The Guantánamo Public Memory Project:
Experiments in New Media and National Dialogue

by Liz Ševčenko

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In May 2013, President Obama renewed his pledge to close Guantánamo. "Imagine a future—10 years from now or 20 years from now," he suggested, "when the United States of America is still holding people who have been charged with no crime on a piece of land that is not part of our country" (*New York Times,* 2013).

This is, in fact, very easy to imagine. Twenty years ago this year, the United States of America was holding another group of people at Guantánamo charged with no crime: Haitian refugees seeking asylum who were found to be HIV positive. Less than 10 years after a hunger strike, legal campaign, and social movement "closed Guantánamo" in June of 1993, it was opened for "enemy combatants." Only by erasing GTMO's past could Obama make its future seem absurd.

The US Naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, or GTMO, is an enduring part of American politics and policy that has been repeatedly forgotten, remembered, and forgotten again. Long before Obama asked of GTMO, "Is this who we are?" this tiny spot in Cuba has been a battleground for American identity and values. It has defended and defined America from the War of 1898 to the Cold War to the War on Terror. The 1903 lease—valid indefinitely—grants Cuba "total sovereignty" but the US "complete jurisdiction and control," creating a legal black hole into which thousands have fallen. It has detained Haitian and Cuban refugees outside US law; been a beloved home for military families; and offered the best jobs around for Eastern Cubans. New construction has just been completed on a new facility for holding refugees—reminding us that even if this Guantánamo closes, another is set to open.

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The lack of historical perspective in debates about GTMO concerned the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. Sites of Conscience shares a commitment to using the histories of their places to raise questions about the ongoing legacies of what happened there, bringing deeply divided societies to confront the past and explore how to move forward. In 2009, the Coalition launched the Guantánamo Public Memory Project (www.gitmomemory.org), now coordinated from Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights.

The Project brought together students from 13 public history and museum studies programs across the country to collaboratively create a traveling exhibition, web platform, interview collection, and public dialogues on GTMO's history and the questions it raises for our own communities. This endeavor became an experiment in new media and Sites of Conscience: how to harness social networks to open dialogue on deeply hidden histories, and foster civic engagement on the issues they raise today.

GTMO, Memory, and New Media

People touched by GTMO use social media to sustain social identities and communities of memory. There's a Facebook page for post 9-11 prison personnel; a Yahoo group for people evacuated during the Cuban Missile Crisis. "Gitmoites," as people who lived on the base as military or dependents call themselves, sustain strong networks

Kathy and Sam Phillips, O'Neill Family Backyard, Nob Hill, June 1965. Courtesy of Barbara O'Neill.

based on nostalgia for GTMO's close-knit residential community. "Everything was so free down there," remembers Anita Lewis Isom of GTMO in the 1960s. "I would give anything to go back." Graduates of GTMO's WT Sampson High School use Facebook to organize regular in-person reunions.

For others, GTMO was anything but free: in the 1990s, the base held over 50,000 refugees from Haiti and Cuba in tent cities behind barbed wire. "It felt like a prison," said Sergio Lastres, one of 30,000 *balseros*—as Cubans who fled by balsa, or raft, identify. *Balseros* are bound together by three different Facebook groups, each with its own culture and characteristics: one is a platform for discussion of island and exile politics among people who define as *balseros*; another is more about the *balseros* experience itself, a space to share memories and photographs and reunite with people now scattered around the world.

Social media was once harnessed for a new form of public reconciliation. In 2010, Army Specialist Brandon Neely, a guard at GTMO, made headlines when he reached out to a released detainee he recognized on Facebook, through which he arranged to meet in person and apologize. But mostly the social networks are isolated from each other. This reflects the fact that though GTMO is tiny, many groups never crossed paths on the base; and if they did, their experiences were radically different.

So new media posed particular challenges and opportunities for "remembering" GTMO. An active military base perched on the eastern tip of Cuba, GTMO's a place most people will never visit. How could the Project connect people to an inaccessible place, and sustain attention to its people and policies?

Those who have seen GTMO see it very differently from each other. And those who've never set foot there have deeply divided views of it. How could the Project foster exchange and empathy between such starkly different memories and beliefs?

Building the Project: A National New Media Collaboration

The Project created a process of collaborative curation to build awareness and open dialogue among disparate stakeholders. The Project Hub's small staff at Columbia University invited public history and museum studies programs at 13 universities nationwide to jointly create an on-line and physical exhibition on GTMO's history and the questions it raised—for GTMO and for their own communities. Using a common curriculum developed by historical advisors and

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faculty at each participating university, students from Phoenix to Pensacola took a course on GTMO's history; reached out to people in their own communities with direct experience at GTMO; and mined the Project's archives. Their final course assignment was to create one piece of what became a traveling exhibition, web platform, interview collection, and series of public dialogues. Each student team curated one exhibit panel for the traveling show, using a common design template that focused on a different time period or theme. The Project's designer assembled the panels into one physical exhibition of 13 massive hanging banners that travels to all the communities that created it. Each panel includes a paragraph titled "Our Point of View" by the student authors, emphasizing how each narrative emerged from a different context.

Each panel contains a QR code through which visitors can link to deeper digital content through their smartphones, including three to five minute audio portraits of people with diverse GTMO stories. Students were invited to work together to build a virtual portrait of GTMO on the web through an interactive map; first-hand accounts of what it looked, smelled, sounded, and felt like; and digital exhibits that explored GTMO's evolution and the larger questions it raises. This portrait of GTMO emerged as an ever-evolving mosaic of hundreds of different mini-exhibits, each created by different students in different parts of the country. Students identified the stories, images, and places that moved them most, and added them one by one to the collective portrait in the form of points on the map, nodes on the timeline, or audio portraits of people who

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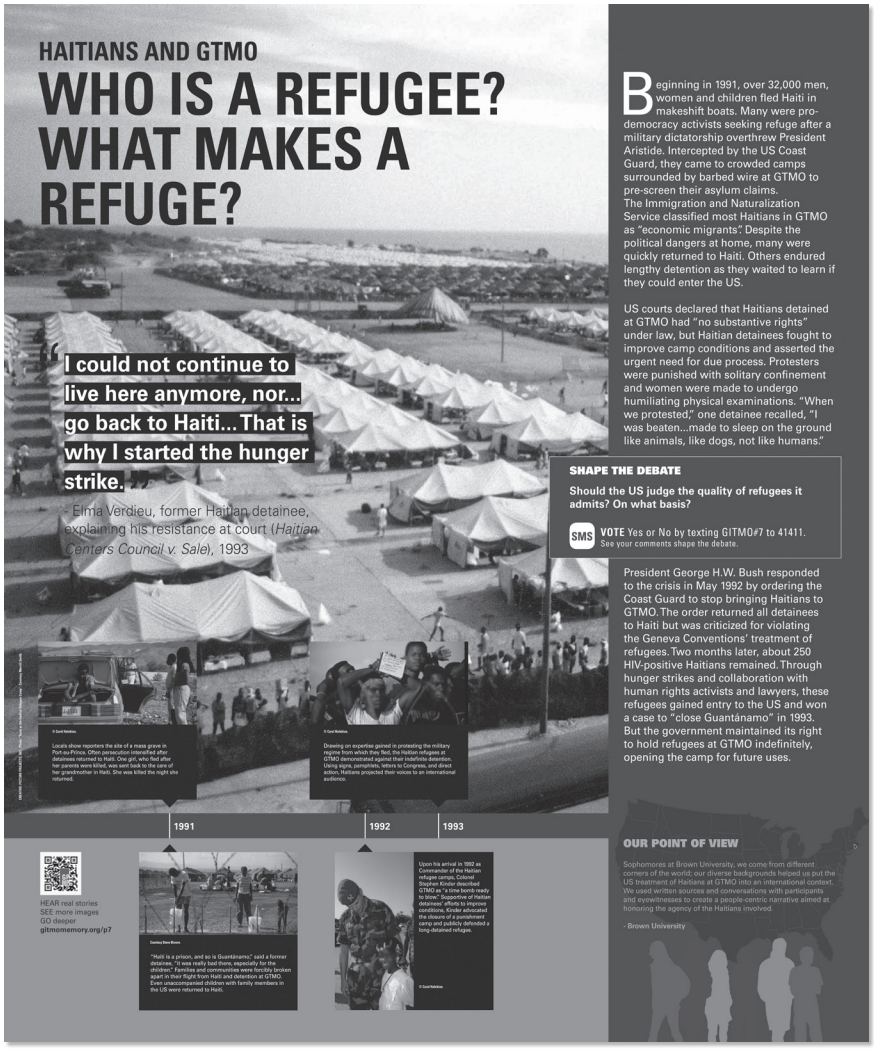
Image posted by Raul Lopez on Balseros Cubanos *Facebook page. Courtesy of Raul Lopez.*

experienced GTMO. Many venues include monitors playing the audio portraits and other digital content.

Students used new media to wrestle with the deep challenges of creating a public memory of such a contested history. Throughout the semester, the Project facilitated dialogues among students on its blog and through video conferences. Located in radically different contexts and seeing GTMO through radically different life experiences, students debated over how to represent Guantánamo, how to collaborate with people who had lived through it, and how to pose open-ended questions to visitors that would spark meaningful dialogue.

Social Media and Sharing Authority

Some students used social media as a new platform for community curation. The Facebook pages for each Guantánamo identity are themselves robust digital exhibitions. The *Balseros Cubanos* page comprises a rich collection of images with brief captions, and a wealth of individual stories. But it is designed to share, not show, speaking to people with a common experience, silent on the complex context that gave the images their meaning. An image depicting shirtless friends arm in arm looks everything like a relaxed



Guantánamo Public Memory Project *traveling exhibition panel with "Shape the Debate" question. Courtesy of the Guantánamo Public Memory Project.*

afternoon anywhere if one didn't know they were under armed guard or understand that the makeshift tent city behind them was their home for nearly 2 years. In oral histories, *balseros*' memories of GTMO are varied and complex: some call it a concentration camp, others a positive, productive time, with many somewhere in between. The Facebook page lacks this kind of analysis.

So an exhibition educating outsiders about the *balseros* crisis, and opening dialogue about its relevance today, would require a very different approach. NYU students invited members of one *balsero* Facebook group to collaborate on choosing which rafter images and stories should be included in the exhibition. Students posted photos of the camps by journalists and other outsiders, and invited members to vote on which they thought best conveyed their experience, or submit their own photos and captions. While members nominated their own photos and voted on others, they posted few reflections on what should be said. Such statements might have revealed differences in how people interpreted the experience, differences that may have caused conflict members did not want to introduce. Similarly strong consensus narratives emerged on pages for "Gitmoites." To complicate this consensus, in addition to the collaborative curation, students used Facebook groups as an outreach tool, identifying individuals to interview and discuss the exhibition outside the social network space.

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"*Shape the Debate*" *results displayed on a monitor in the traveling exhibition. Courtesy of the* Guantánamo Public Memory Project.

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How can digital platforms make the invisible visible? How can social media connect divided communities and open dialogue on contested questions? And what technologies inspire and enable people to participate?

New Media and Civic Engagement

Each exhibit panel contains a "Shape the Debate" question, crafted by the panel's student curators. Visitors are invited to vote and comment on the "Shape the Debate" questions via text message. The question is based in the history covered in the panel, but addresses a broader issue relevant today. For example, the Rutgers University team that focused on the US acquisition of GTMO asked, "Is the US an empire today?" Responses are updated regularly and displayed in a monitor in the exhibition.

The "Shape the Debate" section was itself hotly debated within the Project. Many students and faculty felt GTMO's issues were too complicated to be reduced to a yes/no vote; moreover, forcing people to choose sides would replicate the political polarization the Project hoped to combat. Others worried that if the only way to explore questions was to participate in a long facilitated dialogue, most people would not take the time.

Ultimately, the Project sought to use new media to engage people without much time to spare, as a gateway to deeper engagement. After submitting their vote—for example, "Yes" to the question "Should the US judge the quality of refugees it admits? On what basis?"—they receive a text noting that so far, 43% also say yes, 57% no, and a comment from someone who voted the opposite way: "NO: Refugee status is based on need. It is, for good reason, illegal to reject people persecuted in their home countries." For visitors with more time, "Shape the Debate" votes and comments were integrated into discussion guides for face-to-face facilitated dialogues host sites can offer. In the four cities where the exhibition has traveled as of this writing, most simply viewed the "Shape the Debate" results, which frame the exhibition's introduction, rather than taking out their phones to vote; but 75% said they planned to discuss the issues with others. About two and a half times as many people have "Shaped the Debate" via SMS as participated in facilitated dialogues.

Participate in the Project

The Project extends an open invitation to universities and communities to shape this international conversation. There are many opportunities for students and communities to integrate new research and reflections, and host the exhibition with their students/community's work displayed. With multiple copies of the exhibit circulating, new communities can host it almost any time. Together, we can continue to wrestle with questions like: How can digital platforms make the invisible visible? How can social media connect divided communities and open dialogue on contested questions? And what technologies inspire and enable people to participate? Together we can generate new experiments for inspiring civic engagement in hidden histories and their contemporary issues. Browse an exhibit overview and specifications at http://gitmomemory.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/InfoPamphlet_03_05_2013.pdf, or contact guantanamo@columbia.edu.

Guantánamo Public Memory Project Participating Universities:

Project hub:

Columbia University Institute for the Study of Human Rights

Current partners:

- Arizona State University, Tempe, Public History Program
- Brown University Program in Public Humanities
- Florida International University, Museum Studies Program, Cuban Research Institute
- Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Museum Studies and Public History programs
- New York University Archives and Public History and Museum Studies Program
- Rutgers University, New Brunswick Department of Art History, Cultural Heritage and Preservation Studies Program
- Tulane University, Department of History, Center for Latin American Studies
- University of California, Riverside, Public History Program
- University of Massachusetts, Public History and Art History programs
- University of Miami, School of Communications, Cuban Heritage Collection
- University of Minnesota, Department of History
- University of North Carolina, Greensboro Department of History
- University of West Florida, Public History Program

Guantánamo Public Memory Project Exhibit Schedule

December 13 2012 – February 10, 2013
Kimmel Windows Gallery, New York, NY

February 18 – March 29, 2013
Douglass Library, Rutgers University New Brunswick, NJ

April 8 – May 12, 2013
Cultural Arts Gallery, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, IN

June 1 – August 10, 2013
California Museum of Photography, Riverside, CA

September 11 – October 9, 2013
Herter Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA

October 16 – November 29, 2013
Phoenix Public Library, Phoenix, AZ

December 6, 2013 – January 2014
International Civil Rights Center and Museum, Greensboro, NC

February 11 – March 16, 2014
Minnesota History Center, St. Paul, MN

April – May 2014
T.T. Wentworth, Jr. Florida State Museum, Pensacola, FL

August 15 – September 30, 2014
Little Haiti Cultural Center, Miami, FL

September 1-September 30, 2014
University of Rhode Island Feinstein Providence Campus Gallery, Providence, RI

Fall 2014
Tulane University, New Orleans, LA

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