

## **Torture in the Modern World (FSEM)**

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### **Purpose of the Museum Project**

Most years, I teach an FSEM on torture. Usually, I assign two writing assignments. While the particulars of these assignments have changed over the past four years, the general purpose of each has held steady. The first assignment asks students to take a position on the US debate about torture; a secondary purpose is for students to demonstrate that they understand the basic facts of this debate. The second assignment asks students to interpret contemporary torture, identifying and reflecting on the prevailing meanings the practice has today.

For the workshop, I chose to review the 2015-16 version of the second assignment, what I called a “Museum Project.” This year, I asked students to imagine that they are in charge of transforming the detention center at Guantanamo Bay (after its closing) into a museum about US interrogation practices during the war on terror. The assignment asked students to do the following three things:

- Name the museum,
- Provide an overview (approximately 800 words) that succinctly communicates what they hope visitors will learn from or experience at the museum,
- And select and descriptively caption at least four artifacts – images, documents, etc. – that they would display at the museum. I asked that captions be about 200 words in length and relate the artifact back to the overall purpose of the museum.

With this assignment, I want students to go beyond some of the familiar arguments and positions about torture, many of which we address in the first half of the quarter and in the first writing assignment. (Some of these familiar arguments include: Torture works / doesn’t work; Torture is justified / is not justified; Enhanced interrogation is / is not torture.) Rather, I want students to use the museum to construct an argument about what torture means to those who suffer it, those who use it, those nations that allow it, and the citizenry who accept it. Unfortunately, I did not articulate this in my prompt for the assignment! (The things you learn when reviewing a new assignment!)

In anticipation of the assignment, we do several things:

1. Students visit The Counter-terror Education Learning Lab (The CELL) in Denver during orientation, which is a museum / educational center on terrorism.
2. Students read and discuss scholarship on the ways that countries deny their use of torture, how historical uses of torture are reference points for understanding contemporary torture, and how Cambodia has attempted to reckon with Khmer Rouge torture at The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.
3. Students engage in a group exercise that is something like a “trial run” of the project, selecting documents from some that I’ve provided and captioning them for display during a class period.

### **Student Strategies for the Assignment**

Though I did not require this of students, the majority imagined their museum as a space with rooms. Each room had its own “message,” which expressed a portion of the overall theme or argument of the museum, as articulated in the overview that students wrote. One student, who I will refer to as Maura, designed her museum around the argument that torture betrays US values. She proposed four rooms, each expressing a different national value: “freedom,” “democracy,” “exceptionalism” (my phrase) or America as the “good guy” (hers), and “patriotism.

Grace, whose museum was, in my view, the most sophisticated in the class, proposed that her guests would travel into the subjective realms of torture. But she linked this journey to that of art – showing how photography and artwork could dehumanize or dignify victims, as the case may be. She titled room one “The Guilt of the Torturer,” room two “Dehumanization of the Victim,” room three “The Return of Dignity to Both,” and the final room “Insanity of the Public.”

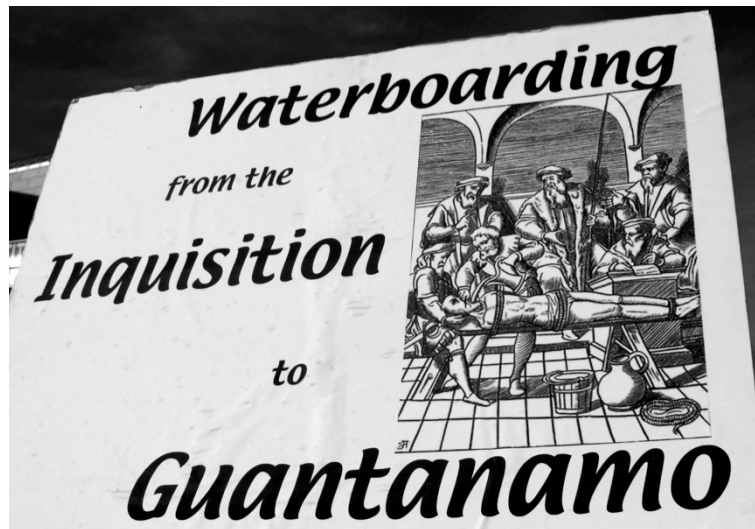
Most students came to use rooms organically, without my prompting. (I believe, however, that I suggested the idea to Maura, who struggled with the assignment, after seeing how it benefitted students.) I believe that this strategy helped students structure their museum, connecting its elements to their overarching themes. If I were to assign this project again, I would likely include “rooms” in the prompt. Because I asked students to present and caption four artifacts, most settled on four rooms as well. I might require that – or simply suggest it – in future iterations of the assignments.

A second, notable strategy related to students’ use of “artifacts.” I required students to present and caption four, giving some slight extra credit on the assignment for exceeding that requirement. Most students presented four or five artifacts, most artifacts came from documents I presented or displayed myself in class, and most students presented individual artifacts individually, rather than combining disparate ones into a richer display. Some students identified which room these artifacts would appear in. Some didn’t.

Maura presented four artifacts, all of which I’d displayed or discussed in class:

1. A photo from Abu Ghraib, which she linked to the theme of “freedom,”
2. A signature of Donald Rumsfeld on a memo authorizing torture, which she linked to the value of democracy and transparency,

3. President Bush's 2003 statement in support of UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, which she linked to American exceptionalism. Here, Maura combined the statement with an image that cuts across its grain, a protest poster:



4. A provocative mural in Iraq linking Abu Ghraib to the Ku Klux Klan. Maura linked the image in the caption to American exceptionalism and patriotism.



Grace's use of artifacts differed from Maura's. She presented 3-9 per room. Some of the documents came directly from class. All *types* of documents also came directly from class. However, Grace presented documents within those types (e.g. "the Abu Ghraib photographs") that I had not shown the class. She provided overarching captions, rather than individual captions, to these artifacts; the captions linked the set of images to the purpose of the rooms.

### Successes – and Challenges

It is easy for me to see the success of Grace’s project. Grace designed a museum that built on, but did not replicate, the positions and arguments from course readings and lectures across the quarter. It was thematically coherent, addressing the subjective dimensions of torture and the ways that art (or quasi-art, such as perpetrator photographs) could assault the subjectivity of victims or affirm their basic human dignity.

Grace also went beyond the requirements of the assignment in several ways. She experimented with the layout and typeface of her writing to emphasize certain points. For instance...

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*Do not proceed into the museum if you care about humanity.*

Hopefully, the above phrase alarmed you, as our society fortunately assumes that everyone has at least one bone of compassion among their anatomy.

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She incorporated extra artifacts, some of which she found through her own research. These artifacts were thematically coherent. Room 1, for instance, contained photos of Abu Ghraib torturers – posing with each other, posing with their own victims, and posing with a corpse. Room 3, on the other hand, contained Chris Bartlett’s black-and-white portraits of former-detainees, which Bartlett intended to counter the dehumanizing Abu Ghraib photographs.

The message of Maura’s museum – that torture betrays US values – also built on, but did not straightforwardly reproduce, material from class. It is, however, a less rich theme than Grace’s, as it primarily deals with the politics of torture (from topics 1 & 2 of our class) and doesn’t meaningfully address some of the social and cultural aspects of the practice (from topic 3 of our class). Moreover, Maura’s attempt at presenting the components of this message is not always successful. Some of her “rooms” seem to communicate very similar, if not identical messages. For instance, her room on freedom is a “very patriotic room.” Room 4’s theme, however, is patriotism. Room 3 (which I call “American Exceptionalism”) lacks a clear theme beyond the idea that the US thinks of itself as the good guy, but doesn’t always live up to that standard. Maura begins her description of the room with, “America has always been portrayed as the hero and the good guy. In this next room I display that that isn’t the truth.”

This also seems to be theme of room 4:

The room will be set up like a classroom with American textbooks on the desks. The textbooks will have negative key history points though instead of positive.

Lacking distinct sub-themes, Maura presents artifacts that seem to me to be interchangeable. The poster in room 3 could just as well appear in room 4, while the mural in 4 could appear in 3 (both are reproduced above). Rumsfeld’s signature, in room 2, is meant to illustrate the lack of transparency around torture and, so, illustrate how torture violates democratic values.

SECDEF DECISION

Approved D.R. Disapproved \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Attachments  
As stated

cc: CJCS, USD(P)

However, I stand for 8-10 hours  
A day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours?

D.R. DEC 02 2002

ified Under Authority of Executive Order 12958

It is fine, but it could have just as easily been any document on torture – since there is nothing that is unique about this document’s message about transparency. A document with a redaction might have been more appropriate. And this signing statement of Rumsfeld’s, which compares forced standing to his own standing at a desk, might better illustrate a room about “clean” or “markless” torture techniques and the perception that such techniques are not torture. (The line is: “However, I stand for 8-10 hours a day. Why is standing limited to 4 hours? D.R.”)

Finally, Maura’s selection of captions did not, in any way, suggest that she had done independent work or investigation of potential artifacts. All come directly from class.

### Implications

For a number of reasons, I am scaling back the museum project. The main reason doesn’t concern the challenges of the assignment: I am having students work on revising a single, position paper over the course of the quarter. Rather than assign the museum project as a second, major writing assignment, I’m making it one that should take about a week and a half to complete. It will be weighted less than this assignment has been in the past. But we will have a class dedicated to allowing students share their exhibit with each other.

There are many things that I think I can do to help students be more successful on this project, even if it takes an abbreviated form.

1. Many students proposed a theme or message for the museum that straightforwardly or, in Maura’s case, indirectly replicated issues we dealt with at the start of the quarter; these early topics are addressed in the first writing assignment. My hope is this second writing assignment allows students to explore arguments different than those that they explored in the first writing assignment. I can facilitate this by:
  - a. Emphasizing this in the prompt, rather than in tiny font in the rubric.
  - b. Discussing, more explicitly, how museums make messages. I can do this before the quarter even begins with our visit to The CELL and then return to it when we discuss the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.
2. Nearly all students used artifacts that I had provided. Even Grace, who used documents that I hadn’t shown, largely replicated the sources of documents that I had shown. This is not surprising, for several reasons. First, the assignment did not ask or require them to find a document from outside of class. Requiring that students find at least one unique artifact may help address this. Second, many students do not know how to locate such documents effectively. Having a class on information literacy or

- showing students where the vast repositories of these documents are stored could help.
3. Few students combined individual artifacts to convey a rich, complex message. This, combined with the use of artifacts I'd shown in class, meant that most of the museums lacked originality. While I hoped to model the use of multiple, diverse, and contradictory artifacts through an in-class, group exercise, I found that most groups used individual, straightforward artifacts rather than using multiple ones to build complex displays. It didn't occur to me, after that exercise, to then model the use of artifacts in different ways. I should do this. And I should suggest in the prompt (or perhaps require) that students combine multiple artifacts into a single exhibit.
  4. As students worked through this assignment last fall, I began to suspect that I had taken for granted a set of cultural competencies, interpretive skills, and familiarity with the genre (see Appendix C, point 3, "So Why Does a Given Piece of Writing Turn Out the Way it Does?") of museums that nearly all students lacked. While I expected that our readings on culture and torture would help students with this assignment, they didn't help enough. Most students never really moved beyond the politics of torture to the *interpretation of torture*. I need to be more attentive to this transition next year, guiding students into it and helping them understand what it means to engage with the rhetoric of torture as a cultural sociologist would, rather than how someone trying to win a political debate might.