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Guantanamo Boy (2009) and the Task of Critique

Alex Adams

From the inception of the post-9/11 war on terror, a high-profile political debate has taken place concerning the military and moral permissibility of state torture. Apologists for torture often either posit utilitarian arguments such as the "ticking bomb" defense of torture, which claims that torture is acceptable in certain conditions, or they claim that torture is not acceptable, but that the interrogation techniques used in the secret archipelago of war on terror black site prisons are not forms of torture and can thereby be condoned. These positions are contested by those who pose arguments against torture that are often human-rights-based or deontological (that is, based on normative moral judgments), and which emphasize both that torture is never morally permissible and, further, that the interrogation technologies of the war on terror in fact do constitute torture. Cultural productions are major sites in which this debate is articulated and amplified. Representations, arguments and narratives justifying torture have been extensively critiqued (Brecher; Luban; Rejali), whereas anti-torture stories and the argumentative positions they narrate have received less critical attention. This essay reads Anna Perera's young adult novel *Guantanamo Boy* (2009), an anti-torture intervention "for kids" (Pauli), which represents and criticizes the state torture perpetrated at the American military prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. My central argument here is that *Guantanamo Boy*, and the political position of which it is a narrative iteration, represents a limited condemnation of torture. That is, although it provides a critique of torture and of Guantanamo Bay, which is in many ways compelling, the novel fails to address adequately the way that those who justify torture decisively frame the debate and, as such, it does not engage clearly enough with the surprisingly resilient questions that such texts raise. This essay unpicks the precise message of *Guantanamo Boy*'s anti-torture pedagogy and critique: my main concerns here are first, with the narrative frame through which the text critiques both the context and techniques of torture, and second, with the equivocal representation of Islam and Muslims found in the text. In these two respects, I argue, the book does some effective political work. However, this work is based on an intellectually and ethically timid critique that fails to address the ideological foundations and argumentative complexities of the positions assumed by those who would justify or normalize torture.

Literature for younger readers, as a key socializing tool with an often (but not necessarily) explicitly pedagogical character, has always had a radical and politicizing potential (Lampert 10–18; Mickenberg and Nel). Literary and cultural contributions to public understandings of torture can articulate critique and encourage important aspects of citizenship, such as political engagement, antiracism, and interest in human rights. However, my reading of *Guantanamo Boy* underscores that this is by no means a straightforward or unproblematic task. The details of the ways in which novels engage moral and political issues reveal the complexity and difficulty of intervention in such debates, and the all-too-frequent lack of the subtlety necessary for clearly articulating such knotty ideas. Following scholars who argue that "children's war fiction makes plain the task of war fiction more generally" (Miller, "Ghosts" 273), and that the educational nature of young adult literature makes more explicit the teleology and didacticism inherent in realism itself (Eisenstadt 193), I argue here that the problems highlighted by a close reading of this text are not restricted to anti-torture interventions within the horizon of children's literature, because many similar texts produced for general audiences reproduce the limitations I identify here. Children's literature provides a useful platform for the discussion of the exact nature of anti-torture critique, as it often (but by no means necessarily) provides a forum in which the pedagogical tendencies of literature are made very plain; in addition, children's literature is often more readily accepted as having the "co-constitutive link with both history and politics" (Lampert 18) that I argue is characteristic of cultural production more generally. This transparency makes the type of explicitly pedagogical children's literature exemplified by *Guantanamo Boy* particularly generative territory for inquiry into the nature of the political and discursive "work" that such texts are deliberately positioned to undertake.

Guantanamo Boy is a long novel with multiple investments, including an explicit and detailed opposition to many of the injustices that have so far characterized the war on terror. As a consequence of this (as well as its earnest clarity) it is easy to position this text as an educational tool, and indeed it has been the object of several theatrical adaptations targeted at school groups. Ian Ward writes that "if legal language is, to use Foucault's phrase, a 'specialized knowledge', then literature, and especially children's literature, can serve to de-specialize it" (118). Perera organizes the unpalatable (upsetting) and potentially dry (legally complex) aspects of American torture into a linear realist narrative in order to make them more accessible to a younger audience; whilst of course intense scrutiny of legal detail is absent from Perera's text, it accessibly narrativizes, clarifies, and de-specializes the complex legal and political entanglement that leads to the illegal permissibility of torture at Guantanamo (Gregory; Kaplan). This activist intent is also consistent with a reflective trend in war writing for young people. The heroism and swashbuckling that perhaps characterized early twentieth century war writing for younger readers have been gradually sidelined in favor of writing in which "young readers are urged to examine the nature of violence and suffering, persecution and endurance, hatred and loyalty, selfishness and sacrifice" and to "share the writers' condemnation of war and the repugnant beliefs which lead to conflict" (Agnew and Fox 53; Myers). *Guantanamo Boy*, then, can be located both within a trajectory of activist human rights writing about Guantanamo itself and within a tradition of young adult writing that seeks to educate readers about the brutality and injustice of war. This text does valuable political work, but the specific anti-torture position that it articulates is not theoretically rigorous enough. Torture is wrong in both deontological and utilitarian terms: torture is morally evil when considered on its own terms as an individual act (Sussman), violence so extreme and unpleasant that it can never be described as proportionate or morally appropriate; neither can torture be justified in utilitarian terms, because it cannot be described as having any desirable consequences in the short or long term (Arrigo). If anti-torture activism is to be effective, and I insist that it must be, then it must be able to articulate a similarly robust critique.

The Post-9/11 Torture Debate and Truth Work

After the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States in 2001 demonstrated the enormous destructive potential of international terrorism, many Western commentators argued that torture could and should form part of the military and political response. Cultural productions such as Fox's televisual drama *24* (2001–14), James Barrington's novels *Overkill* (2004) and *Pandemic* (2005), Gregor Jordan's movie *Unthinkable* (2011), and Frank Miller's graphic novel *Holy Terror* (2011), for example, all narrate ticking bomb scenarios in which it is demonstrated that torture can solve problems: when a bomb is ticking, torturing the terrorist responsible for it in order to prevent its detonation is represented as a morally acceptable, militarily effective, and intellectually rational tactic for saving innocent lives. These narratives, which are often structured around the persuasion of a character who is an opponent of torture, dramatize and amplify the arguments made by utilitarians such as Sam Harris

("Case for Torture"; *End of Faith* 197), Charles Krauthammer (2004), and Alan Dershowitz (*Why Terrorism* 131–63; "Tortured Reasoning"; *Is There a Right* 121), who claim, scandalously, that torture can be justified as a militarily legitimate and morally compassionate element of counterterrorism strategy. These texts are often complex explorations of the politics of emergency and counterterrorism, but they frequently defuse the subtle concerns they raise through their "saturat[ion] in generic elements working to *normalize* torture" (Holloway 25, emphasis in original). That is, they couch their reactionary political arguments in the pleasures of genre in order to make them seem natural, normal, and as a consequence morally and politically defensible. The many reasons for the resurgence of this rhetorical defense of torture are beyond the scope of this article; it is worth emphasizing, however, that this narrative has never been confined to the speculations of academics or the imaginations of artists. Members of the Bush Administration who were instrumental in legalizing torture after 9/11, such as Donald Rumsfeld (585n) and Karl Rove (295–99), for example, uncritically cite the ticking bomb scenario as a situation in which it would be difficult to morally object to torture, and MI5 has defended British complicity in torture by claiming explicitly that despite being contrary to the values of the liberal democracies that employ it, torture is defensible in utilitarian terms (Merrill et. al.). More recently, President-elect Trump repeatedly defended the use of torture in the course of the presidential election contest, simultaneously trivializing, normalizing and recommending it (Johnson; Phelps; Trump); interestingly, he channeled the vocabulary of *24*'s protagonist Jack Bauer by stating that he would do "whatever it takes." The popularity of the ticking bomb scenario is therefore a concrete example of the intentional circulation of a misleading trope that functions to obscure the facts of torture at the same time as it provides an emotionally appealing yet rationally unsustainable excuse for it.

Oppositional, disclosive, and contestatory narratives, such as Gavin Hood's movie *Rendition* (2007), Dorothea Dieckmann's novel *Guantanamo* (2004), or Jim Threapleton's film *Extraordinary Rendition* (2007), most frequently use an exposure model in order to reveal to audiences the unpalatable truths of the post-9/11 torture program that are masked by ideological fictions such as the ticking bomb scenario. Torture is revealed, in these texts, to be a gratuitous excess of power that cannot effectively uncover either the truth or—its substitute—"actionable intelligence." Much as ticking bomb fictions are mutually implicated with political arguments that directly legitimize torture, there is a blurring of distinctions between the critique of torture through fictional narratives or documentaries—such as *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2008) and *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006)—and activist exposure literature with which these cultural productions often share a voice (Bravin; Rose; Sands;

Smith). These texts counter officials' justifications of torture by emphasizing that torture never corresponds to the clear-cut emergency policing situations that ticking bomb narratives and arguments necessarily presuppose (Scarry), and they underscore that the conditions in which torture occurs are often concentrationary, systematic, and characterized by injustice and arbitrary brutality. *Guantanamo Boy* is part of this activist strain of post-9/11 torture writing. In the novel, a fifteen-year-old British Asian boy called Khalid Ahmed is captured and imprisoned while on holiday in Pakistan in 2002. Khalid's carceral trajectory, from arrest in Pakistan to prison in Afghanistan and then on to American custody in Cuba, follows a pattern that is found repeatedly in the literature of incarceration that has emerged from Guantanamo (Begg; Errachidi; Slahi). After being tortured into falsely confessing to involvement in terrorism, Khalid is sent to Camp Delta and is in due course contacted by a human rights lawyer who advocates for his release. Much of the novel focuses on Khalid's experience of incarceration: Guantanamo is explained to the reader both through descriptions of Khalid's experiences and through the explanations of them that adult characters give to Khalid.

Perera's intention in producing this narrative is explicitly pedagogical and anti-torture; she claims in interviews that the novel's objective is to tell young readers "the truth" about Guantanamo (Pauli) in order to "annihilate the idea that torture can ever be justified" (Kemsley). This notion of telling "the truth" about torture and political violence—the strategy of exposure work—recurs throughout the proliferating multidisciplinary bibliography invested in resisting the official discourse of the war on terror (Harlow). There are two common imperatives found throughout much of this heterogeneous archive. Firstly, there is the imperative to expose and explain the forms of injustice that Guantanamo represents, and secondly, there is the imperative to rehumanize the prisoners—that is, to represent them as human beings capable of bearing human rights and deserving to benefit from legal protections, rather than as the monstrous subhumans who deserve torture that they have been made to seem by both official discourse and scaremongering cultural production. It is in terms of these two imperatives that *Guantanamo Boy* is less compelling than it could be.

There is an abundance of scholarship on children's literature of conflict. However, apart from work stressing the parallels to be drawn between the past and present (Miller, "Ghosts") or work that discusses the war on terror by analogy (Reynolds), very little scholarship has addressed the children's literature of the war on terror. This may be due to the dearth of textual production, a lack that is not easy to explain; though there is a substantial body of children's texts relating to 9/11 (Lampert), which is of course a major coordinate in the war on terror, *Guantanamo Boy* is perhaps the only serious attempt to engage young adult readers with torture in the war on terror. Matt Whyman's thriller *Inside the Cage* (2007) is the only other young adult novel about secret prisons that I have been able to locate, and it merely uses extraordinary rendition and black site prisons as plot devices for a generic thriller, much as Dan Fesperman's *The Prisoner of Guantanamo* (2006) uses the war on terror prison network as a backdrop for an adult Cold War thriller. These texts do not represent serious engagements with the political scenarios against which they are told; rather, they appropriate them for dramatically exciting scenery. Likewise, Kenneth Kidd notes that many of the young adult texts produced about 9/11—from which discussions of torture are conspicuous by their absence—are often "books that promote infantile citizenship, that resort to a thematic of absolute evil and absolute innocence" (140–41). Kidd argues that many post-9/11 texts for younger readers squander the educational opportunity that they represent, and are marked instead by a politically unambitious refusal to explore historical complexity. *Guantanamo Boy*, with its clear intent to promote critical and politicized citizenship in its readers, also fails, for precisely this reason, to articulate the intellectually fulfilling critique of power that it promises. This is exemplified in particular by its narrative of absolute innocence, which seriously impoverishes the intervention it is positioned to make in the torture debate.

It is not merely the texts that are unsatisfying, however: scholarship on political narratives for younger readers often makes naive assumptions about the ways in which these texts are received by audiences. For example, a critical literature has emerged surrounding the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, which has as its goal "teaching interracial understanding and fellowship, historical truth, and cultural self-awareness" and which comprises texts that "problematize America's segregated, hierarchical society and inspire a more multicultural national perspective" (Teorey 227). Teorey's remarks here reflect a certain assumption that the no doubt sincere antiracist intentions of the authors of young adult texts translates directly and uncomplicatedly into positively liberalizing educational effects on readers. Other educational scholarship shares this assumption that children's literature represents an unproblematically useful classroom tool for helping young readers "further their development as global citizens" (Monobe and Son 70). However, texts that attempt exposure work cannot be relied upon to transparently and unequivocally reveal definite messages, to directly communicate unmediated and unambiguous political meanings, in the ways that writers or educators may intend. For example, we can turn to the conditions under which *Guantanamo Boy* is critical of torture.

Torture

Perera's work is particularly valuable for its representations of specific torture acts. Darius Rejali (2007) demonstrates that democratic states remain torturing states: they have not eliminated torture from their arsenal of political technologies, he shows, but rather they have learned to disguise and legitimize their use of torture by using "clean" forms of violence which do not leave identifiable marks on the outside of the body. The war on terror has borne witness to an extensive arsenal of such techniques. Many of the forms of torture that are committed in Guantanamo Bay, for instance, are non-scarring, which allows apologists for the prison to claim that it is a humane and safe environment because the prisoners are not suffering forms of spectacularly bloody violence (Sands 6, 165). However, whilst forced standing, sleep deprivation, and dietary manipulation may seem innocuous to some, their creative concatenation can represent very severe human rights infringements. Representations that stress this have clear political value. Post-9/11 anti-torture texts have often used waterboarding—a procedure in which prisoners are made to experience a limited form of drowning, which causes severe physical pain and extreme mental distress (Beynon)—as a focal point to reveal that techniques used by American forces do in fact constitute torture. *Guantanamo Boy* is part of that trend of literary exposure work. Apologists for waterboarding rely on its non-scarring nature to minimize the extent to which it is perceived as harmful: unlike the spectacular atrocities of the enemies of the West, such as the beheadings, live immolations, and suicide bombings of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh, it does not cause visible harm (Del Rosso). Despite the protestations of politicians such as President Trump, who called the pain caused by waterboarding "peanuts" (Phelps), waterboarding is definitely a form of torture, as Christopher Hitchens demonstrated when he tried to prove that it was harmless by voluntarily undergoing it. Reflecting upon his experience, he concluded that "if waterboarding does not constitute torture, then there is no such thing as torture" (Hitchens, "Believe Me"). Texts that amplify and underscore the painful nature of waterboarding have a clear value: they provide ways to resist its justification.

Khalid is waterboarded in a chapter titled "Water Games" (146–57), which communicates the salient descriptive factors of waterboarding and the key factors of Khalid's response to it: "[A] cloth lands on his face. More hands hold it down, so that he breathes in the smell of gauze bandages, and at the same time a trickle of cold water pours through the cloth and down his nose and mouth" (151). Perera conveys the fear and disorientation Khalid feels and aligns the reader entirely with him, refusing to examine the motivation of the torturer and focusing purely on the distress caused by the violence.

Significantly, Perera highlights the non-scarring nature of waterboarding, writing that "apart from the cut and bump on his forehead, there are no marks on his body. Nothing to prove anyone was trying to kill him" (156). This undermines persistent myths that in order to qualify as torture, violence must be messy; in particular, it deflates the idea that waterboarding is in any way mild or benign. Perera's representation of torture, then, is effective in revealing the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo as forms of torture. However, those who justify torture argue that there are circumstances in which it should be done *despite* its horrifying nature. This is a question that Perera's text cannot address, due to the philosophical and ethical blind spot in its framing of torture.

In *Guantanamo Boy* the story of the false positive provides a framing narrative context for the story of mistreatment in captivity. False positive narratives are texts that utilize a certain specific form of dramatic irony in which an innocent person confesses under torture to something of which the audience or reader knows they are innocent. Describing one of Khalid's early interrogations, Perera writes that "[t]his was beginning to feel like a scene from *Groundhog Day*. The same questions going round forever. With the same answers being ignored because they don't fit the answers the Americans want" (74). Khalid confesses, but in corroborating the false allegation he has merely been forced into perpetuating the injustice against himself: the argument that torture can be justified as an intelligence-gathering measure is intended to be deflated by this self-defeating confession, which merely confirms an untrue allegation and does not reveal any true or useful information. Here, as in other false positive narratives, the point is to demonstrate that torture is wrong both because innocent people are made to suffer it and because it is a self-confirming technology of violent power with no capacity to reveal the truth: because innocent people will falsely self-incriminate to escape suffering, torture is revealed as both a repulsive act and as a strategy of power that is ineffective on its own terms. This narrative frame is effective in revealing the injustice of false imprisonment, and it is pertinent to Guantanamo as so many of the prisoners are falsely imprisoned, but it does not go far enough in critiquing torture, because it fails to address the question of whether it would be effective or appropriate to torture guilty people. This representational strategy resorts to a thematic of absolute innocence and fails to acknowledge the complexity of the question it attempts to reframe.

The central problem is that nobody would argue that the innocent should be tortured. A coherent anti-torture position does not make discriminations on who it is permissible to torture, and deploring the fact that torture cannot discriminate between the innocent and the guilty in fact underlines the desirability of punishing the guilty and protecting the innocent. If ticking bomb narratives show that the guilty deserve torture and the false positive narrative argues that the innocent do not, then there is little meaningful difference between them. Although it is not a ticking bomb narrative, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), for instance, justifies torture by initially revealing torture as horrible and then subordinating this horror to the claim that it nevertheless provided the information that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden (this is untrue, but it is the conceit of the film; see Hersh). That is, the philosophical and political position implicit in the narrative of this movie—that torture is effective and should be used despite its horror—is in no way challenged by the claim that the innocent should not be tortured. Of course they shouldn't: if it is to be effective, *Zero Dark Thirty* argues, torture must be used on those who have questions to answer. The false positive narrative cannot speak to or confront this concern. The horror of the false positive narrative is that somebody innocent gets what somebody guilty deserves (false imprisonment suggests its opposite: legitimate imprisonment), and the only consistent anti-torture argument is that *nobody*, even guilty terrorists, deserves torture. The false positive narrative is a structurally incomplete opposition to torture as it leaves the broader question of the permissibility of torturing the guilty—which is, after all, the only argument put forward to justify torture—unaddressed. A similar problem pertains to the representation of Islam in *Guantanamo Boy*.

Islam

In much of the discourse produced in the course of the war on terror, Muslims are often made to fall outside of the intelligible limits of the human, represented through a series of clichés such as the murderous fanatic, the raging crowd, and the passive victim (Butler; Kumar; Mertus and Rawls; Morey and Yaqin). Echoing the insights of critical race studies and accounts of colonial violence, scholars have described the way that the war on terror creates a Manichean world in which there are "two kinds of humans, those who are worthy of respect and those who have lost all their rights" (Perrigo 229). Islamophobic discourses may be heterogeneous in some respects; the Islamophobic "pseudo-intellectual pugilism" (Lean 11) of the American Christian right wing cannot, for instance, be conflated with the popular rationalist secularism that vocally demonizes Islam in a way that emphasizes its irreconcilability with the traditions of Western secular republican democracy (Dawkins, 2007; Harris *End of Faith*; Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*). What these voices—and others—amount to, however, is a very definite and vocal antagonism to Islam and Muslims that consistently and repetitively both associates Islam with terrorist violence and claims that Muslims should not bear human or political rights equal to those of others because their beliefs, practices, and traditions render them necessarily incompatible with the privileges of modernity.

Like much of the Guantanamo canon, *Guantanamo Boy* resists this, by firstly challenging the racist association of Islam and terrorism and secondly by representing Muslims as human beings capable of bearing human rights. In Khalid's encounter with Ali Abaza, a falsely imprisoned lawyer who enlightens Khalid on the history and nature of Islam, much of this reframing is done explicitly. Ali tells Khalid that "[t]he world learned about chivalry and brotherhood from Islam" (221), that "Islam is not a medieval culture, like they pretend in the West" (222), and that "[p]olitics and culture must not be confused with religion" (223). This didactic interlude insists that unpleasant events associated with Islam—public executions, suicide bombings—are cultural and political, and that even though they are often framed in theological language they are not to be taken for either an authentic representation of the spirit of Islam or as representative of all of Islam. Further, this conversation with Abaza separates Islam from terrorist violence, as he states that "any person who commits an act of terrorism violates the laws of Islam" (224). This is an important uncoupling, which allows Islam to assume a human multivalence that other representations often refuse it.

A significant aspect of Perera's reframing of Islam lies in Khalid's character arc. At the beginning of the novel, Khalid is ambivalent toward the religious dimension of his parents' Pakistani culture, and actively disavows it more than once. At the beginning of the novel we read that "they sometimes say Friday prayers and usually eat halal food, but that's as far as the Muslim religion goes in Khalid's family" (12). Further, at various stages of his ordeal Khalid lashes out at Islam, blaming it for his problems. Shortly after his capture we read that "the one thing he wishes he could change right now is the religion he was born into" (94) and later he is "angry too at the Muslim religion for getting him into this mess" (104). However, in Guantanamo Khalid becomes familiar with the Qur'an itself and develops a religious identity. Like many Muslim prisoners in American jails (Hamm 669, 678–79), British prisons (Spalek and El-Hassan 109–11) and indeed many Muslims in Guantanamo itself (Brittain and Slovo 41), Khalid experiences his increased religiosity as a uniquely meaningful way of coping. Islam gives Khalid "a feeling of calm instead of the pain, bitterness and rage this prison has created" (282). At the start of Khalid's captivity he finds the sound of salah frightening and isolating, but by the end of the novel Khalid participates happily in daily prayer. The text foregrounds that Islam forms an important source of community identification and personal spiritual solace.

The thematic of absolute innocence, however, is again problematic here. Although this character arc allows Khalid to experience Islam as positively transformative, audience identification with Khalid is conditional on his initially secular identity. He is innocent throughout, but we learn to care about him when he is secular; it is stressed that Khalid is innocent at the same time that it is stressed that he does not identify as Muslim. In other exposure texts, audience sympathy with Muslim victims of torture comes at the price of the foregrounded disavowal of their Muslim identity. In *Rendition* (2007), for instance, the innocent character undergoing torture conspicuously has his secular Western characteristics, such as his Western grooming, his professional career and, in particular, the fact that he does not attend mosque, emphasized in order to underscore his resemblance to the presumed white Western audience; he is not Muslim enough to deserve torture. *Guantanamo Boy* is also problematic in this regard: through his secular ordinariness, Khalid is carefully and conspicuously constructed as a "normal" British boy through the emphasis that is placed on his secular activities and interests. He likes football and online gaming, he has a multicultural bunch of friends, and he has a crush on a girl. He is not devout, he does not pray, and he complains about having to adopt conspicuous markers of Muslim identity: "he's totally British, so why did he smile politely when Auntie gave him the shalwar kameez to wear?" (96). Many British Muslims do not struggle to reconcile Muslim identity with their Britishness, and feel that it is possible to retain a distinct Muslim cultural and religious identity simultaneous with and complementary to their British identity (Chambers 9; Maxwell). However, readers first engage with Khalid when he emphasizes the extent to which Islam is antithetical, irrelevant, and exterior his to British characteristics. He is an "ordinary Rochdale lad" who "happens to be Muslim" (Said): in this text Islam is not ordinary, normative, or British. Over the course of the narrative Khalid is irreversibly transformed into an authentic and dedicated Muslim through a contaminating, involuntary, and traumatic involvement with Pakistan and the war on terror. At the beginning of the novel, Islam is invisible and irrelevant, and at the conclusion, Islam is represented as a forcibly acquired war identity. Throughout the text the daily experience of Islam, and the extent to which it is a normative component of everyday life (and unrelated to political conflict) for a great many Muslims, remain only partially visible, described in the abstract but not enacted or demonstrated in the narrative. His Muslim identity is laboriously disassociated from terrorism, but this itself treats Islam as something that must be accounted for.

To oppose normative and authentic Britishness to Muslim identity emphasizes the aforementioned secularist narrative in which Islam and the West are necessarily incompatible. Here I echo a trenchant critique of human rights discourse, which argues that "respect for differences applies only to those differences that are reasonably consistent with . . . the identity of a wealthy—albeit visibly declining 'West'" (Badiou 24). Badiou argues that the white Europeans and Anglo-Americans who make decisions on who can bear human rights only recognize and respect the humanity of those who resemble themselves. Asked about the challenges of representing a young British Muslim boy, Perera remarked that she did not pay it any special attention because "[b]oys are boys" (Pauli). This universalizing position, which claims that the complexities of ethnicity and cultural difference do not deserve attention because we are all the same underneath, in fact erases the ways in which difference and cultural specificity are important markers of cultural identity; it flattens out important differences between religious and ethnic groups and the many heterogeneous forms of masculinity found within and among them. Crucially, it means that Khalid is made sympathetic by being shown as not different from the majority, which underscores the extent to which difference is suspicious and must be apologetically normalized. The *Entwicklungsroman* (Trites 9–15) structure of *Guantanamo Boy*, in which Khalid is changed by the transformative experience of torture and incarceration, allows Khalid to find religion as he comes of age through suffering, it allows the text to show that his religious identity was not to blame for his incarceration (because he did not have a religious identity until he was incarcerated), and it shows Islam as a redemptive spiritual force; however, this narrative arc also depends upon the audience building their identification with Khalid at a point at which he vocally rejects Islam as irreconcilable with his ordinary secular interests. Much as the narrative frame of the false positive allows audiences to sidestep considerations such as the morality of torturing the guilty, this narrative arc requires the audience's identification of Khalid as innocent to occur at a point at which his Muslim identity is repeatedly rejected or trivialized.

Conclusion

The limitations of the moral and political critique found in *Guantanamo Boy* cannot be dismissed as specific to young adult literature, as many other texts for general audiences that intervene in the torture debate also feature the limitations I have identified here. My critical gesture here is not simply a Žižekian reversal—an attempt to reveal that liberal politics are different from the reactionary politics they claim to oppose only by a matter of degree, or that liberalism is merely a hypocritical veneer superimposed on an unavowed fascism. I intend, rather, to show that elements of the justification of torture can be found even in the places where they are most vocally and conspicuously challenged, because such positions draw on and are reinforced by a remarkably elastic vocabulary of political and cultural tropes. I do not claim that Perera somehow justifies torture in the course of a polemically anti-torture text, or that her antiracism is in fact somehow racist; neither do I claim that Perera is a secret advocate of torture, as Perera's website and social media output make abundantly clear that she is an unconditional opponent of torture and vocal supporter of human rights. I argue, rather, that the anti-torture position narrativized in *Guantanamo Boy* does not critique torture rigorously enough because it does not effectively address, rebut, or challenge the questions posed by those who *do* justify torture, in part because the dramatic irony of the false positive fails to effectively rebut utilitarian arguments supporting torture and also because its lack of attention to the subtle politics of difference leaves its representation of Islam shallow. These two facets of this novel reveal not only the limitations of this specific novel but also the difficulty of effectively maintaining moral and political messages in literary texts more generally. Given that President-elect Trump has strongly suggested that he intends to reintroduce torture into the arsenal of technologies available to American military forces, intellectually lucid and ethically robust political and cultural resistance to the justification of torture remain vital. If our critique is so easily defused, then it is no critique at all.

Alex Adams is an early career researcher based in North East England. He completed his Ph.D. at Newcastle University; his research interests include literature and politics, human rights, violence, masculinity, film, and political emotions. His first book, Political Torture in Popular Culture: The Role of Representations in the Post-9/11 Torture Debate, *was published in 2016.*

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