

Camp X-Ray and the Task of Critique: Torturability and the Politics of Ethical Recognition in Guantanamo

ALEX ADAMS

No they were not inhuman. Well, you know that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman.
—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (36)

An enemy had to remain a caricature if he was to be kept at a safe distance: an enemy should never come alive.
—Graham Greene, *The Human Factor* (148)

POLITICAL TORTURE IS MADE psychologically and politically possible by the dehumanization and demonization of one's enemies. When we fail or refuse to recognize our opponents or enemies as fellow human beings, it becomes easier to commit atrocities against them, to incarcerate them in dungeons, and to physically and psychologically victimize and exploit them. It is fundamentally and urgently necessary, therefore, for those of us in the humanities who oppose torture to critique and oppose the ways in which cultural artifacts and practices enable, or are otherwise complicit with, the political strategies of dehumanization that, in part at least, enable the violence of modern war. In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler defined the task of the humanities in the context of the then-emerging post-9/11 war on terror as the responsibility "to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense" (151). How does

the way that knowledges of war are mediated, she asks (here and elsewhere), affect the ways in which we can recognize our shared, vulnerable humanity? Further, how is this organization of understanding complicit in the ways in which the injustice, violence, and inequality of neocolonial global warfare come to be comprehensible? How, we might ask, does the way our knowledge is organized obscure and normalize this complicity in both dominant discourse and militarized practices?

To answer these questions, which remain vital today, it is necessary to describe the political and aesthetic factors that determine the philosophical horizons of human life that we can recognize as legitimate, as sympathetic, as deserving of affective attentions such as compassion or love, and as bearing political qualities—in theory universal protections but often in practice differentially distributed privileges (Kapoor and Narkowicz)—such as citizenship, human rights, equality before the law, and individual dignity. Put simply, we must investigate how political and cultural discourses organize knowledge in order to make it easier for us to accept the existence of a political quality I will call here "torturability" and to consider how we can best critique and resist this organization of knowledge. (My position, for the avoidance of doubt, is that nobody is torturable and that torture is always wrong.)

ALEX ADAMS is an independent scholar living and working in North East England. He has published widely on the representation of torture in popular culture, including two monographs, *Political Torture in Popular Culture: The Role of Representations in the Post-9/11 Torture Debate* (Routledge, 2016) and *How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario* (Repeater, 2019).

This article attempts this task through a reading of *Camp X-Ray*, a 2014 fiction film by writer-director Peter Sattler. *Camp X-Ray* explores the theme of torturability through a story about an unlikely yet powerful emotional connection between a prisoner and a guard at the US internment camp in Guantanamo Bay. This movie, which takes the moral and ethical problem of conflict incarceration and indefinite detention as its front-and-center conceptual territory, gives us a clear opportunity to unpack the questions I pose here. The Guantanamo prisoner is a particularly vivid example of a modern “torturable subject,” as the inmates at this prison are interned without trial, subject to torture, and entirely at the mercy of the American security and military apparatus. They have been legally dehumanized through their designation as “enemy combatants” and “detainees” and as such have been placed outside the protection of the law (Joynt; Sands 40–43). In political discourse and in popular culture too, much of it openly racist, these prisoners have been described as monstrous and as in some way deserving of the harsh treatment they have suffered (McClintock; Gregory). *Representations* of these prisoners, I argue here (as I have elsewhere), are particularly valuable for critical analysis because they enable us to consider the ways in which political discourses about torturability are circulated, mediated, debated, and contested in and through popular culture and political discourse.

This article is, therefore, also an attempt to address one of the broadest and most fundamental questions in literary and cultural studies (broadly defined)—namely, that of the extent to which cultural production is complicit in the reproduction of political power and, more to the point, to what extent hegemonic popular culture is capable of articulating conceptually meaningful and politically effective resistance to power. For instance, *Camp X-Ray*’s advertising byline, “connection takes courage,” seems to invite us to read the movie as an attempt to overcome the political and ethical barriers put in place by the militarized modes of thinking that overdetermine our understandings of

contemporary geopolitics, to discard clash-of-civilizations discourse, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, and arguments that incarceration in Guantanamo is humane, even excessively comfortable, for prisoners.

That is, the task of understanding torturability also must include critique of the rhetorical and representational structure of attempts to *rehumanize* enemies. What, after all, does it mean to construct a category of the human outside of which it is possible to be pushed (with very often the gravest of material consequences) and into which it is possible to gain, or regain, admittance? Further, we must be able to extend our humanizing gaze not only to the unjustly incarcerated but also to the guilty terrorist subject and be able to understand and represent those who are guilty of terrible crimes in such a way that we can at once perceive their difference from us—indeed, perceive their odiousness—and simultaneously recognize their status as fellow members of the human community. This article, by examining the way that *Camp X-Ray* shows the potential for compassion between enemies, discusses the ways in which it is (or is not) possible to conceptualize meaningfully rehumanizing stories.

This article has two parts. First, my reading of the central relationship between the guard and the prisoner shows the flexibility of the discursive parameters of what can be recognized as politically legitimate human life; the audience is invited to share the guard’s fascination with this prisoner to the extent that he is differentiated from the rest of the prison population in ways that echo some troubling aspects of dehumanizing discourse, such as clash-of-civilizations rhetoric and the Eurocentric parameters of humanity. Second, I examine how this rehumanization requires that the audience share the subject position of the prison guard. The film’s compassionate task is complicated by the fact that the prisoner remains ambiguous throughout the text, and one of our tasks as an audience is to “work out” the truth about the prisoner, a task that is fundamentally at odds with the political aims of rehumanization. The two readings of this movie I give here show

the potential for our models of ethical consciousness to articulate a valuable critique and for surveillant epistemologies to undermine that critique; crucially, they show that these knowledges, which may seem incompatible, can be at play at once, in tension or in uneasy coexistence, in one text.

Camp X-Ray and the Task of Critique

In *Camp X-Ray*, Private Amy Cole is a member of the military police in Guantanamo. She is quickly disillusioned with her new role: the routine is grinding, the accommodations are spartan, and the food is bad; she makes few friends, and the only romantic connection she forms sours into a welter of endlessly renewed resentment; the work is tedious, dangerous, dirty, and depressing. Ultimately, she finds that the only person she can really empathize or connect with is a prisoner, Amir Ali (frequently referred to by his prisoner number, 471). Over the course of their relationship, she comes to recognize the dignity of his humanity; she prevents his suicide, and when she leaves, they exchange gifts.

The film is explicitly critical of Guantanamo. It shows the regime as dehumanizing and as animated by a fundamentally poisonous, shocking antagonism; it shows the violence of military discipline and the dreary, monotonous hopelessness of prison life. Centrally, the film chronicles Cole's loss of faith in the military and political mission of Guantanamo. The first time the film shows the soldiers reciting Guantanamo's call-and-response slogan, "Honor Bound to Defend Freedom," she participates, but later in the film, after her disillusionment has taken root, she refuses to chant along with the other soldiers.

How do we understand the critical gesture that this film makes? It is a deliberate intervention in the post-9/11 torture debate, which has played out over the last two decades across a range of political and popular cultural productions, including thrillers such as *24* (2001–18), *Unthinkable* (2011), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012); exposure texts such as *Rendition*

(2007), *Extraordinary Rendition* (2008), *The Report* (2019), and *The Mauritanian* (2021); and documentaries such as *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2005), and *Eminent Monsters* (2019). But the polarity that may be assumed to structure such a debate—pro-torture versus anti-torture, fascism versus justice—is not in fact present. In general, the post-9/11 torture debate is dominated by hegemonic epistemological and political positions that circulate within a discursive field determined by the political coordinates of counterterrorism and security discourse. That is, many of the post-9/11 arguments over the political and ethical legitimacy of torture—and the cultural texts that narrativize, disseminate, and contest them—are articulated from a position of enunciation that is predisposed to make arguments in favor of torture seem reasonable, logical, and right, a legitimate if unpleasant political and military technology suited for use against terrorists. In particular, cultural texts that are confrontationally critical of power, such as *Camp X-Ray*, often reveal particularly clearly the limits of how critical it is possible to be from a position of enunciation within the discursive field of power, a position of enunciation that is always already militarized and that operates comfortably within a field of intelligibility that aims to use the political imperatives of counterterrorism discourse to determine our habits and horizons of perception.

Camp X-Ray is a perfect example of this argumentative neutering, because it represents a particularly limited critique of Guantanamo. The military detention regime is shown as gloomy and inhumane, but the story of interpersonal connection is ultimately redemptive and cathartic: the prison is shown to us as a depressing and difficult place, yet one that is capable of fostering love across the barbed wire, so to speak. The film's ahistorical story and its sentimental resolution leave any substantial political feelings unengaged; by focusing very narrowly on one emotional relationship, the film prioritizes a story of forbidden private love and lets the global political injustice of the post-9/11 torture program operate as a colorful

yet vague backdrop. The critique in which the movie engages, then, is limited by the way in which it folds the substantial political problems of Guantanamo into the texture of the private. This article unpacks the nature of this private relationship, showing how it is defined by ethically limited scripts, racism, and the logic of surveillance.

Impossible Compassions: The Horizons of Empathy

Director Peter Sattler claims that he wrote *Camp X-Ray* in order to prompt people to “look at [their] enemy as a human being” and to make “some larger, archetypal philosophical statement about the core relationship [they] have with a stranger” (qtd. in Rosenberg 93). To return to Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life*, one of the most intriguing potential solutions that she posits to the ethical problems posed by regimes of surveillant, militarized dehumanization is a recourse to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who is preoccupied with precisely this concern with the relationship to the stranger. Levinas’s philosophy can help us to think through *Camp X-Ray*, the ethics of critique, and ways to undermine the notion of “torturability.” To be clear, I do not wish to harness Levinas’s philosophy and demonstrate that it shows us how to love our enemy: I want to use it to think through the political and representational implications of staging the birth of compassion between two enemies.

Levinas’s most widely discussed philosophical figure is that of the “face,” which centers on the emergence of the possibility of ethical contact between beings. Put simply, Levinas emphasizes the prime importance of interpersonal contact and responsibility; the “face” for him is not simply the human face, but is that totality—the full human being in all of their insurmountable alterity—which we come to apprehend when we recognize our responsibility toward another human being. For Levinas, the moment in which we recognize the vulnerability of another person is the moment in which we are initiated into an awareness of our

permanently binding responsibility toward that person and the moment in which we become unable to commit violence against them. The face of the other communicates to us “the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” (*Totality and Infinity* 199). As such, this recognition of the presence and dignity of another being is founded on a commitment to responsibility and nonviolence. Levinas establishes what Leora Batnitzky calls “an ethics of infinite responsibility” (9), which makes his thought relevant to the idea of “torturability”: his focus on the dignity of the other and the definite responsibility we have to abhor violence against others may give us a way to understand the urgency of refusing to commit violence, whatever the circumstances. The face “bespeaks an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it speaks a divine prohibition against killing” (Butler 135), and for this reason, it helps us center our responsibility toward others in ethical thinking. If we recognize the humanity of the other, that is, we can only refuse to torture them.

Levinas positioned his philosophical reading of being as an antidote to Heideggerian being, which, he argued, privileged the violence of knowledge over the call to responsibility represented by compassion. Heidegger’s theory of knowledge was, for Levinas, inseparable from his complicity in Nazi crimes, and Levinas explicitly positioned his theory of ethical being as an alternative theory of being that prioritized love over knowledge. “To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself” (Butler 134). It is a radical recentering of love over knowledge in our understanding of being (Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”).

A range of thinkers have addressed the way that this attractive set of ideas intersects with debates about the ethics of representation. It is tempting to consider the ethical potential of literature and culture—the way that they are credited with being able to give us access to the inner lives, experiences, and ideas of other people—to be an enactment of the utopian ethical contact Levinas envisages. That is, it is

tempting to imagine that when we encounter a character in a novel or onscreen—a close-up of a face, perhaps—the emotions we feel when we relate to them represent some form of vital ethical awakening.

Perhaps. But such feelings, substantial and powerful though they may be for readers and audiences, are not what I'm referring to here, nor are they what Levinas means to refer to. Indeed, Levinas, "a fierce and unwavering iconoclast" (Crignon 101), was profoundly and unequivocally dismissive of the notion that the work of art itself could be ethical; as Peter Schmiedgen has noted, in general "Levinas is committed to the view that the representational work of art is an essentially idolatrous object" because Levinas's ethics "posits as its highest goal engagement with the other and not with our representations of the other" (148). That is, for Levinas, art and representations are *obstacles* to ethical consciousness, because they objectify the other, the relation with whom can only ever be an immediate, unreplicable encounter. As Jill Robbins writes, "the necessary *indirection* of a work's mode of signification falls short of the *directness* of the discourse of the face" (68). The fact that any representation must inevitably work through a system of signs and reference forecloses any possibility that the work of art can harness, mobilize, reproduce, or otherwise *use* the ethical encounter, which exists in pure lived immediacy. Levinas uses the notion of expression to describe this communicativity: the face expresses; it does not mediate, denote, or stage. Expression is "therefore pure meaning and is without context" (Crignon 103) and is as such very different from representation, which inevitably rests upon an indirect process of signification.

Rather, in discussions about ethical contact and literature, it is more productive to think through the way that literature *stages* ethical contact between beings, the way that the work of art can bring the act of ethical attention itself to our notice. For example, in *Tsotsi* (1979), the only novel by South African dramatist Athol Fugard, a street thug has a sympathetic epiphany in the act of mugging a disabled beggar.

What is sympathy? If you had asked Tsotsi this, telling him that it was his new experience, he would have answered: like light, meaning that it revealed. Pressed further, he might have thought of darkness and lighting a candle, and holding it up to find Morris Tshabalala within the halo of its radiance. He was seeing him for the first time, in a way that he hadn't seen him before, or with a second sort of sight, or maybe just more clearly. The subtleties did not matter. What was important was that in the light of his sympathy the cripple was revealed. (Fugard 106–07)

Dramatizing the moment in which Tsotsi recognizes his shared humanity with his victim, this scene shows interpersonal recognition—a kind of wordlessly disclosive light that reveals the fundamental truth of universal human dignity—as the basis for compassionate relationships and as the underlying prerequisite for a rejection of violence. Ethical action, or ethical living, is founded upon interpersonal compassion.

There is important work to be done regarding the role of critical discourse here. Representations and narratives give us ways to think through relationships, of course; more, our critique of them also gives us ways to think through the politics of the forms of compassion that these representations stage. Compassion is a political emotion, described in compelling terms by Lauren Berlant as "a social and aesthetic technology of belonging" and "an emotional complex that has powerfully material and personal consequences" (5, 11). To forget this is to reduce compassion to a pleasant, woolly, and insubstantial affect and to ignore its situatedness in political and material conditions and its irretrievable implication with historical trajectories, relations, and events. Compassion is a form of political attention with conditions, horizons, and limits; to be somebody who deserves compassion is to be somebody with a privileged status.

In particular, for a reading of *Camp X-Ray*, we should consider the role of vulnerability in the process of ethical recognition. For Levinas, the other is revealed to me when I have power over them, the privileged ability to see them

and recognize our mutual availability to death and to suffering (*Totality and Infinity* 198–99). The assumption of responsibility for the other can easily be an act of power: the assumption of responsibility *for* is often in practice difficult to distinguish from the assumption of responsibility *over*. Like Tsotsi, I am the one who wields the power to recognize my other; I am the one with the power to grasp my interlocutor as human and to choose not to murder. This requires me to be in the position of a converted murderer: the one who chooses not to do what is within their power.

Camp X-Ray dramatizes the power dynamics that are always already present in political intersubjectivity. *Camp X-Ray* humanizes Ali, but it does so within very narrow limits. Importantly, the emotional climax of the film is profoundly ambiguous. Cole talks Ali out of his despairing suicide attempt, and the viewer could be forgiven for understanding this as a triumph of love or compassion. However, in preventing Ali's suicide, Cole is literally discharging her duty: the task of prison guards in Guantanamo is described at the start of the film as being "to prevent them from dying" (as opposed to preventing their escape). The divine injunction spoken by the face of the other, "you shall not commit murder," is directly obeyed in *the same movement* in which Cole executes her duty to the prison by prolonging Ali's incarceration. Tristram Vivian Adams, in *The Psychopath Factory* (49–57), argues that capitalist employment organizes empathy such that we are required to perform it as part of our professional responsibilities, regardless of whether it is genuinely felt. Here Cole uses her empathy—represented as genuine—in the course of her labor for not merely a functional purpose but a *disciplinary* purpose as well; it is not merely performative but *weaponized*. This reveals just how easy it is to integrate empathy and compassion into disciplinary violence.

Thinking about this position of power implicit in the act of recognition—the dynamic of power built into the decisions about whom we are prepared to accept as a fellow human—also reveals the horizons of the human implicit in

Camp X-Ray's position of enunciation. I will proceed to examples in a moment, but first, I should acknowledge that this is a problem with Levinas's philosophy too: his work, although it is attractive enough to have gathered what Stella Sandford calls "an unusually sympathetic body of literature" (2), has implicit and troubling horizons of humanity. Sandford and Luce Irigaray, for instance, criticize Levinas from a feminist perspective; Fred Moten has demonstrated that Levinas's repeated racist dismissals of decolonization are "not just a series of unfortunate misstatements that are extraneous to the proper philosophical work" but "are, rather, restatements of a theme that is constitutive of that work" (7); and Hamid Dabashi has argued provocatively that Levinas's philosophy is as complicit with Israeli power as Heidegger's ever was with Nazi power. "Even after the horrors of the Sabra and Shatila massacres," writes Dabashi, Levinas "refused even to acknowledge Palestinians as human enough to be his 'other'" (257). Accordingly, in the face of such open and unequivocal racism, appeals to what John Drabinski, for instance, calls a "decolonized" Levinasian thinking, must be treated with caution. Alain Badiou, for instance, writes that in practice "this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a *good* other—which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us?*" (24). Levinas's philosophy leaves many with the troubling suspicion that there are some faces that cannot reveal vulnerability and that cannot disclose the unique human spark which leads us to acknowledge our responsibility for their suffering—and that these faces may belong, predictably, to those of particular racialized groups, women, and other marginalized people.

It is important that *Camp X-Ray* humanizes a Muslim prisoner; it shows under what conditions "we"—that is, the audience for the film, liberal white Americans with their hearts in the right place, like Cole—are able to sympathize with a Muslim. Islamophobia can most productively be understood as being "defined by the onlooker in a position of power and imposed onto people through various types of

generalization, misperception and stigmatization” (Mondon and Winter 2157). That is, a racist gaze is a gaze of power, which uses the political coordinates of racist knowledge in order to organize its worldview and its perception of individuals within this worldview. The Levinasian encounter could be read as that encounter which cuts through the misperceptions of racism and reveals the true universal humanity that is obscured by it; I would argue, however (with Dabashi, Moten, and others), that the Levinasian encounter *retains* its racism and uses its racism as an organizing principle in order to establish who counts as a legitimate object of compassion. *Camp X-Ray* does not stage a singular moment in which Cole comes to see Ali as human; there is no Tsotsi moment. Rather, over the course of the narrative, Cole is forced to see Ali’s humanity through the process of becoming friends with him, through the process of developing a relationship, an intimacy. For Levinas, the face-to-face connection is spontaneous; the recognition of humanity, however, is very often more complex and riven with politics. Cole accepts Ali as human when she learns enough about him to establish that he meets a set of criteria, which she can read as cues and which enable her to recognize him. *Cole is capable of recognizing his humanity precisely because she discovers that he already resembles her.*

The process of humanization in *Camp X-Ray* is a process of *differentiation* and *Europeanization*. The other prisoners remain an anonymous, shouting, violent rabble, and we recognize Ali as special by observing the characteristics he possesses that they do not (that is, his humanity comes at the expense of every single other prisoner in Guantanamo). The moments in which he resembles the other prisoners—when he speaks Arabic, when he engages in violent behavior—are the moments in which he is “torturable”: he throws feces on Cole, in retaliation for which he is subjected to twelve hours of punitive sleep deprivation. The moments in which Ali seems European, however—when he reveals that he is German, for example, rather than Afghan or Middle Eastern,

or when he reveals that he is a fan of *Harry Potter*—are the moments in which he seems sympathetic, in which he seems troublingly familiar, in which he seems human, and in which his vulnerability is revealed as relatable. At the movie’s conclusion, when he makes a compelling claim to be innocent of terrorism and unjustly incarcerated, Cole definitively recognizes his dignity: his European innocence now fully established, Ali has achieved the status in which Cole can see his “face” and recognize him as a fellow being, as someone who should not be subject to torture.

By this, I of course do not mean to say that European Muslims are somehow “inauthentic” or not “really” Muslims: I do not wish to claim that one can be only *either* European or Muslim, *either* guilty or innocent; nor, of course, do I wish to set up a rigid binary in which guilty Muslims are torturable. Rather, I mean to say that this film maintains the racist fascination with the “authenticity” of Western Muslims and with the racist trope in which Muslims are considered less threatening the more they resemble Europeans or Americans. Questions about whether European Muslims are ever authentically European or Muslim, whether their “allegiances” lie with the West or with Islam (whether they are well-integrated capitalist subjects or secret terrorists waiting to strike), are a mainstay of racist Islamophobic discourse, particularly on the extreme right in Europe, which often demonizes immigrants from Muslim-majority areas as terrorists, thieves, or rapists (Sanyal 90–97). In the US, likewise, “conservatives racialize Muslims as holding essential characteristics and values which justify surveillance, profiling and exclusion” (Watson et al. 465). In particular, by emphasizing the figure of the Western Muslim and asking us to interrogate whether we believe he can “really” be innocent, whether he can “really” be human, *Camp X-Ray* relies on and amplifies racist ways of representing Muslims and Islam. Its tension hinges on the fact that he transgresses a rigid binary; by exploiting this, the film *reinforces* rather than questions the binary.

He is *both*; this hybrid “both”-ness, which the audience is asked to interrogate, is the uncertain territory on which the film focuses. That is, its gestures toward humanization are complicated by their incorporation into another, competing political, intellectual, and narrative schema. Throughout, one of the problems that the audience must confront is the question of whether Ali is “really” good or whether he is deceiving Cole. The process of establishing his availability to the ethical gaze is impossible without entering complicity with the epistemology of surveillance.

The Surveillant Perspective

Camp X-Ray is always complicit with Guantanamo’s surveillant gaze. We are privy to a multitude of perspectives, an omniscient exteriority fundamentally denied the prisoners. We see Cole’s leisure time; we see her at lunch; we see her on duty. We see Ali’s capture; we see inside the officers’ quarters; we see Cole’s return home. Ali sees the inside of his cell. This surveillant position is more complex, however, than simply being able to see the prison from more than one position. In an essay critiquing Errol Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure*, film scholar Bill Nichols excoriates a notorious moment in *Schindler’s List* (1993) in which the camera gazes through the viewing aperture on a gas chamber door as naked captives scream and panic. This moment is fundamentally exploitative and unethical, Nichols writes, because in it the camera and the audience occupy “literally the point of view of the death camp guards.” All of *Camp X-Ray* is articulated from this problematic subject position. This is not simply visual but is epistemological too: even when we are in Amir Ali’s cell with him, we are still trying to figure out whether he can be trusted.

That is, because we don’t know anything about him for sure, we are in the position of interrogators. The film derives much of its intrigue from the question of whether Ali’s attempts to appear sympathetic are simply attempts to bamboozle Cole into permitting

him the privilege of emotional intimacy. In addition, Ali’s story about himself is problematic: the little that we know about him independent of his relationship with Cole is not compatible with the autobiography that he presents to her. For example, in the powerful moment toward the end of the film in which Cole saves his life, he claims to be innocent and to have been cleared for release. The very first scene of the film contradicts this, however: the opening of the film depicts Ali’s capture in his flat, with cell phones—often used as IED detonators or for untraceable communication between members of a terrorist cell and a visual shorthand for suspicious activity in many genre war films of the war on terror—on his table. The movie makes no further attempt to explain why he is in Guantanamo. If indeed he is involved in terrorist activity, we do not know anything about his motivations; if he is innocent, we don’t know by what twist of fate he ended up in Guantanamo or why he had the cell phones. It is a condition of audience sympathy with him that this aspect of his character and story remain unarticulated.

Brian Jarvis writes that many generic features of US prison films “underline the essential humanity of the prisoners and the inhumanity of the system” (168). However, the process of sympathetic characterization that marks the genre’s representation of criminal inmates is complicated by the political nature of the crimes of which Guantanamo’s prisoners are accused. The process of sympathetic characterization “begins with the de-criminalization of the prisoner-hero” (171), a process in which the prisoner may be revealed as unjustly incarcerated, in which their crimes may be portrayed as trivial in comparison to the brutality of the prison regime, or in which their criminal activity takes on a romanticized appearance. This process never begins for Ali: he is never decriminalized, as the ambiguity over his guilt remains present throughout. If he is guilty, then his involvement in terrorism will never be amenable to the process of decriminalization: it will never seem romantic or trivial. The fact of his political undecidability suspends his full integration

into the archetype of the sympathetic prisoner. This surveillant gaze, built into the philosophical structure of the movie, fundamentally undermines the ethical project of *Camp X-Ray*. In what remains of this article, I examine one particular aspect of Ali's characterization to give a more concrete example of this.

Intertextuality and the Double Agent: Ali as Death Eater

Cole and Ali's first conversation features a telling reference to J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels.¹ Ali, a voracious reader, asks whether the library has yet acquired the final volume of Rowling's series. In particular, Ali says that he wants to know what happens to Severus Snape, because at the end of the penultimate book, it is revealed that even though Snape has appeared to be a villain throughout the series, he is, in fact, a good guy. Later, at the film's close, Cole adds *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final novel in the series, to the prison library, expressly so that Ali will be able to read it. A short dedication that she writes in the book states, "I don't know if Snape's a good guy. But I know that you are."

This reference to Rowling does a great deal of work. It introduces another major theme in the movie: How do we know who is a good guy and who is a bad guy? How do we distinguish between friends and enemies? Unfortunately, however, it does this by invoking one of the most problematic ways of discussing the relation between Islam and the West: the figure of the infiltrating double agent.

Ali's claim about the conclusion of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005) is intriguing because, to most readers of the novel at least, it is wrong. In the closing chapters of *The Deathly Hallows* (538–63), a detailed examination of Snape's memories establishes that he has in fact been working against Voldemort, the villain of the series, from within his organization, and that he has been on the right side—with Harry and against Voldemort—all along. At the close of the sixth volume, however, the book to which Ali is referring, Snape appears

to reveal his true allegiance to Voldemort when he murders Dumbledore (495–96). In sympathizing, perhaps identifying, with Snape *at this point in the narrative*, Ali sympathizes with Voldemort—that is, he takes the side of one of the most widely known villains of modern literature and celebrates the completion of a murderous secret plot perpetrated by a double agent. Children's literature scholar Kim Reynolds has written that Voldemort's "network of the undead and potential martyrs," particularly in the final three novels, in some ways reflects the nature of an al Qaeda–like terror organization and that Voldemort himself "increasingly resembles a Bin Laden figure" (144). Ali's contrarian reading of *Harry Potter*, in which he applauds Snape's murder of Dumbledore, shows his admiration for Voldemort's sinister organization and perhaps, if we follow Reynolds's parallel, his admiration for Bin Laden. In addition, it reveals him as a villain with astonishing ideological resilience, because he has been able to preserve his moral code—utterly antithetical to anybody who has understood the humanistic messages of the *Harry Potter* novels—in spite of his eight years in prison.

Most importantly, this reference to *Harry Potter* is ambiguous, opaque, in need of interpretation. What does his reading of Snape tell us about Ali? What do we learn about him? That is, it is a *clue* to the mystery that he represents, which enables us to decipher him, to constitute him as an object of knowledge, as a specimen to be understood, a text to be interpreted, a puzzle to be solved. Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, readers are given equivocal indications, contrasting views, and partial explanations about Snape, none of which allow us to know whether or not he is really working for Voldemort until the very last volume decides the question unambiguously; in particular, his history as a reformed Death Eater (a follower of Voldemort) renders him untrustworthy, even when he appears—and claims—to be working against Voldemort. We are left in a constant state of uncertainty about Snape, and much the same could be said of Ali throughout *Camp X-Ray*, as we are constantly trying to work out

whether Cole is right to be developing an intimacy with him. Importantly, many post-9/11 genre texts feature similar characters. One could consider the many double-agent characters who feature in *24*, for instance, or Sergeant Brody in *Homeland*, whose conversion to Islam dovetails with his “turning” into a double agent of a terrorist organization. The way that double agents are treated by such texts is often echoed by the ways in which racist discourse focuses on racial others and forms one of the major ways in which “dominant epistemologies about race are constituted and reconstituted through popular culture” (Flynn and Mackay 6). According to contemporary racism, Muslims are suspicious because they may be secret sleeper agents—the more we know about them, and the less we conclude that they resemble our idea of a politically unacceptable Muslim subject, the safer we feel we are (Breen-Smyth; Kundhani). By leaving us in a state of uncertainty about Ali, *Camp X-Ray* mobilizes this racist logic.

Conclusion: Justice

In his essay “The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture,” Levinas writes that culture can give us “another way than that of knowledge to give meaning to being” (156). That is, for all of his disparagement of the ethical potential of the work of art, Levinas remains optimistic that systems of giving meaning to being that do not prioritize the power maneuvers involved in surveillant knowing can be imagined. In this article I hope to have demonstrated that such a project has value but that it is limited. The generation of compassion, like the exposure of atrocities, is only a tactic, insufficient in itself and easily disregarded. The greater goal that anti-torture critique must strive for—that is, justice, abolition, antiracism, and equality before the law—is more complex and cannot be approached by framing narratives in which *one* Muslim *might* be innocent. Paul Gilroy, writing about racism, makes a pertinent point in his *After Empire*:

This racial order or nomos cannot be undone by fiat, by charity, or by goodwill and must enter comprehensively into the terms of political culture. It is only then, in the face of a whole, complex, planetary history of suffering, that the luxury and the risk of casual talk about humanity can be sanctioned. (38–39)

Without a comprehensively disruptive narrative that articulates the full philosophical and political reasons that torture cannot be tolerated, talk of the humanity of the other remains a luxury, symbolically pleasurable but politically worthless. Compassion and empathy are not, after all, solidarity; exposure is not redress. Cultural representations, such as *Camp X-Ray*, that engage in anti-torture critique risk political irrelevance and philosophical banality if they fail to engage in this wider project and if they continue to reproduce the racist logics that underpin the militarization of popular culture.

NOTE

1. Rowling has become controversial in recent years due to her embrace of gender critical feminism. To be clear, I stand in solidarity with trans people and against transphobia.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Tristram V. *The Psychopath Factory: How Capitalism Organizes Empathy*. Repeater, 2016.
- Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Translated by P. Hallward, Verso, 2012.
- Batnitzky, Leora. “Encountering the Modern Subject in Levinas.” *Yale French Studies 104: Encounters with Levinas*, 2004, pp. 6–21. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3182502>.
- Berlant, Lauren. “Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding).” *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, edited by Lauren Berlant, Routledge, 2004, pp. 1–13.
- Breen-Smyth, Marie. “Theorising the ‘Suspect Community’: Counterterrorism, Security Practices and the Public Imagination.” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2014, pp. 223–40, doi:10.1080/17539153.2013.867714.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.
- Camp X-Ray*. Directed by Peter Sattler, 2016.
- Conrad, Joseph. “Heart of Darkness.” 1899. *Heart of Darkness*, edited by Paul B. Armstrong, 4th ed., W. W. Norton, 2006, pp. 3–77.

- Grignon, Philippe. "Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image." *Yale French Studies* 104: *Encounters with Levinas*, 2004, pp. 100–25. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3182507>.
- Dabashi, Hamid. *Can Non-Europeans Think?* Zed Books, 2015.
- Drabinski, John. *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other*. Edinburgh UP, 2012.
- Flynn, Susan, and Antonia Mackay. Introduction. *Surveillance, Race, Culture*, edited by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 1–18.
- Fugard, Athol. *Tsotsi*. 1979. Canongate Books, 2009.
- Gilroy, Paul. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*. Routledge, 2004.
- Greene, Graham. *The Human Factor*. 1978. Vintage, 2005.
- Gregory, Derek. "Vanishing Points: Law, Violence and Exception in the Global War Prison." *Violent Geographies: Fear, Terror and Political Violence*, edited by Derek Gregory and Allan Pred, Routledge, 2007, pp. 205–36.
- Irigaray, Luce. "What Other Are We Talking About?" *Yale French Studies* 104: *Encounters with Levinas*, 2004, pp. 67–81. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3182505>.
- Jarvis, Brian. *Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and US Culture*. Pluto Press, 2004.
- Joynt, Anne E. "The Semantics of the Guantánamo Bay Inmates: Enemy Combatants or Prisoners of the War on Terror?" *Buffalo Human Rights Law Review*, vol. 10, 2004, pp. 427–41, <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/bhrlr/vol10/iss1/7>.
- Kapoor, Nisha, and Kasia Narkowicz. "Unmaking Citizens: Passport Removals, Pre-emptive Policing and the Reimagining of Colonial Governmentalities." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 42, no. 16, 2019, pp. 45–62, doi:10.1080/01419870.2017.1411965.
- Kundnani, Arun. *The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism and the Domestic War on Terror*. Verso, 2015.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Is Ontology Fundamental?" *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Continuum, 2006, pp. 1–10.
- . "The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture." *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Continuum, 2006, pp. 154–60.
- . *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne UP, 1969.
- McClintock, Scott. "The Penal Colony: Inscription of the Subject in Literature and Law, and Detainees as Legal Non-Persons at Camp X-Ray." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2004, pp. 153–67. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468107>.
- Mondon, Aurelien, and Aaron Winter. "Articulations of Islamophobia: From the Extreme to the Mainstream?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, no. 13, 2017, pp. 2151–79, doi:10.1080/01419870.2017.1312008.
- Moten, Fred. *The Universal Machine*. Duke UP, 2018.
- Nichols, Bill. "Feelings of Revulsion and the Limits of Academic Discourse: Letter to Errol Morris." *Jump Cut*, vol. 52, 2010, <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/sopNichols/index.html>.
- Reynolds, Kimberley. *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction*. Palgrave, 2007.
- Robbins, Jill. "Aesthetic Totality and Ethical Infinity: Levinas on Art." *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1995, pp. 66–79, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/526993>.
- Rosenberg, Carol. *Guantanamo Bay: The Pentagon's Alcatraz of the Caribbean*. Herald Books, 2016.
- Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. 2007. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- . *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. 2005. Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Sandford, Stella. *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas*. The Athlone Press, 2000.
- Sands, Philippe. *Torture Team: Uncovering War Crimes in the Land of the Free*. 2nd ed., Penguin, 2009.
- Sanyal, Mithu. *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo*. Verso, 2019.
- Schmiedgen, Peter. "Art and Idolatry: Aesthetics and Alterity in Levinas." *Contretemps*, vol. 3, 2002, pp. 148–60.
- Watson, Jake, et al. "'Let's Hope the Boston Marathon Bomber Is a White American': Racialising Muslims and the Politics of White Identity." *Identities*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2019, pp. 450–69, doi:10.1080/1070289X.2017.1397964.