi's narrative from the beginning. As happens so often in trauma narratives, Abbasi's story shifts to the present tense as he describes his own position in the first image the world would see of the newly inducted prisoners:

They put me in the hands of the Marines, and then they lift you up and check one side. Lift you on the other side. You are frog marched from one set of hands to another and end up in the

stress position. They put us in the compound, and there is this famous Pentagon picture they released of us in stress positions. If that is the first picture, I am one of them. I was sitting in that stress position.[1]

The photo Abbasi refers to was for a time the single photo of the prisoners at Guantánamo and, according to military protocol, revealed only the bodies clad in orange suits, fixed in stress positions, and not the faces of the prisoners. The juxtaposition between the projected anonymity of the prisoners in the photograph Abbasi references and his visual testimony is striking, as we are called to move from the stance of spectator to a position of empathetic witnessing. And yet, as Abbasi moves from his life story to his torture story (where the life story stops), the smile that graced his features when the interview began still lingers—but freezes—as he continues to speak.

There is the hot sun. There is the surgical mask on your face. The sweat is going into the surgical mask. You cannot breathe. Dogs are barking. There is the soldier barking orders and then the bad translation of Arabic. I am just sitting there. You are in this stress position. You have to hold the position. Your hands have to be in a certain place. I cannot breathe.[2]

The witness, expecting Abbasi's affect to build as the story of torture unfolds, cannot "see" the evidence of suffering except in the absence of feeling and the disjuncture between what Abbasi describes and how he tells it. Ironically, neither could the prisoners "see" the torture of others, or the torturer's implements as they were hooded and only knew what was happening, as Abbasi says several times, by "sound."

As those of us in the Center began editing the beautifully shot interview, we realized that we had to annotate the video to move the viewer from the position of potential voyeur into the role of witness. In particular, we needed to shift the attention of the viewer away from the fixed smile to the haunted, and still fearful, expression in Abbasi's eyes as he carefully described what happened to his body. In the absence of documentary evidence of photographs of torture or Guantánamo itself (and while they were banned), several gifted visual artists have drawn the scenes of torture that former prisoners spoke in courtrooms. One of these is the British artist Lucy Edkins, who listened to the testimony of the Tipton Three—three British nationals who were held in Guntánamo from 2001 to 2004—and produced the *Tipton Report* (2004), which translates the experience of interrogation and torture the Tipton Three encountered in their incarceration at Kandahar and Guantánamo.

Lucy Edkins graciously allowed us to instantiate Feroz Abbasi's narrative of torture with images of what others like him suffered, lifting the mask of isolation and connecting the experience of the individual subject with those of others who shared the same fate and yet were prohibited from communing with each other. Her work offers the viewer the opportunity to become a witness, and frightens off the casual voyeur in her graphic depictions of a gun held to the head, of dogs rushing for the throat, and a prisoner lying on a wooden bench in an isolated cell. She connects the experience of one prisoner with all the others, giving us in visual terms the clearest

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impressions we can gather of the collective experience of extreme suffering. As we move through Abbasi's narrative with Edkins's images, we experience the remnants of the sensory assaults that Abbasi's voice and features belie: we begin to understand the cost of telling to those who have not seen or experienced torture.

Unveiling the dark archive—an archive to which few if any have access—of our country's recent past in a time of terror from within is no easy task. It requires a collective of voices of the lawyers, judges, former military prosecutors, and guards who have abandoned or risk their careers to protest torture in a democratic state. It requires the brave work of journalists who have refused to accept the limitations placed on them to remove blindfolds of all kinds. Carol Rosenberg, the heroic Miami-based journalist who has covered Guantánamo for the last decade, speaks of the importance of recovering the individual voices of prisoners to comprehend what they have suffered:

I write about Guantanamo full-time. And you can write about the debate, you can write about the discussion, you can write about the trials and the policy, but I wanted to tell a different story. And it goes back to that first photo on January 11, 2002, that, in many people's mind is Guantanamo, 20 guys on their knees in a cage. And if I've done anything or tried to do anything in the eight years is make those men individuals. And, for better or worse, that's what this mosaic does. It takes the men out of the cage and out of the orange jumpsuits and lets you look in their eyes.[3]

In continuing our work, looking into the eyes of those who suffered and witnessed torture, we must also hear that which remains unspoken and see that which cannot yet be transmitted in word and gesture. We must continue to build memory's mosaic by arranging the fragmented stories we are given, piece by piece, one shard of memory at a time. We must also, as stewards of the radical archive, protest the conditions that lead to the enactment of torture.

Mary Marshall Clark is director of the Columbia Center for Oral History and Columbia University, the world's oldest university-based oral history public archive. Clark, along with the sociologist Peter Bearman, undertook a large, longitudinal oral history project, "The September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project," a collection of 600 interviews with culturally and ethnically diverse New Yorkers differently affected by the afterlife of the September 11 events. Clark, Bearman, Catherine Ellis, and Stephen Drury Smith co-edited 19 of these stories in *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 2001* and *The Years that Followed*, published by The New Press in September 2011. Currently, Clark is directing a legal, historical project on the post-9/11 use Guantánamo Bay as a detention center, and on the ramifications of policies of torture and rendition on individuals and families. Clark is past president of the Oral History Association and a distinguished lecturer for the Organization of American Historians. Prior to her career at Columbia, Clark conducted oral histories for the *New York Times*.

Notes

[1] Reminiscences of Feroz Abbasi, Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University Libraries (session 1; page 46): http://www.columbia.edu/cu/libraries/inside/ccoh_assets/ccoh_8954358_transcript.pdf

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Faces of Guantánamo." Interview by Bob Garfield with Carol Rosenberg, January 15, 2010: http://www.onthemedia.org/2010/jan/15/faces-of-guantanamo/transcript

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