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Studying the Invisible. Experiences of Extreme Violence as a Methodological Challenge

Frithjof Nungesser[*]

Abstract: *»Das Unsichtbare erforschen. Erfahrungen extremer Gewalt als methodologische Herausforderung«.* The study of extreme violence confronts researchers with a number of methodological challenges. This applies especially to approaches in violence research that focus on visual materials. Drawing on research on experiences of violence and resistance in the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, this article discusses two key sets of problems connected with the (in)visibility of violence. Problems of *contextual (in)visibility* result from various aspects of the context under study (e.g., spatial layout, access control, media technologies). An analysis of Guantánamo and its visual representations suggests that, quite generally, visually-oriented violence research needs to reflect the availability, selectivity, framing, and contested nature of its materials. In contrast, problems of *epistemic (in)visibility* do not result from the contexts studied but from the way they are studied. These problems become particularly relevant when examining the acts and experiences of those affected by violence. I argue that the dominant methodological approach to violence and culturally entrenched concepts of victimhood promote the neglect of the victims' experiences, subjectivity, and agency. Therefore, research needs to search for alternative ways to approach phenomena of violence – for example, by analyzing non-visual materials, such as personal documents of victims. Referring to accounts of former Guantánamo inmates, some of the challenges of such an approach are discussed. Overall, I conclude that that questions of (in)visibility need to be considered in every study on violence – both as an important condition of analysis and as an essential aspect of the phenomena analyzed.
Keywords: Visibility, torture, Guantánamo, methodology, framing, photography, personal accounts, agency, victims.

1. Introduction

Violence research typically aims at understanding the conditions or causes of the *exercise* of violence (Hoebel and Knöbl 2019; Nungesser 2019a). The

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objects of this "perpetrator oriented" (Hartmann and Hoebel 2020b, 67; Därmann 2021, 56) research are usually *observable*, often even *publicly* observable, dynamics of violence. According to Eddie Hartmann and Thomas Hoebel (2020a, 72-5), research on violence is characterized by a "visibility bias." This bias is also linked to technological developments. In the last decades, the amount of photo and video materials has increased dramatically, due largely to the proliferation of security cameras and mobile video recording devices (Casper and Moore 2009, 1-3). As a consequence, both everyday violence and violence in war zones have increasingly been captured visually (Sontag 2004, 18-9; Griffin 2004, 381-2; Collins 2008, 3-7). These developments have opened up new ways "for getting at the situational details of violent interactions" (Collins 2008, 7), thus reinforcing the focus on visible acts of violence even further (e.g., Nassauer and Legewie 2019; Philpot et al. 2020). The present article argues that this line of research, despite all its merits, runs the risk of reproducing empirical and analytical blind spots. More specifically, this paper discusses methodological challenges in the study of experiences of extreme violence, which are often *invisible* in different ways. These challenges will be discussed against the background of my research on experiences of violence, vulnerability, and resistance in the US detention camp within the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base (Nungesser 2019b, 2022).

Based on the Guantánamo case, this article addresses two key sets of problems connected with the (in)visibility of violence. The first set of problems is rooted in the *contextual* (in)visibility of violence. Depending on various contextual factors – such as the spatial, material, and temporal organization – situations differ substantially with respect to the (in)visibility of violence. While in some contexts, violence is conducted in public and thus can be observed, in other contexts, such as Guantánamo, violence is to a large extent rendered invisible – even though many pictures of the detention site itself exist. In section 2, the contextual invisibility of Guantánamo is discussed in three steps. First, the various modes of invisibility surrounding the camp are outlined. Then, it is shown that the large number of photographs of Guantánamo generates an indirect visibility which suggests transparency but, in effect, hides much of the actual violence that takes place there. Finally, the political conflicts surrounding the (in)visibility of the camp and the fate of the inmates are discussed.

The second set of problems revolves around the *epistemic* (in)visibility of violence. Epistemic (in)visibility does not result from the contextual features of the situation examined but from limitations of the research process itself. These limitations become especially obvious when research departs from the perpetrator-oriented perspective and focuses instead on the acts and experiences of those affected by violence. In the first part of section 3, I outline different facets of epistemic (in)visibility by drawing on recent literature on vulnerability, victimhood, and violence. I show how the dominant

methodological approach to violence and the culturally entrenched concepts of victimhood promote the neglect of victims' subjectivity and agency. Also, I argue that the epistemic characteristics of violent experiences reveal some fundamental limits of the visual approach to the study of violence. Taken together, these problems suggest that research needs to explore alternative ways to approach phenomena of violence – for example, by analyzing non-visual kinds of material such as personal accounts of victims. In the second part of section 3, I discuss some of the challenges of such an approach, again using the Guantánamo case as my starting point.

Overall, this discussion shows that contextual and epistemic (in)visibilities are seminal dimensions of violent processes that need to be taken into account in every study on violence. In the concluding section, I outline two general consequences of this insight. First, violence research – especially visually-oriented violence research – must consider the patterns of, and the political conflicts over, (in)visibility that determine whether and how violent processes become observable. The (in)visibility of violence is not just a side effect of the actual social process in question. Rather, in order to reconstruct the logic, meaning, and communicative function of violence, its (in)visibility must be understood as an essential aspect of the research object. Second, the methodological questions connected to the problems of (in)visibility confront researchers in this area with ethical and political challenges. The (in)visibility of violence cannot be understood without considering structures of domination and power. Using visual materials without accounting for the political embeddedness of (in)visibility may reproduce existing hierarchies and power structures at both the conceptual and the empirical level.

2. Contextual (In)Visibilities and the Politics of Sight

2.1 Shrouded in Invisibilities

In examining the dynamics of violence and resistance in Guantánamo, one is first confronted with the peculiar problem that the objects of study are shielded from perception in various ways, despite the fact that the camp is both a visually familiar place and often referred to in public debates. From a macroscopic perspective, the camp can be understood as the hub of an international network of invisible detention facilities, known as "black sites" (Fletcher and Stover 2009, 3-6; Barnes 2016, 200-203; Brody 2011, 20-2). Transfer to these black sites was administered through the US' "extraordinary rendition" program. The CIA put terror suspects onto "ghost planes," effectively transforming them into undocumented "ghost detainees" (Human Rights Watch 2004b, 2; Barnes 2016, 201). This "outsourcing" (Mayer 2009, 101) of detention and interrogation is documented in accounts from former camp

inmates, who repeatedly report having been dragged into "a secret world" (Begg 2007, 3) – be it in US military camps abroad such as Kandahar or Bagram (Begg 2007, 108-91; Kurnaz 2008, 47-82; Errachidi 2014, 54-73) or in prisons of other states such as Jordan or Pakistan, who cooperated with US authorities (Begg 2007, 1-19; Errachidi 2014, 43-53; Slahi 2017, 150-87). For 780 individuals, this international logistics of rendition, detention, and violence had the same final destination: Guantánamo.

Given its geographical location on an island outside of US territory and its heavily fenced layout, the camp is spatially and materially sealed off from the outside world. Also, because it is embedded within a military base, the organizational control over the area is high. Nevertheless, Guantánamo is far from invisible. Many people can readily picture the camp, usually because they have seen photos of it. In fact, in contrast to other facilities involved in the "war on terror," Guantánamo has been captured in "thousands of photos" (Van Veeren 2011, 1728), from both the outside and the inside. However, as will be shown in greater detail in the next subsection, these images present the camp in a highly selective and politically orchestrated way, which hides the violence behind a myriad of pictures.

This peculiar concurrence of selective visibility and invisible violence has been intertwined with social and judicial invisibilities. Entrance to the camp has been severely restricted. In the initial years, only the Red Cross had regular access to the prisoners (Fletcher and Stover 2009, 84-5), but even this contact was partly limited – in violation of international law (Singel 2007). Moreover, due to its legal status, the organization could not criticize or publicly report the conditions in the camp. It was only after four years of the camp's operation that a list of its inmates was published (Siems 2017a, 376). Family visits have never been allowed, phone calls have been prohibited or permitted only two times a year per inmate (Human Rights Watch 2008, 2; Siems 2017a, 385). Correspondence with relatives has been restricted by massive redactions or even manipulated, or prevented altogether (Human Rights Watch 2008, 15; Ischmuratov 2006, 136-7; Slahi 2017, 195-6). Also, it was not until more than two years after the camp was established that the US Supreme Court ruled that inmates were entitled to legal representation and trials. In response, the "Combatant Status Review Tribunals" were institutionalized, which – in contrast to regular courts – were withheld from the public. This system, too, had to be fought over years of litigation up to the Supreme Court (Fletcher and Stover 2009, 85-7; Hajjar 2018). Moreover, this judicial invisibility operates not only on a procedural level, but also on a semantic level. Acts of illegal detention and torture were hidden behind "radical" (Hajjar 2018, 300) and "creative reinterpretations" (Gardell 2008, 145) of international and US law, which brought about new legal categories: prisoners were classified as "unlawful enemy combatants," thus denying them prisoner-of-war protections under the Geneva Conventions; diverse torture methods became known

as "harsh" or "enhanced interrogation techniques" or as "an alternative set of procedures" (Allen 2007; Gardell 2008, 148; Brody 2011, 71-6).

While the term "enhanced interrogation techniques" is a euphemism coined to obscure the use of violence, the actual physical application of these techniques is intended to make the violence in Guantánamo temporarily invisible, since its consequences are rendered imperceptible. In using interrogation methods such as waterboarding, stress positions, sexual humiliation, or sensory deprivation, interrogators strived to inflict severe physical or mental pain and suffering but to "leave no marks" (Allen 2007). These techniques are the result of the systematic development of methods of "white" or "clean" torture. They are not only based on decades of psychological research but were also planned and in some cases enacted by US psychologists and healthcare personnel (Gorman and Zakowski 2018, 66; Soldz 2008). To the CIA – and to the US administration in general – this "approach had the dual advantage of being more effective and depriving the tortured subject of the means of communicating his or her experience: a torture tale requires visible scars for validation" (Gardell 2008, 141).

Guantánamo, it turns out, is shrouded in invisibilities. Given its perceptual, social, and judicial isolation, it has been impossible for external parties to directly observe the camp proceedings, let alone the interrogations. Hence, there has been no way to study any of the concrete acts of violence in the camp as they unfold. Nevertheless, Guantánamo is a well-documented place. The question thus needs to be asked whether there are other, more indirect ways to gain visual access to the camp and the violence done there.

2.2 Indirect Visibility

During German Chancellor Angela Merkel's inaugural visit to the United States in 2006, former US President George W. Bush said in reference to Guantánamo: "First of all, I urge any journalist to go down there and look at how the folks that are being detained there are treated" (The White House / Office of the Press Secretary 2006). In his quote, Bush implied that there was far-reaching transparency regarding Guantánamo. He created the impression that journalists could serve as proxies who could allow the public to see what is going on there, thereby suggesting a kind of indirect visibility of the camp. Consequently, questions arise as to the actual extent of this indirect visibility and the extent to which it is framed according to a specific political and military position. With these questions, we tread the ground of what is called the "politics of visibility" (Casper and Moore 2009) or the "politics of sight" (Pachirat 2011). In the following, I first outline two key aspects of how specific perspectives on Guantánamo were produced: the actual process of photoproduction and the dominant motifs of the pictures. In the subsequent

subsection, I situate Guantánamo's highly selective visual representation within the broader dynamics of the politics of sight surrounding the camp.

In order to understand the indirect visibility of Guantánamo, it is necessary to retrace the concrete production of its visual representation. How does a press visit to Guantánamo work? Can a journalist get a detailed picture of the camp? Are members of the press permitted to see or even interview prisoners? According to Elspeth Van Veeren (2011, 1727-8), visitors to Guantánamo "are provided a military escort and are subject to a series of regulations regarding their movements, including strict rules limiting photography inside the facility." Visitors have to take part in "a pre-programmed guided tour of the facilities" and, before leaving, all the photos they took must be approved by military officials. Like personnel, visitors are physically searched to prevent the release of uncleared material (Van Veeren 2011, 1728). Some aspects of the manner in which these regulations have been implemented can be seen in the reports of former inmates. Khalid al-Asmr (2006, 66), for example, states that Guantánamo staff made sure that press delegations "never came near the prisoners" and that inmates were instructed "not to talk to the delegations" (see also Azzam 2006, 89; Errachidi 2014, 83). Murat Kurnaz (2008, 211) describes a kind of stage which was set up for the journalists.

> We were also inspected twice a week by groups of journalists. They never visited our containers, of course. Instead, we were led to a kind of playground with soccer goals, basketball hoops, and a volleyball net. Sometimes there were brand-new soccer balls, volleyballs, and basketballs lying around. Normally we weren't allowed on the ground, only when journalists were visiting.

The effects of the regulations can be seen in the subjects of the camp pictures. In her study of Guantánamo photographs, Van Veeren (2011) distinguishes three main series of pictures. The photos of the "orange series" (Van Veeren 2011, 1730-9) show the prisoners kneeling in the gravel, chained and almost completely deprived of any sense of their surroundings by gloves, black goggles, earmuffs, and surgical masks. In wearing orange jumpsuits, the inmates are marked as guilty, emulating the regular US prison system. The chains and masks make the inmates appear to be dangerous individuals, although, officially, this is intended to anonymize them and to protect them from humiliation in accordance with international law. These photos were taken in the first days of the camp and show the arrival of the prisoners at Camp X-Ray, which was closed after only three months.[1] Nevertheless, the images are

[1] A description of the arrival in Camp X-Ray (and some pictures of the "orange series") can be found, e.g., in Kurnaz (2008, 91-126).

probably the most "enduring" images of Guantánamo.[2] Even today, 20 years later, media reports often use these pictures.

Van Veeren (2011, 1739-46) divides subsequently published photographs into the "white series" and the "empty cell series." The images in the "white series" show the prisoners unchained in casual and predominantly white clothing. In these images, detainees are escorted through the camps by guards, they are interacting with one another, or are engaging in sports (as Kurnaz reports in the passage quoted above). These pictures depict a specific group of inmates; white clothes have been accorded only to "cooperative" detainees.[3] Photos in the "empty cell series" show selected facilities of the camp in a vacant and cleaned condition – not only a cell but also the camp hospital, exercise yards, tribunal rooms, and the remains of Camp X-Ray. Compared to the first series, these two groups of images put more emphasis on the modern, rational, and humane character of the camp, but still convey the message that dangerous terrorists are brought to justice here (Van Veeren 2011, 1742).

While the three series of pictures analyzed by Van Veeren provide specific perspectives of the inside of the camp, one could add two series on the camp's exterior. One of the most prominent groups of images shows the external view of the different camps, which is dominated by large chain link fences and concertina wire. These photographs often feature the fortified entrance of one of the camps, which is marked by a sign that provides the name of the camp and its logo, as well as the now (in)famous motto of the Joint Task Force, "Honor Bound to Defend Freedom." Aside from this "fence series," there is a group of images that one could name the "off duty series." These images remind us that the base is "home to some 6,000 soldiers and contract domestic workers, as well as their families" (Hall 2021). A bowling center is depicted, as are playgrounds and the well-known McDonald's restaurant behind barbed wire, illustrating the stark contrast between the inside and the outside world.

Guantánamo is thus not an invisible place. Rather, it is made visible indirectly, through a large number of photographs. These representations, however, are extremely selective – especially those of the camp's interior. We can see photos of selected groups of anonymized prisoners, taken in particular areas and over short time periods, as well as images of empty facilities. Interrogations, torture, and humiliation, arbitrary mistreatment, and violent force-feeding – all of this is hidden behind the published pictures. Yet, as we know from inmates and their lawyers, all of the 24,000 interrogations were videorecorded (Denbeaux et al. 2008, 3; Fletcher and Stover 2009, 176). These

[2] According to Michael Griffin (2004, 383), such "enduring representations […] shape and delimit popular imagination" of military conflicts – regardless of the total number of photos that actually exist of the respective conflict.

[3] For more on the camp's "level-system," see, e.g., Fletcher and Stover (2009, 44-5).

materials, of course, were not published. That violence thus remains invisible.

2.3 The Politics of Sight

Referring to US war photojournalism in Iraq and Afghanistan, Michael Griffin (2004, 400) states that "photography is in no way de-linked by its status as a 'recording technology' from the economic, social, and political forces that shape the limits and propriety of representation." The Guantánamo photos demonstrate that this claim holds also true for later developments in the "war on terror." In a rather literal sense, those photos confirm that the frames through which we perceive violence "are politically saturated" (Butler 2009, 1) and that these frames are not just a matter of verbal discourse but also of visual representation (Van Veeren 2011, 1723-4). It is precisely through their *mixture* of visualization and invisibility that the photographs take on an important role in the politics of sight surrounding the "war on terror." "Although the happenings inside Guantánamo are carefully guarded, the very existence of the camp appears to be for domestic and global public consumption" (Neal 2006, 44).

It seems that, from the administration's point of view, the message that should be "consumed" is twofold: On the one hand, Guantánamo is portrayed as a transparent and modern facility that plays an essential role in the "'just', 'humane' and 'clean'" "war on terror" (Van Veeren 2013, 90); on the other hand, the pictures, especially those in the "orange series," convey a message of punishment. Drawing on Foucault, Mattias Gardell (2008, 152) interprets these early photographs as part of a "political ceremony by which a momentarily shaken sovereignty seeks to re-constitute itself and demonstrate to the world the invincible force of the sovereign." He (2008, 152) argues that, following 9/11, the logic of secret investigation and public torture, which Foucault (1977) describes as characteristic of the French ancien régime, reappeared in a globalized world. The public display of punishment, Gardell claims, aims not only to deter other (potential) jihadists but also to remind all US citizens that every violation of the law "constitutes a rebellion." While I agree with some points of Gardell's argument, I think it can hardly explain the highly selective representation of the camp in general or the widely *in*visible execution of violence and torture, in particular. Guantánamo is not simply a recurrence of sovereign power. Rather, the characteristic combination of depiction and invisibility seems to be the result of a concurrence of different logics of power (to put things in Foucauldian terms): The public display of sovereignty has to be aligned with the disciplinary and biopolitical logics within and outside the camp. In fact, Gardell (2008, 157) himself mentions the "paradoxes" and "fissures" that result from the interplay of different

logics of power, though he does not apply this argument to tensions within the representation of Guantánamo.

There are tensions not only *within* the official representation but also *between* this official representation and rival politics of sight that advance radically different framings of the camp. These attempts to reframe Guantánamo follow two closely connected approaches. The first approach aims to reveal inconsistencies between the official representation and other materials that were not intended for the public. These materials include a few photos that were smuggled out of the camp without clearance (Van Veeren 2011, 1729). They also include leaked materials such as the 2003 "Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures" published on Wikileaks (Singel 2007) and a 2009 confidential report by the Red Cross (Mayer 2009, 210). Moreover, thousands of official documents on Guantánamo could be retrieved through requests under the Freedom of Information Act (Siems 2017a, 372-6). Finally, human rights organizations, lawyers, and researchers published reports that claim to describe the real situation in the camp and the experiences of inmates (e.g., Physicians for Human Rights 2005; Human Rights Watch 2008; Fletcher and Stover 2009). The second approach seeks to change the interpretation of the well-known and enduring Guantánamo images. According to Van Veeren (2011, 1737-8), this is what happened in the case of the "iconic" pictures of the "orange series." Specifically, "elements of these images can and have been successfully rearticulated within the discourse of anti-Guantánamo campaigns to transform detainee identities in the orange series from 'terrorist' to 'torture victim.'" This rearticulation is performed, for example, in NGO campaigns where protesters, in hoods and orange jumpsuits, confront the public by kneeling on the street (Van Veeren 2011, 1738-9). Drawing on both official and unofficial materials opposing politics of sight thus use the tensions within the official representation to reframe the perception of the camp.

My arguments thus far raise a number of issues that are of more general methodological relevance to violence research, especially with regard to the use of visual materials. First, it becomes clear that direct visual access to violent acts is limited and regulated by diverse factors such as the material, organizational, and political contexts. Especially in cases of extreme asymmetrical violence, attempts to establish an extensive contextual invisibility are typical. Second, the considerations above illustrate that both the availability and the content of direct and indirect visual representations of violence are shaped by political power relations. Third, it could be shown that a conflict of rivaling politics of sight can develop around sites of violence, where the (in)visibility and interpretation of violence are at stake. These aspects must be considered when making visual materials the foundation of research. Otherwise, researchers risk overlooking essential dimensions of violent processes, as well as reproducing specific political representations of violence.

3. Epistemic (In)Visibilities and the Search for Alternative Ways of Access

3.1 Invisible Suffering and Impossible Agency

If one examines the processes in Guantánamo (or other camps) from the perspective of the inmates, one is not merely confronted with the problem of the contextual accessibility of suitable data. In addition, one faces the question of which perspective is adopted on the persons affected by violence. In recent years, important contributions have strongly criticized prevailing conceptualizations of vulnerability and victimhood (Butler 2016, 2020, 185-204; Därmann 2020, 2021; Koloma Beck 2021; Meyers 2011; Millet 2018). Looking at Guantánamo with this body of research in mind can help us remain mindful of another set of problems, which revolves around the *epistemic* (in)visibilities of violence. Problems of epistemic (in)visibility are different in kind from those of contextual (in)visibility. This becomes apparent from the fact that these problems would also be encountered in cases where acts of violence were directly observable, i.e., cases involving no contextual invisibility. In other words, (in)visibility is not only a matter of contexts but also a matter of concepts.

In four steps, I will now outline key challenges connected to the epistemic (in)visibility of violence in general and of experiences of violence in particular. In the next subsection, I will refer to the reports of former Guantánamo inmates in order to discuss how the use of victims' accounts can help to deal with both contextual and epistemic invisibilities.

1) In her comparative study of the victims of slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust, Kitty Millet (2018, 18) advances the criticism that "in order to build a shared history of persecution, genocide scholars posited 'victim objects' rather than specific subjects. Victims became silenced in the name of historical dispassion and objectivity. Simultaneously, the need to find an agent and to identify causality displaced victims in favor of perpetrators. Perpetrators remained subjects over silent victims." On Millet's view, methodological as well as ethical positions foster the visibility of certain aspects of violent processes, but also shroud other aspects. Of particular importance is the paradoxical effect created by the longing for an explanation. It is precisely the horror caused by the scale of violence that fuels the desire to comprehend the incomprehensible. Ingrained scientific ideals, such as the striving for reflexive distance, contribute to an external, analytical perspective, which eschews taking the perspective of those affected by violence. According to Millet (2018, 1-2), this in turn leads to a focus on "quantification" and "causes," which, however, promotes an objectification and homogenization of the victim group – which, again, strengthens the "perpetrator orientation" of

violence research mentioned above (Hartmann and Hoebel 2020b, 67; Därmann 2021, 56). This focus on numbers, causes, and explanations of violent acts comes with a risk of rendering the *experiences* of violence invisible.

2) Even when victims take center stage, they are often interpreted in ways that obscure important dimensions of their subjectivity. For example, as Diana Tietjens Meyers (2011) argues, two victim paradigms emerged in the late 20th century: the pathetic and the heroic victim. Pathetic victims, according to Meyers (2011, 257-8), are characterized by their innocence, helplessness, and suffering, leading to a "de-agentification" of the individuals concerned. Accordingly, Meyers claims, this victim paradigm is usually applied to groups such as Holocaust or trafficking victims. "Heroic victims," in contrast, are conceived of as "idealistic," "courageous," and "stunningly agentic figures" who are motivated by "a commitment to peace and justice" (Meyers 2011, 258-9). This paradigm is typically embodied by individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Aung San Suu Kyi (whose status as heroic victim has probably been tarnished since the publication of Meyers's article).

The dominance of these two victim paradigms introduces problems not only for moral and legal philosophy (in which Meyers is interested), but also for violence research. The situation and character of victims appear as radically different from those of other individuals: "Each paradigm 'others' victims – either as less than fully human or as superlatively human" (Meyers 2011, 267). If one is guided by these concepts, it becomes difficult to grasp the actual actions and experiences of victims – whether in camps or in other contexts of violence. With regard to torture, for example, recourse to the heroic victim paradigm contributes to ignoring the radical asymmetry of torture contexts and the difficulty of effective resistance. This criticism is formulated, for example, by Wolfgang Sofsky (1996, 89), who then, however, goes to the opposite extreme by speaking of an "elimination" of the agency of torture victims, thus following the pathetic victim paradigm. The two paradigms are also problematic in the further sense that they associate moral criteria, such as innocence or idealism, with the concept of the victim. These culturally entrenched paradigms thus hamper a differentiated and empirically open-minded analysis of the experiences, the suffering, but also the agency of victims of violence.

3) Against this background, it seems necessary to resort to literature that focuses on the agency of victims. In this way, it becomes possible to take a look at dimensions that are hidden by the two victim paradigms. In contrast to the "pathetic victim paradigm," this line of research points to the many forms of resistance that can be found even in contexts of extreme violence (Därmann 2020, 2021; Därmann and Wildt 2021). Unlike forms of public and "civil" protest, these practices of "uncivil disobedience," as Iris Därmann (2021, 21, 55) calls them, have long been ignored. Hence, there seems to exist a visibility bias in the case of acts of resistance as well as acts of violence

(Därmann and Wildt 2021, 3-4). The "heroic victim paradigm" also fails to capture many of the aspects found in the literature. For example, studies show that in some contexts of violence, "unheroic" everyday life is an essential part of dealing with the situation (Koloma Beck 2012). Furthermore, focusing on heroic aspects can lead to a hierarchization of those affected, which leads small, barely noticeable, often only symbolic or ineffective acts of resistance to become invisible (Därmann 2021, 21-2; Därmann and Wildt 2021, 12-4). Problems with this paradigm also emerge when dealing with unexpected reactions to violence, such as when a survivor of sexual violence refuses to identify and condemn her tormentors in order to keep functioning (Koloma Beck 2021). The heroic perspective in particular, then, is problematic in light of the fact that "the normativity of research and the normativity of the field need by no means be congruent" (Koloma Beck 2021, 90). Therefore, when looking at experiences of violence, researchers need to guard against their own preconceptions of victimhood and resistance. How violence is experienced, and how individuals deal with and resist violence, are open and empirical questions.

4) When studying experiences of extreme violence, one is confronted with yet another form of epistemic invisibility. This form of invisibility does not follow from contexts or concepts, but rather from the basic characteristics of experiences of violence. Even if acts of violence can be observed in some way, and even if a suitable and differentiated understanding of the agency and subjectivity of victims is applied, certain dimensions of violence are visible or invisible per se. If a person is punched in the face, for example, this act is visible in such a basic sense, even if it is conducted behind the walls of a torture camp and is thus contextually invisible. In contrast, the experience of how it feels to get punched in the face (or to punch someone in the face) is epistemically invisible in a strong sense, even if the violent act itself is conducted publicly. This *strong epistemic invisibility* points to fundamental limits of visually-oriented violence research. Hence, researchers who strive to include the perspective of victims must reflect on how they might integrate non-visual materials, which can compensate for the lack of visibility. This is why Kitty Millet (2018, 1-2), for example, calls for a more systematic use of autobiographical sources in order to reconstruct the perspective of those affected by violence. Some of the challenges of such an approach are discussed in the following, again using the example of Guantánamo.

3.2 Substituting for Visibility

Due to contextual factors, the violence in Guantánamo cannot be observed; for epistemic reasons, experiences of violence and the agency of inmates are conceptually challenging and perceptually elusive. Guantánamo thus represents a problematic subject for visually oriented approaches to violence. The same is probably true for comparable sites of extreme asymmetrical

violence. Against this background, there is a need to find alternative ways of accessing acts and experiences of violence. Materials are needed that compensate for the lack of visual data, as it were. In contrast to many other contexts of extreme asymmetrical violence, Guantánamo admits of such materials in a variety of forms, from interviews to books with personal accounts to drawings by inmates.[4] However, as with the visual materials, the question is in how far such documents can be a reliable source of research and in which way the camp becomes perceivable through them. I now outline four challenges that arise when dealing with these materials – and which may come up when dealing with other contexts of violence.

1) As with the photos, the problem of access also arises with regard to inmate reports. Because the inmates were thoroughly isolated from the outside world, most of their accounts and all of the interviews were published at a time when they were no longer in the camp. The only report written during imprisonment is Slahi's (2017). Slahi's lawyers had to go through six years of legal battles until a first, heavily redacted manuscript could be handed over to the book's editor, Larry Siems (Siems 2017a, 371-77). Two and a half years later, in January 2015, the first edition of the *Guantánamo Diary* was published – almost 10 years after the manuscript was written in solitary detention (Slahi 2017, xiv). It was only in 2017 that a restored edition could be published. Because the original manuscript was still classified, Larry Siems and the recently released Slahi tried to "reconstruct the scenes that the censored text obscured as faithfully and accurately as possible" (Siems 2017b, xviii). These struggles over the availability, censorship, and publication of personal accounts further complicate the conflict over the perceptibility of the camp. In the case of Guantánamo, but also when examining other contexts of violence, it is therefore always necessary to reflect on questions of why certain experiences could be made available, why others could not, and what consequences this selectivity has for understanding the overall phenomenon.

While personal accounts and documents from inmates are thus subject to some of the same limitations and conflict dynamics as the visual materials discussed in the previous section, there are also important differences. Unlike photographs, memories are not bound to technical devices. Baggage checks and approval procedures cannot prevent mental belongings from leaving the camp. In this respect, the access to violent processes is, at least potentially, considerably better in the case of inmate testimonies. This opens up an alternative path for gaining insight into the otherwise invisible contexts

[4] In addition to several book-length accounts (Adayfi 2021; Begg 2007; Errachidi 2014; Habib and Collingwood 2008; Kurnaz 2008; Slahi 2017), inmate statements can be found in NGO and academic publications (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2004a; Fletcher and Stover 2009) and in numerous interviews in both written and video form (Willemsen 2006; Witness to Guantanamo 2022). There are also poems and drawings by inmates (e.g., Falkoff 2010; Worthington 2008).

of violence. At the same time, however, the characteristics and limitations of such materials must be considered.

2) When studying the perspectives of victims in highly isolated contexts, researchers often depend on a limited number of materials. This leads to the question of whether the few materials which are accessible are also *reliable*. In this context, two potential difficulties can be distinguished. First, as psychological research has shown, in situations of extreme and chronic stress, distortions and lapses of memory are likely consequences (Brenner 2010, 472-8). In fact, in the reports from Guantánamo, inmates repeatedly admit great difficulties in their attempts to remember some of their longer periods of imprisonment – for example, because they were suffering from severe depression and/or were under the influence of medication (Zaeef 2006, 240; Errachidi 2014, 138-40; Slahi 2017, 346). Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the reports from Guantánamo were, in almost all cases, written ex-post – often years after the events described. Thus, the question arises as to how complete, accurate, and correct such personal reports are. A second challenge arises from the fact that experiences of violence described in interviews or books have to be structured in a certain way. For example, in the interviews I analyzed, an interview guide is recognizable. In the books, the experiences have to be put into a comprehensible, narrative form, which follows specific traditions of biographical narrations (see, e.g., Roux 2020, 432). It is also important to note that, in most cases, the former inmates were assisted by co-authors – usually journalists or writers.[5] In this context, then, one question is whether narrative patterns and possible dramaturgical strategies hamper a comprehensive understanding of the camp, if reports conform to the paradigm of the heroic victim, for example.

Despite these potential difficulties, in the case of Guantánamo, interviews and testimonies have proven to be reliable, detailed, and indispensable sources. Their reliability is demonstrated not only by the similarities between various interviews and inmate accounts but also by the coherence between these accounts and the extensive body of research conducted by NGOs, lawyers, journalists, and researchers (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2004b, 2008; Brody 2011; Physicians for Human Rights 2005; Allen 2007; Fletcher and Stover 2009). The narrative organization of the reports is also not a fundamental problem. This is partly due to the fact that every form of interview, report and, even more so, biographical narrative must follow such culturally entrenched patterns (Fuchs-Heinritz 2000, 141-5). In addition, the subjective and narrative character of the materials is a crucial advantage, especially if one is concerned with the level of personal experience. For example, the

[5] For example, Moazzam Begg's (2007) report was co-written with British journalist Victoria Brittain; Murat Kurnaz's (2008) book, which was first published in German, was co-authored by journalist Helmut Kuhn; for his account, Ahmed Errachidi (2014) cooperated with the well-known South African author Gillian Slovo.

often-fragmentary character of the narratives and the different foci of the reports constitute indispensable information when it comes to comprehending the specifics of the camp experience in each case.

3) Another methodological challenge when studying experiences of extreme violence is the potential survivorship bias, which could be latent in the available material. Given the chronic, massive, and cumulative stress in the camp, the risk of long-lasting and severe trauma, psychiatric disorders, and other medical problems is high (Physicians for Human Rights 2005; Brenner 2010). The devastating consequences of indefinite detention and torture can be seen in the accounts of inmates. For instance, Errachidi (2014, 139) notes that "it wasn't unusual for prisoners in Guantánamo to lose their minds. Some regained their mental balance, others didn't" (see also Ischmuratov 2006, 133; Zaeef 2006, 226; Slahi 2017, 346). Zaeef (2006, 240) even reports that incarceration destroyed some of his most fundamental capacities, such as reading and writing. It therefore seems likely that many of the (former) inmates could not cope with their experiences, could not articulate them, or could only express them in completely different modes. The available material can therefore only reflect the perspective of those inmates who managed to survive the ordeal to at least an extent that allowed them to report their experiences. Hence, quite generally, when drawing on personal accounts, violence research needs to consider that the very fact of surviving creates its own selectivity.

4) Finally, the analysis of victims' accounts must properly respect the fact that undergoing violence is an embodied process that requires articulation in order to be transformed into an experience.[6] Thus, by necessity, such accounts of embodied processes are culturally mediated interpretations that are structured according to biographical, religious, or political patterns. Moreover, researchers should remain mindful that such processes of undergoing are characterized by a certain "*unsharability*" (Wilkinson 2004, 16) – even when they are meticulously explicated. Thus, it is precisely the embodied character of experience that seems to limit the possibility of imagining it. In their testimonies, some inmates emphasize the "unsharability" of their suffering. Slahi (2017, 228-9), for example, writes, "You, Dear Reader, could never understand the extent of the physical, and much more psychological pain people in my situation suffered, no matter how hard you try to put yourself in another's shoes." He nevertheless tries to make his torments comprehensible to some extent, by referring to aspects of bodily experiences that are familiar or at least easily replicable for his readers (Slahi 2017, 25, 315). Other inmates have also explored the limits of what can be communicated. For example, Sudanese journalist Sami al-Haj used drawings to convey his extreme experiences of hunger strike and the consequent force-feeding. The results

[6] For more on the relation of embodiment and the symbolic articulation of experience in general, see Jung (2017).

are harrowing testimonies that not only make the violence visible, but also capture the subjectivity of the experience (Worthington 2008; Köthe 2021, 72-80). Inmates' numerous personal documents – be they reports, interviews, or drawings – provide detailed insights into the acts and experiences of violence, vulnerability, and resistance in Guantánamo. Compared to the photographic materials, they open up alternative and indispensable approaches to further understanding this site of indefinite detention and violence. But these sources also have their limits, as something "unsharable" remains. This is, of course, a general problem of social research, but it is particularly pronounced in contexts of violence.

4. Conclusion

This article has discussed methodological challenges arising from the (in)visibility of violence. The importance of the (in)visibility of violence, it turned out, is not merely due to the fact that it determines whether the phenomena under study are directly accessible or not. In addition, it became clear that the acts and structures that render violence visible or invisible are themselves of seminal importance, if we are to understand violent practices and their broader social, cultural, and political contexts and their consequences (Fujii 2021). In other words, the (in)visibility of violence needs to be considered both as an important condition of analysis and as an essential aspect of the phenomena analyzed. Discussing these questions with reference to the Guantánamo detention camp had the advantage that the case is so prominent, so enduring, and so thoroughly studied that the problems of (in)visibility could be made more visible within this context. Therefore, the case may be especially instructive for violence research in general. In my view, two more general implications follow from the considerations presented.

1) If the (in)visibility of violence itself is an important part of the phenomena of violence, then researchers should always take into account the specific contextual (in)visibility in which its object of study is embedded. The degree of contextual (in)visibility depends on various factors, including the layout of the environment, the number of people involved, the availability of media technologies, the level of organizational control over the environment, and the potential political motives for showing or hiding acts of violence. In the case of Guantánamo, these factors lead to a selective and politically-controlled indirect visibility of the camp, which in turn contributed – and still contributes – to the invisibility of violence in the camp. Building on these findings, comparative studies of different constellations of contextual (in)visibility could be carried out. Cases in which violence is deliberately and purposefully made invisible – as in Guantánamo – could then be compared to cases in which violence is deliberately displayed – for example, in the form

of lynching, public executions, or live-streamed terror attacks. We could then compare whether and in which way not only "violent displays" of "extra-lethal violence" (Fujii 2013, 2021) express and communicate specific ideas of social order, but also to what extent the conspicuous non-display of violence conveys such ideas. Such cases of controlled (in)visibility could also be contrasted with situations in which there is little or no control over visibility – for example, where many individuals are involved in an uncoordinated way, such as in violent protests or riots. Studies that use visual materials in order to analyze violent (or other) processes thus should assess their data with reference to these constellations of contextual (in)visibility.

2) As is illustrated in the third section above, the methodological focus on explanation and visual data entails a marginalization of other aspects of violence. This marginalization consists not only in the – always necessary – limitation to certain empirical cases and aspects, but is often accompanied by conceptual limitations, such as the neglect of the subjectivity and agency of victims. It is thus evident that the epistemic orientations and the methodological strategies of violence research *themselves* contribute to (in)visibilities of violence. This performative effect of research should be reflected in a more systematic way. In this vein, Teresa Koloma Beck (2019) has argued (in reference to Nelson Goodman) that violence research can be perceived as a "way of world-making" that, in part, shapes the very subject it studies. In light of this problem, I want to close with the plea that methodological and methodical preferences should not alone determine the course of violence research. Limiting the study of violence to the realm of the visible would remove seminal phenomena and aspects of violence from the scope of research. Moreover, reducing violence research to the domain of the visible would be highly problematic in terms of the ethical responsibilities of research. Hence, it seems, violence research cannot completely abstain from "politics of sight" (Pachirat 2011) or "ocular ethics" (Casper and Moore 2009, 14). Patterns of (in)visibility are constitutively connected to structures of domination and power, which frame violence in specific ways. The critical reflection of these patterns as well as the systematic inclusion and refined conceptualization of experiences of violence and resistance are in order – for both analytical and normative reasons.

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