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# What Does It Mean to Be an American? American Ignorance and Social Imagination of Citizenship

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## Abstract

In its war on terror, the United States tortured and abused individuals in its custody over a decade. This article examines a specific sort of epistemic response by Americans to the use of torture by their government, the sort of response that enables Americans to operate with epistemic ignorance to maintain a favorable construction of their identity as Americans. I lay out the concept of American ignorance as the active production of false and/or incomplete beliefs about what it means to be an American and explore the mechanism through which this ignorance operates in society. The article argues for accountability to create better epistemic environments necessary for any meaningful shift in how Americans perceive themselves qua Americans.

Content note: this article contains descriptions of torture, including sexualized torture.

From 2003 to 2006, Majid Khan was tortured at the hands of the Central Intelligence Agency. In his 2021 testimony in open court, he spoke about rape through forceful anal penetration, when a purée of his lunch was inserted through his anus and when water was pumped into his rectum through green garden hoses. He testified about the use of a plunger to force-feed him, about being beaten by guards while humiliatingly nude and shackled for hours, and experiencing hallucinations due to lack of sleep. He was also “intentionally nearly drowned in icy cold water in tubs at two sites, once while a C.I.A. interrogator counted down from 10 before water was poured into his nose and mouth” (Rosenberg 2021).

In 2015, Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s heavily redacted book *The Mauritanian Guantánamo* detailed his fourteen-year torture at the hands of the CIA (Slahi 2015). This included his body being placed in stress positions for prolonged periods of time, noise bombardment, sleep deprivation, being told that his mother will be arrested and put in an “all-male prison environment” at Guantánamo, a boat ride with an airtight bag around his face, ice stuffed into his clothing, constant beatings, and sexual humiliation over the years.

In 2021, Mansoor Adayfi chronicled his fourteen years of imprisonment. In one incident, he describes the use of noise from vacuum cleaners to torture prisoners.

This was done for months on end, to the point that Adayfi damaged his ears trying to stuff them with toilet paper, and another prisoner attempted to take his life by cutting his veins with his teeth (Adayfi 2021).

And finally, the United States Army's criminal investigation revealed the case of twenty-two-year-old Dilawar, tortured at the detention center in Bagram, Afghanistan in 2002. He had "had been chained by the wrists to the top of his cell for" four days and "his legs were bouncing uncontrollably in the plastic chair and his hands were numb." He was forced to his knees, "[B]ut his legs, which had been pummeled by guards for several days, could no longer bend." After the interrogation, he was chained "back to the ceiling." He died a few hours later. "It would be many months before Army investigators learned a final horrific detail: Most of the interrogators had believed Mr. Dilawar was an innocent man who simply drove his taxi past the American base at the wrong time" (Golden 2005).

### I. Coming to Terms with Torture

In the wake of attacks on American soil on September 11, 2001, the United States government enacted a series of draconian measures such as the abrogation of civil liberties through the USA PATRIOT Act (Savage 2011), the collection of personal data through the Total Information Awareness program—later renamed Terrorism Information Awareness program (Harris 2012), and the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. One such measure was the detention and interrogation of thousands of Muslim men (Sanger 2001). This included interrogations at Guantánamo Bay, at Black sites situated across eight countries (Vitkovskaya 2017), and in prisons on military bases overseas (Golden 2005).

In December 2014, the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its findings on the use of torture by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) within their Detention and Interrogation Program (Feinstein 2014). The report was hailed in some American media outlets as the darkest chapter in the recent history of the United States. This characterization was symbolic of American consciousness—that of historical amnesia; viewing this report as the darkest chapter indicated a lack of awareness about the many other dark chapters in American history.

This article examines a specific sort of epistemic response of Americans to the torture report, the sort of response that enables them to operate with epistemic ignorance to maintain a particular construction of their identity as Americans. I examine how the epistemology of ignorance can inform normative questions of belonging.

What it means to be an American signifies many different things to Americans; it is not one-dimensional or monolithic. For some, part of what it means to be an American is to belong to an industrious and exceptional country, capturing a nationalistic pride that is somewhat comparative in nature. For others, being an American, among other things, is about baseball, football, apple pie, Thanksgiving parades, Fourth of July fireworks, belief in individual rights, meritocracy, civil discourse, and often—a surprising—confidence in having a political voice that makes a difference. So when they self-identify as American, it is not in reference to governmental policies per se or a comment on America's relations with other nations; rather it is a reference to culture, traditions, and most important, values. In other cases, it may not mean any of these things. The identity may mean something completely different to many within American minoritized communities such as the LGBTQ community, Black Americans, Latinx, Jews, Asian Americans, or even white Americans. For some in minoritized

communities, America signifies broken promises, and being American is a matter of bureaucratic formality. So, in many ways the identity is always up for contestation and is fractured and layered in ways that do not always overlap.

In this article, I am interested in specific beliefs about what it means to be an American, where often our epistemic beliefs about this identity are grounded in narratives that are institutional and state-approved. For example, some threads of pride in our identity, such as the value of free speech, democracy, freedom, and so on require the state's ability to legitimately use force to secure those rights. Other points of reference for what it means to be American, such as a relatively affluent standard of living that makes many quintessentially American cultural traditions fiscally possible, are in part a result of America's economic and military domination over other nations. Such a conception of being American simultaneously contains elements of both, a sense of superiority over others and ignorance of one's sense of identity *in relation to* one's own state policies. It is solely this aspect of the American identity that I focus on throughout the article.

I have this particular focus with the understanding that there is no singular or true conception of the American identity, but this aspect of American identity provides rich grounds for thinking about the problematic relationship between our sense of our national identity and unjust epistemic environments that mold it. The epistemic reception of the torture report serves as an example of how we maintain certain conceptions of our identity.

Many of the reactions to the torture report in the media fell within the following categories, exhibiting, on the part of many, epistemic resistance to a shift in how they saw themselves as Americans. These reactions can be categorized as falling under denial, mitigation, and exculpation:

1. Denial: There was no torture. The report is an exaggerated account by a Senate committee comprising only of Democrats in order to discredit President Bush's administration, a Republican administration.
2. Mitigation: It happened, but it was not torture—this was followed by a “debate” on what qualifies as torture. The 2002 Torture Memos had already been declassified, a decade prior to the 2014 report. The memos outlined mitigating justification for why the United States was not bound by the Geneva Convention in its treatment of “terrorists” (Greenberg and Dratel 2005), playing into the perception of ourselves as law-abiding. Similarly, in a 2016 interview, the former CIA director, Michael Hayden, refused to call waterboarding torture, relying primarily on a legalistic defense (Hasan 2016). Former Chief of CIA and the Secretary of State under President Trump, Mike Pompeo, although in his confirmation hearings stated that he would never restart the use of torture, had earlier commented that waterboarding was not torture (Sorkin 2017).
3. Exculpation: It was torture, but we had exculpating reasons:
  - a. If we have tortured, it was done by a few rogue CIA agents, who kept our government misinformed about the gravity of their actions. This explanation relies on the mythical caricature of a pure, moral United States, the “real United States,” founded on core values of democracy and freedom.<sup>1</sup> This explanation did not gain as much traction after the release of the 2014 torture report, as it did with the release of the horrifying Abu Ghraib prison torture photographs. Even in the case of Abu Ghraib though, we never humanized the detainees of war, rather we attempted to humanize

ourselves by distancing the state, and consequently what it means for us to be American, from the actions of a “few bad apples.”<sup>2</sup>

- b. We were fearful and thus should be excused; other similar versions: our lives were in imminent danger or we did not know when the next attack would come.<sup>3</sup>
- c. The enemy is a nonstate actor and does not follow the same rules of war as we do, hence forcing our hand at this necessary evil.<sup>4</sup>

Within a short span of time, these epistemic responses of denial, mitigation, and exculpation reframed the narrative of this report as merely an aberration within America’s much larger manifest destiny. The severity, depth, and length of the torture-related activities did not cause a seismic epistemic shift in how we, as Americans, view ourselves. Indeed, it was shocking to see the *lack* of outrage at the prolonged and deliberate conduct of our government. For our purposes, it is not relevant whether these sorts of responses were maliciously intended to manufacture a new “truth” by state actors and their proxies, or genuinely held beliefs, or some combination of both. These kinds of responses shaped epistemic environments that sustained certain problematic conceptions of American identity. Thus, for us as Americans, the report did not cause an epistemic crisis by confronting us with the discrepancy between who we see ourselves to be—a fairly law-abiding and democratic people—and what our state did: torture over a prolonged period of time.

Of course, these were not the only sorts of epistemic responses. Many among us certainly knew that American exceptionalism is a farce, and the torture report only solidified our senses of what it means to us to be American, that is, to be a citizen of a country that engages in torture to maintain economic and military supremacy. Similarly, there are Americans for whom this did shake their beliefs about their own identity as Americans. However, these responses bring to light the ways that we sustained our beliefs about our identity as Americans as people who are for the most part law-abiding, democratic, pluralistic, and so on.

The next section introduces and lays out some of the key features of what I term *American ignorance*. Section III focuses on the ways that American ignorance operates. The final and fourth section argues for accountability to create a socially better epistemic environment necessary for any meaningful shift in how Americans perceive themselves qua Americans.

## II. American Ignorance

I define *American ignorance* as the active production of false and/or incomplete beliefs about what it means to be an American, where this production of beliefs obscures and erases certain relationalities while producing and sustaining other sorts of narratives that maintain a sense of American superiority. Charles Mills uses the term *ignorance* “to cover both false belief and the absence of true belief” (Mills 2007, 16). American ignorance encompasses, among other things, a sense of superiority of American societal values, assumptions of benevolent interventions for the imposition of democracy among “backward” peoples, and an unshaking belief in the fundamental difference of the *other*. *Other* here is used in the Beauvoirian sense, where the *other* is always in relation to the subject (Beauvoir 2011)—in this case, the dominant perception of the “liberal American.” The racialized Muslim *other* stands in opposition to this American—where the American is the positive, the neutral, the enlightened, the

civilized, and the rational. More contextually, the word *other* here refers to Muslims belonging to Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African nations, places where the United States of America has engaged militarily in the past two decades to fight the “war on terror.” American ignorance produces, sustains, and perpetuates a sense of superiority of values and xenophobic tendencies toward the *other*, encapsulated by the often-vocalized sentiment that America is “the greatest country on Earth.”<sup>5</sup>

A more pernicious manifestation of American ignorance occurs when we fail to see ourselves in any relationality with the *other*—the most common refrain: “I don’t really think of myself as an American,” or “it is not an important aspect of how I think about myself.” In such cases, one willfully or otherwise does not perceive the connections between our understanding of our identity as Americans and the imperialistic aspects of our country’s foreign policy. Miranda Fricker notes that with White ignorance there is “a form of collective denial in the White community about some uncomfortable truths” (Fricker 2007, 50). Similarly, one aspect of American ignorance is that a collective denial about the nature of our engagement with the *other* contributes to sustaining false and/or incomplete master narratives.

The torture report represents one such example of uncomfortable truths and serves to explore the kind of epistemic response that sustains American ignorance. The report details the use of “enhanced interrogation program” during the Bush administration, where mid-level CIA officers conducted the torture. Instances of torture included: threatening sexual violence with a broomstick; using medically unnecessary “rectal hydration” and “rectal feeding” during harsh interrogations that lasted for days at a time; waterboarding; forcing detainees with broken legs to stand in stress-inducing positions, exacerbating their injuries; placing a detainee in a coffin for 128 hours; exposing detainees to loud music for extended periods of time; keeping detainees sleep-deprived in stressful positions; and inducing hypothermia as a torture technique, and so on (Feinstein 2014). As these uncomfortable truths came to public light, certain sorts of collective responses, such as the ones listed above, maintained in many a favorable social imagination of what it means to be an American.

*Social imaginations of our citizenship* comprise beliefs that can often be both aspirational—for example, we are a nation that values hard work and rugged individualism; *and* realistic—for example, not all of us will achieve the “American Dream” despite hard work within American capitalist structures. American ignorance focuses on a specific sense or impression of what it means to be an American, where our imaginary is synthesized from incomplete truths or falsity or ignorance of the history of this country, painting ourselves as belonging to a country that supports democracies, free speech, and human rights. Such sorts of impressions find an epistemic home in sympathetic, dominant narratives of citizenship, simultaneously epistemically resisting the historical narratives that run counter to that general impression of Americanness by Americans. In the judgment of Michel Rolph Trouillot, “the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production” (Trouillot 1995, xix). This uneven power, Trouillot contends, plays a role in identifying certain historical events as memorable and relevant within our collective memory, while it silences other narratives. Thus, “[H]uman beings participate in history both as actors and narrators” (5). These selective narratives serve not only the purpose of forming one’s sense of identity, but our perception of ourselves shapes what and how we choose to remember so that we can have a favorable opinion of ourselves (Wilson and Ross 2003).

The torture report runs counter to this favorable social imagination of what it means to be American, and many of our epistemically varying reactions to the torture report actively produced and sustained the perceptions of what our government did in our name.

We can further understand the concept of ignorance by way of example. Shannon Sullivan focuses on the case of Puerto Rico and explains how Americans' lack of knowledge about the island is "formed out of complex structures of colonialist *ignorance/knowledge* that champion an asymmetrical and a nonreciprocal relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico" (Sullivan 2007, 168). Sullivan uses the term *ignorance/knowledge* instead of simply *ignorance* because "rather than oppose knowledge, ignorance often is formed by it, and vice versa" (154). I find this term useful in thinking about American ignorance as it highlights the complex relationship between knowledge and ignorance. To preserve American privilege, one must consider "knowledge" about the *other* to be of an inconsequential nature and remain ignorant of the complexity of the United States' relationship with that *other*. Thus, ignorance functions "as an active production of particular kinds of knowledges for various social and political purposes" as it pertains to "the epistemic relationship between two lands" (154).

As Americans, we cannot see ourselves in terms of our country's unchecked, disproportionate, and imperialistic relation with the racialized Muslim *other*, all while being able to live the American experience and sustain the myth of American values *precisely* because of the United States' military and economic strength built on such relations with the *other*. *Our incomplete/false "knowledge" about the other actively informs and maintains our ignorance about what it means to be American.*

These false/incomplete beliefs are rooted in a specific sociohistorical context, that is, they are a function of, and particular to, the American hegemonic world order. Furthermore, American ignorance encompasses not only those beliefs that operate on bad faith—for example, as with the xenophobe or jingoist—but also those beliefs that are mistaken about the role that America has played in the world—such as the belief that America's involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan has overall benefited the local populations. It also includes "incorrect judgements about the rights and wrongs of moral situations themselves" (Mills 2007, 22)—for example, prioritizing idealized (but often nonactualized) liberal values over the very real civilian deaths during invasions. American ignorance sustains a lopsidedness within conversations about democracy and liberation—lopsided not merely because of a self-interested nationalistic agenda (which is to be expected of nation-states), but primarily because of the arrogance within that agenda.

The term *American*, broadly construed, refers to the citizens of the United States of America, but such use may conflate power relations within the American public and possibly run the danger of erasing dissident narratives that have existed simultaneously alongside the dominant narratives of what it means to be an American.<sup>6</sup> It is crucial to acknowledge that *American ignorance is neither shared by all Americans, nor experienced in similar ways*. It is shaped by intermeshed identities and experiences in the United States. Mills, for instance, recognizes "that people have other identities besides racial ones . . . and these factors will modify, by differential socialization and experience, the bodies of beliefs and the cognitive patterns of the subpopulations concerned" (Mills 2007, 23). Similarly, Americans may hold other identities besides their national identity, and Afghani American may have access to epistemic resources that perhaps more privileged members of society do not. Furthermore, in many instances people may share insight into other people's struggles and histories because of their own struggles. For

example, there has been a resurgence of solidarity between Black and brown Americans and the Palestinian American movements. Precisely because of their own experiences of humiliation and intimidation at the hands of authorities, many Black Americans and Latinos understand the lived experience of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, and furthermore, understand the role of American tax dollars in maintaining such conditions. This is similar to solidarity between the American civil rights movement and global decolonial liberation movements throughout the colonized world (Sato and Moser 2022). This is all to say that American ignorance varies depending on one's social location and lived experience; one may be able to see differing degrees of reciprocal relationality with the *other*. More important, though, this variation especially among American resisters and dissidents results in much-needed cracks or wedges in American ignorance.

American ignorance and White ignorance share many conceptual features, but they may not fully map onto each other and have some differences of degree. For example, American ignorance often conceals within it any degree of individuality of the foreigner Muslim/the racialized Muslim *other*. A glaring example of a particular kind of White ignorance is evident in how some perceive the treatment of African Americans and Latinos within the criminal justice system. With the increased availability of documentary evidence of police brutality by way of cellphone videos, White Americans now have access to a wider array of evidence regarding the use of state violence against people of color. Nonetheless, many expend significant cognitive effort considering alternative explanations. For example, Rep. Peter King argued that Eric Garner died not because he was placed in an illegal chokehold by the NYPD, but rather because he was obese and asthmatic (Fischer 2014). Similarly, Officer Darren Wilson (6-foot-4 and 210 pounds) testified that he shot Michael Brown (6-foot-4 and 292 pounds) because he felt like a “five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan. . . . [T]hat’s just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm” (State of Missouri vs. Darren Wilson 2014). Such cognitive efforts are attempts to find fault in the disadvantaged and the oppressed, becoming fixated on the idea that somehow the individual victim must be responsible in *some* way, rather than shake their belief in our institutions. One can find similar sorts of cognitive efforts to maintain ignorance of systemic racial discrimination within housing, education, employment, and healthcare disparities. In each case, systemic institutional racism often remains willfully obscured by those who offer convoluted “explanations” of the individual life choices of the oppressed. However, in the case of the detainees who were tortured by the American government, the individual case is almost never examined, as the individual ceases to exist. The racialized Muslim *other* becomes a caricature of the irrational terrorist. Folks who sustain American ignorance do not expend cognitive labor justifying whether in each detainee’s case the relevant authorities used proportionate or discretionary power wisely. Foreign racialized Muslim lives (or deaths) are considered intrinsically different, in that they belong to a dangerous class and are inconsequential. By virtue of their *chosen* belief set, foreign, racialized Muslims have essentially breached some imagined socially accepted conception of reasonability, and that *choice* relegates them to a *collective* that represents illiberality and intolerance. All racialized, Muslim, *other* bodies—and thus *any* body—can be classified as an enemy combatant.

This is all to say that there seems to be a degree of difference between American ignorance and White ignorance and that for American ignorance to thrive, it conceals within it a prohibition on the examination of the “collateral damage” of war as injustices of an *individual* kind on the *other*. As soon as we “know” any alternative unflattering



version of ourselves, we subsume it into the humanized and civilized image that we have of ourselves as the supposed champion of liberal values of democracy, freedom, due process, human rights, and such, thus maintaining an incomplete or false sense of what it means to be an American. How we see ourselves remains unaffected. There is a *continual* abrogation of rights of *others* within American history, but each moment in itself appears to us as an aberration from who we “truly” are (Sheth 2009).

The 2014 report did not contain completely new information, and certainly the use of torture did not last for a brief time. There was a slight change in policy after President Obama’s election. On January 22, 2009, his second full day in office, the President issued an executive order to close the CIA’s secret detention program. However, his office lacked interest in criminal investigations against the perpetrators of torture, and the administration did not cease other morally objectionable practices, such as “the practice of indefinite detention without trial, closing the military detention facility at Guantánamo Bay and ending rendition of detainees to countries that practice torture” (Human Rights Watch 2011). That is to say, the United States government outsourced torture to other countries, while simultaneously sustaining the American social imagination of what it means to be an American.

### III. How American Ignorance Operates and the Question of Liability

How do individuals develop and maintain forms of irresponsible ignorance?

Not alone, but with a lot of social support and collective effort

—José Medina

Now that some of the key features of American ignorance have been introduced and sketched out, I explore the mechanisms via which it may operate within civil society. In the case of the social imagination of our citizenship, many Americans are hermeneutically marginalized, that is, as Fricker puts it, they have a “significant area of their social experience obscured from understanding owing to prejudicial flaws in shared resources for social interpretation” (Fricker 2007, 155). We often cannot imagine our own role in enabling nondemocratic and oppressive policies within “developing” (read *other*) nations because we do not have the shared epistemic resources for understanding that role. And those resources are obscured through the mechanism via which ignorance operates. In fact, José Medina notes that it is in the interest of the privileged subjects to not attempt to understand uncomfortable truths so that they can keep enjoying their privileges (Medina 2013, 109). It is in our interest to resist knowing our adverse impact on the lives of *others*, as it often requires too much cognitive labor to undo ignorance/knowledge *and* that precise ignorance enables us to enjoy our privileges in this world. Ironically, maintaining this social imagination of our citizenship undercuts the very values of justice and democracy that we see ourselves qua Americans to be committed to.

The installation and maintenance of ignorance does not take place overnight, but the ignorance creates and sustains a social imagination of citizenship that is embedded deeply in our sense of self as Americans. To illustrate the kinds of mechanism such ignorance can function through, I briefly touch on two examples of the institutional production, installation, and maintenance of this imagination of American citizenship: media and education.

Media can serve the political good. As Jason Stanley notes, the state’s attempt to achieve political consensus through propaganda need not always be based on untruths,



be insincere, or even necessarily bad (Stanley 2015). Stanley rightfully points to instances when propaganda on the part of the state can become an unavoidable necessity, simply because the public cannot and does not have the means, time, and expertise to base their voting decisions on a full and rational explanation. But just as propaganda can be used for the public good, he notes, it can also be used to undermine liberal values of reasonableness, pluralism, and equality. For example, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky show how the socially and politically powerful use media to sway the public through what the authors term *doublespeak* (Chomsky and Herman 1988). Doublespeak refers to using language that obscures the truth or makes truth more palatable through intentional ambiguity and distortion. Media discourse that surrounds our engagement in the Middle East is couched in doublespeak, language that serves to sustain American ignorance. “Democracy in the Middle East” serves both as a justification and explanation of our engagement; “insurgent” is used to encompass all unknown threats (including civilians defending their homes from the invasions); “terror suspect/detainee” ensures abstraction from particulars of a person and consequent dehumanization; and “support our troops” shuts down any questioning of our army’s tactics or behavior, and often, any conversation about the legitimacy of our wars. Couched within these phrases is an implicit understanding that *being American entails certain (harmful) epistemic conceptions of the other*. The parameters are set up to allow only certain sorts of discourse—generally involving othering of our enemies’ actions and motivations, while humanizing our own. Any counterevidence to the American social imagination is subsumed into American ignorance, as the American social imagination is reaffirmed as a verified belief within the media discourse.

The K–12 American education system is another example of how we gain and sustain our social imagination of what it means to be an American. Since 2021, at least sixteen states have instituted some sort of prohibition on teaching racism and sexism within schools (Alfonseca 2022). The proponents of these prohibitions state that teaching about racism and patriarchy makes (white and/or male) students feel bad about themselves, but opponents in part argue that not teaching the history of this country is actively instilling a certain distorted image of the United States. Similarly, Medina talks about the case of banning ethnic studies in high school curricula in Arizona. One of the justifications given for banning ethnic studies was that teaching ethnic history (*raza* studies, African American studies, Native American studies) instills a specific ideology that will make children less patriotic and uncivil citizens who eventually question the American government (Medina 2013, 144). As Medina notes, not teaching Americans their own history is instilling in them a certain ideology of what it means to be an American. Likewise, teaching a certain narrative of American involvement in the Islamic world has solidified our belief about our “benevolent” and “modernizing” role in that region. A study that looked at the content related to the September 2001 attacks on the United States (9/11) in high school curricula found that although 9/11 was mentioned extensively, there was an absence of basic facts about the event, there was consistency across material in perpetuating the iconic image of Americans rallying around nationalistic pride, and a lack of contestation of what “terrorism” is (Hess and Stoddard 2007). A subsequent publication by the same authors reveals that only one state (Vermont) mentions Guantánamo Bay prison in its curriculum (Hess and Stoddard 2011). School curricula can form not only the dominant narrative about our engagement with the *other* but also, as noted earlier through theorists such as Wilson, Ross, and Trouillot, school curricula can erase certain events from our collective consciousness. That is, education *can* serve the duality of ignorance: ignorance as

absence—producing particular epistemic oversights, and ignorance as a product—producing particular false narratives.

Once the myth of America's greatness is established as the world's advocate of democracy and individual rights, as a giver of international aid, and a champion of freedom, it needs very little maintenance and justification in the face of a counternarrative. This sort of self-inflicted ignorance is both active and stubborn within the American social imagination. Ignorance/knowledge then serves as the epistemic baseline. The revelations of the Senate report are cognitively easier for us to dismiss or explain away as aberrations, than to expend cognitive labor to reassess what it means to be an American.

One maintains this cognitive state partly through ignoring the grievances altogether, giving negligible attention to our complicity in harming others as a nation. For example, in October 2013, Congress held its first hearing that gave civilians affected by drones a chance to speak about their impacts. Rafiq ur Rehman, a Pakistani primary school teacher, and his two children appeared on Capitol Hill to testify about drone attacks on their village that killed their grandmother. Only five representatives showed up to the hearing, which received negligible coverage in the US media. By ignoring the grievances of Rehman's family, we can comfortably maintain our belief that drones target only terrorists. Furthermore, as Shahnaz Khan notes, we ignore the human face of girls like Nabila (Rehman's then-nine-year-old daughter) who have been adversely impacted by drones, while simultaneously conducting drone strikes in the name of women's rights (Khan 2008, 161–78). This illustrates a solipsistic and flawed worldview where Americans remain the champion of women's rights without humanizing individual Pakistani/Afghan women. Sarah Lucia Hoagland illustrates a typical technique used to maintain one's ignorance, that of denying reciprocity and meaningful relationality. She states:

Many whites seem enormously unself-conscious about whiteness as a cultural and political phenomenon. . . . Yet promoting self-consciousness about whiteness does not necessarily lead to relational thinking; it can rather be a solipsistic inward-turning, a non-relational self-examination whereby the focus remains on white folks. (Hoagland 2007, 99)

Such is the case with our reflection about Americanness. A reflective focus on what it means to be an American does not translate into thinking about meaningful ways our sense of Americanness is interdependent on, and impacts, *others*. Instead, the focus remains centrally *on* Americans, what makes *us* distinct, and how *we* help *others*, thus sustaining the American social imagination.

One reason for the denial of any meaningful relationality between “us” and the *other* is that it is difficult to delineate clear lines between systemic epistemic failure and one's own personal epistemic responsibility. We may not see ourselves as epistemically culpable because we are being held responsible for something that we, as individuals, did not directly cause—or at least, we are not responsible in the same way one may hold President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, the CIA agents directly involved, or even the lawyers and medical professionals who gave the torture program further legitimacy.

However, I argue that there is a moral implication attached to our identity—irrespective of what content *we* attach to the identity or how significant we consider our American identity to who we are—insofar as we cannot see *the role of the prevalent social imagination of what it means to be an American*. Even if we do not subscribe to

this mythical social imagination of citizenship, for many of us, our lack of challenge to the caricature enables perpetuating and sustaining the false/incomplete narrative about that aspect of our identity in the face of a barrage of contrary evidence. When ignorance of the privileged perpetuates *grave harms*—such as a false/incomplete set of epistemic beliefs of denial, mitigation, and exculpation about the use of torture—it becomes irrelevant how one perceives or identifies with an aspect of *their* identity that is collectively shared. That is to say, it is not important that when one thinks of oneself as American, one thinks of parades, pies, or freedom. One's ignorance about one's place in the world *still* has devastating impact on people of worse-off countries, in fact, one's ignorance is essential to maintaining the oppressive harm on others. It is this precise fact that necessitates the creation of an environment that would challenge such epistemic failure.

This epistemic failure is in part because, when the *other* brings forth a claim against Americans, it is often received as a personal attack on one's failure to know and act ethically.<sup>7</sup> Instead of it being an opportunity where one's false/incomplete beliefs are challenged—or as Medina terms it, an opportunity for *epistemic friction*, it may result in the solidification of barriers to seeing the world differently. John Jost, Cheryl Wakslak, and Tom Tyler have shown that endorsing existing systems and ideologies reduces guilt and moral outrage, especially but not exclusively among the privileged (Jost, Wakslak, and Tyler 2007). Endorsing a certain image of American citizenship as one that is liberal and inclusive, or downplaying the significance of our American identity to how we see ourselves, reduces our moral outrage about our government's use of torture to keep us “safe” and sustains our ignorance in our belief that our hands are clean. We persist in our commitment to either the false caricature of “American,” or at the very least, in disassociating ourselves from it without any effort to undo the damage that the ignorance causes because it is unimaginable to align any aspect of our identity with grave harm to others. For people who belong to dominant perspectives, it is not just an epistemically uncomfortable place, the place of reflection on the harm that one's epistemic failures perpetuate, but also one that is inconvenient. Epistemology of ignorance for dominant variants of knowledge/ignorance is grounded in epistemic certainty—that certainty is provided by the dominant social epistemic environment. It is uncomfortable to seriously challenge one's epistemic oversights—or even know of them— but exposure to such a challenge is essential to creating epistemic humility in one's ability to “listen” to others.

#### IV. Just Epistemic Environments: Reckoning with the Past

In the previous sections, I have argued for a specific conception of American identity where Americans have a harmful and culpably false/incomplete belief about what our collective identity as Americans entails and explained some of the ways that this ignorance functions to deflect any meaningful shift in our perception of ourselves in the face of damning evidence. In this section, I argue that in the cases of *grave harm*, such as torture, the process of creating better epistemic environments necessarily entails the notion of epistemic *responsibility as liability*. By better epistemic environment, I refer to social conditions where we have the capability to engage in epistemic activities in ways that allow for dissident narratives and challenges to American ignorance.

A central part of this project is interested in how we, as individual Americans, process our identity—not necessarily an identity of pride over the *other*, but even merely an identity of belonging, shielded from any evidence that may also induce a sense of

collective regret, or reflection, or shame for the wrongs committed in the name of that identity. American ignorance can sustain and perpetuate itself in part because we have not begun to reconcile with our past in ways that enable us to shift our understanding of our identity. Instead, this failure to continually revise the dominant narratives on the “American” identity enables us to dismiss grave harms via the sorts of epistemic responses of denial, mitigation, and exculpation noted earlier.

Our sense of imagined history can influence how we perceive our reality. Jessica Nelson, Glenn Adams, and Phia Salter conducted a study of 199 White midwestern university students and seventy-four Black students at two historically Black universities. The results showed that the perception of racism was differentially related to the importance one gave to racial group identity—it “negatively [related] among European Americans, but positively among African Americans.” Furthermore, it showed:

Whites performed worse than Blacks on a measure of historical knowledge about past racism, and this difference mediated the differences in perception of racism. . . . White participants perceived less racism in both isolated incidents and systemic manifestations of racism. . . . The results help illuminate the importance of epistemologies of ignorance: cultural-psychological tools that afford denial of and inaction about injustice. (Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013, 213, 216)

The authors of this study do not claim that lack of historical knowledge is the cause of the denial of racism, rather that it predicted perception of actual racism. The study offers some support to our intuition that the socially privileged have not engaged in the process of working through uncomfortable truths of the past as they relate to aspects of their identity—in this case, as Americans. This epistemic deficit shapes their perception of wrongs committed in the past and the present.

In *Toward a Political Philosophy of Race*, Falguni Sheth details the United States’ painful history of racialized state violence, from the slavery-justifying John Locke’s explanations of excluding women and “savages” from protection of certain rights, deportation of Chinese migrants in the 1880s, twentieth-century eugenics movements, to property disfranchisement laws of Asians (mostly Indians) in the 1900s, internment of Japanese Americans during WWII, and more recently, the exclusionary laws that racialize, detain, and deport Muslims within the United States (Sheth 2009). Sheth argues that liberalism’s rhetoric of universal and equal protection conceals within it the pattern of systemic racialized state-exclusion, where each instance of egregious behavior on part of the state is viewed as an aberration. Viewing each instance as an aberration enables us to sustain our false and/or incomplete sense of our imagined history as a nation. It permits us to maintain our epistemic trust in the dominant narrative.

Although Sheth tailors her work as a critique of liberalism, her book provides an indispensable foundation for the epistemic work needed to erode American ignorance. In order to resist American ignorance, Americans must begin the process of acknowledging the patterns of our government’s behavior and come to a point where we are epistemically open to seeing the grave harms committed in our name in our nation’s past. Only then can we begin to gradually shift our epistemic stance on how we assess our nation’s present engagement with the *other*. On the other hand, we sustain epistemic oversights and/or sustain a lack of awareness that we might have them when we do not know our own place in history and/or do not revise our narrative about ourselves as Americans.

But how do we begin to shift our epistemic receptiveness to the grave harms done in our name? Medina draws on Iris Marion Young's social connection model of responsibility to offer a way to work toward becoming epistemically responsible and appropriately sensitive to epistemically resistant views. Medina recognizes that individuals are not "isolated perpetrators but . . . embedded in networks of social relations and positions" (Medina 2013, 159). Thus, epistemic responsibility is shared, and responsibility must be discharged through what he terms "chained actions of interconnected individuals and overlapping communities in which they are embedded" (160)—rather than the responsibility being discharged at the individual or macro-level only. I concur with Medina that in some ways we Americans are all responsible for structural epistemic injustices and we don't all share such responsibility equally. Our epistemic responsibility is mediated via privilege, power, social context, and so on.

Medina, citing Young, notes one of the crucial features of the social connection view of responsibility is "that it is more *forward-looking* than backward-looking, examining possible causes of injustice with an eye to correct them and to create new conditions of social life" (159; emphasis in original). He agrees with Young in that claims about collective epistemic failure are heard as "finger-pointing" and result in defensiveness and resentment, instead of forward-looking action to remedy the environment for epistemic deficit (161). However, he acknowledges that shared responsibility must have *both* forward-looking and backward-looking aspects (251).

Unlike Young, my proposal to undertake the process of creating better epistemic environments requires us to be necessarily backward-looking—not instead of being forward-looking, but in preparation to be forward-looking. In cases of egregious harm, we cannot challenge the epistemic framework that is required for any meaningful shift in our knowledge/ignorance of our identity as Americans, without also understanding responsibility as retribution and liability. One of the reservations with Medina's shared and collective model of responsibility is that, because the cost of repairing the epistemic deficit is too high for the socially privileged but hermeneutically marginalized, the larger epistemic framework can never be sufficiently challenged without recognizing responsibility as liability. Medina, in a long line of other philosophers concerned with issues of justice within a nonideal world, establishes that knowledge is always intricately linked to power. *It is difficult to create social epistemic environments that are conducive to the epistemic friction of those that occupy privileged position in the master narratives.* This is especially the case because the state projects its moral legitimacy on the international stage by relying precisely on American ignorance—that is, by relying on a certain social imagination of who Americans are.

To counter American ignorance, I argue for the conception of responsibility as liability. Here, I do not have in mind holding individual American citizens with certain epistemic oversights accountable. Certainly, for such Americans, their epistemic state is in large part a result of communal social circumstances that are context-dependent. Rather, in egregious cases such as torture, there must be public accountability of the wrongdoers *directly implicated in inflicting harm*, in order to create better social epistemic environments needed for any meaningful epistemic friction to undermine American ignorance. Such a conception of liability would include some degree of *enforced* uptake for the placement of that blame and some kind of *publicity* about the blame.

It is likely that being critical of the hegemonic construction of the American identity or holding it liable will result in defensive attitudes or further epistemic barriers. However, *not* placing blame, that is, not holding our collective sense of identity

accountable in the annals of history, ensures an environment that sustains epistemic oversights and/or sustains a lack of awareness that we might have these oversights about our place in the world, not only in the past, but also how we see our place in the world at present. Furthermore, among liberatory theorists, it is often emphasized that the oppressor never voluntarily gives up their privilege (see, for example, Malcolm X 1965; King Jr. 1986; Hamilton and Ture 1992). One cannot depend on the good will of people who directly benefit from not facing the uncomfortable truths about their place in the narratives of others, and hence there must be some sort of *enforced* uptake for the placement of that blame, to ensure that undesirable aspects of ourselves do not remain hidden from our collective view.

I briefly offer two potential mechanisms for enforced epistemic accountability, namely reparations and criminal prosecution, to expand on the sort of social epistemic environments that would allow folks to open the space to epistemically engage with the nondominant narratives of our past. These mechanisms do not by any means ensure that the privileged will indeed engage in the process, nor are they a comprehensive list, rather, they offer a glimpse of the kinds of accountability that can create the social epistemic environments that enable people to meaningfully shift their perception of self as Americans and hence have more ethical engagement with the *other* in the present and future.

Reparations are not buying off one's deed, rather acknowledging one's wrongdoing with a compensatory aim (see Boxill 1972; Cohen 2009), a reckoning with one's own sense of self, and perhaps one of the more concrete ways to allow for a social epistemic environment that enables us to have any inkling that we may have epistemic oversights. Ideally, reparations are "designed to re-establish the situation prior to . . . [a] wrongful act or omission" (Sohn and Baxter 1961) and "Part of what is involved in rectifying an injustice is an *acknowledgment* on the part of the transgressor that what he is doing is required of him because of his prior error" (Boxill 1972, 118; emphasis mine). Similarly, Margaret Urban Walker argues that "Reparative truth telling addresses two intertwined and superadded harms that often befall victims: their epistemic impeachment and their degradation from the moral status of a credibly self-accounting actor" (Walker 2010, 536). That is, an essential aspect of reparations is setting the record "right." So, although reparations are not a cure for American ignorance, they *can* serve as a recording within the dominant narrative of our role in the lives of *others*.

The United States has paid monetary reparations to its own citizens in the past. In 1975, the US government settled a \$9,000,000 class action lawsuit with the heirs of the deceased participants in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and in 1997, Clinton made an official apology to survivors and family members. In 1988, President Reagan offered a formal apology and paid out \$20,000 in compensation to each surviving victim of Japanese descent who was incarcerated in internment camps during World War II. In 1991, a \$56 million reparations agreement was reached with the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma for the lands seized in Florida due to the Indian Removal Act of 1830. In 2013, the North Carolina victims of forced sterilization were awarded \$50,000 each. Each of these instances occurred after years of political push by the wronged, and the reparations were offered with the reiteration and appeal to the mythic imagination of who we are as a nation. This reiteration of the aspirational conception of what it means to be an American sustains American ignorance, often in the very moment that we accept responsibility for the wrong. The reiteration allows us to perform this aspirational aspect in our social imagination, without ever living it in the lives of the *other*. However, in each case, the recorded history can no longer be denied,



and ought to be incorporated into publicity outlets (for example, in public education and the media).

There have been countries that have paid out reparations for torture during the “war on terror”; however, there is little publicity attached to them. In July 2014, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Poland had violated the rights of Abu Zubaydah and Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, two terrorism suspects, by allowing their transfer to a secret detention center run by the CIA in Poland, where the two men were tortured. The court ordered Poland to pay \$135,000 to Mr. Nashiri and \$175,000 to Abu Zubaydah. The reparations were decided by an international body and did not happen because of the good will of the Polish government.

On the other hand, Mr. Bashmilah, who was held in secret CIA-operated prisons for nineteen months and was listed in the Senate report as one of twenty-six prisoners “wrongfully detained,” had his case dismissed in a United States court on the grounds that it might expose state secrets. None of the detainees has received an apology or concrete reparations from the United States (Human Rights Watch 2011), perhaps because the United States refuses to submit to the jurisdiction of international criminal court systems.<sup>8</sup>

Prosecution serves a somewhat similar purpose, that is, it can establish a formal record of the wrongs committed. It creates the environment for deterring American ignorance, at least insofar as the absence of accountability actively sustains a historical amnesia. Additionally, it places the force of law and procedure to give legitimacy to the criminal nature of the wrongs committed. In this “war on terror,” no country has yet conducted a criminal prosecution over the torture committed by the United States and its allies. The United States government has made it clear that it has no interest in any criminal proceedings against the torture program.<sup>9</sup> In April 2009, President Obama gave full immunity from criminal prosecution to all involved, stating:

This is a time for *reflection, not retribution*. . . . At a time of great challenges and disturbing disunity, nothing will be gained by spending our time and energy laying blame for the past. Our national greatness is embedded in America’s ability to right its course in concert with our core values, and to move forward with confidence. That is why we *must resist the forces that divide us*, and instead come together on behalf of our common future – President Obama. (Obama 2009; emphasis mine)

Reflection on who one is or has become, without facing retribution, is possible on an individual level, but it is not clear it can be achieved on a larger scale about one’s sense of their collective identity—especially the sort of reflection that causes a shift in the individuals within that collectivity about what it means to belong to it. It is unlikely that America can cease to perpetuate harm through its disproportionate power, that it can simply “right its course.” More important, for the purposes of this article, it is unlikely that we can begin to realize what being American entails for *others* without some consequences of the said harm and a consequent shift in how we view our collective past. In his statement, President Obama set up any American who arrives at retribution after reflection as a “force that divides the nation,” a force that must be resisted. Thus, epistemic ignorance is a requirement for being the sort of American who believes in the mythical United States’ supposed core values. It comes as no surprise then Gina Haspel was confirmed as the CIA Director under President Trump. This is despite the fact that she oversaw a black site in Thailand and in 2005, ordered the (legal)



destruction of videotapes of interrogation sessions (Savage 2018). We, as Americans, did not exist in an environment where there was any accountability for the tortured or the torturers, and thus we never saw ourselves qua Americans as torturers. Within that epistemic environment of historical amnesia, some of us refuse to see the confirmation of Gina Haspel as any indication of what it means for us to belong to this nation.

Accountability serves a purpose beyond the *primary* concerns of justice for the oppressed. Responsibility as liability and its enforced uptake *creates* the conditions that enable us—the privileged/the hermeneutically marginalized—to engage in epistemic activity with less arrogance in the present and the future. Such a project of working through our past gives us a better understanding of *who we are* and our place in the lives of *others*. It provides the opportunity for us to be epistemically responsible agents.

A reflection on past wrongs without any liability and costs attached to it may be a purely formal kind of acknowledgment that does not make much of a difference; acknowledging the past without bearing any consequences or compensating its victims or their descendants is essentially an empty gesture that does more epistemic harm than good. It amounts to a performative contradiction in *claiming* to acknowledge one's complicity with and involvement in harm without "paying for it." It is indeed more self-ignorance, self-denial, and oblivion. It is an all too epistemically comfortable and superficial way of remembering; that easy remembering contains more forgetting within it. This enables some of us to maintain the United States of Amnesia, to sustain American ignorance.

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## Notes

1 Echoing such a sentiment, President Obama, in an interview with Jorge Ramos, said: "We took some steps that were contrary to who we are, contrary to our values" (Obama 2014b).

2 A few months prior, the Abu Ghraib prison abuse came to public light through a CBS *60 Minutes II* story and a *New Yorker* article (see CBS 2004; Hersh 2004).

Pictures of American soldiers posing while abusing Iraqi detainees shocked America. Soon after the release of the photographs, President Bush promised that the "the wrongdoers will be brought to justice, and that the actions of those folks [American soldiers] in Iraq do not represent the values of the United States of America . . . [the values of] courage, love of freedom, compassion, and decency" (see Bush 2004).

3 In addition to several media outlets using fear as an excuse to justify our actions, President Obama said, "Well, as I've said before, after 9/11, I don't think that you can know what it feels like to know that America's gone through the worst attack on the continental United States in its history. And you're uncertain as to what's coming next. . . . But we have to recognize that when we are under threat and we're afraid and the public is clamoring to do something, that's when we have to be most on guard, because, you know, there are times where we can slip into the kinds of activities that I don't think we want to see repeated" (Obama 2014b).

Also, the President had expressed a stronger justification of the wrongdoing in an earlier press conference: "We did a whole lot of things that were right, but we tortured some folks. We did some things that were contrary to our values. I understand why it happened. I think it's important when we look back to recall how afraid people were after the Twin Towers fell and the Pentagon had been hit and the plane in Pennsylvania had fallen, and people did not know whether more attacks were imminent, and there was enormous pressure on our law enforcement and our national security teams to try to deal with this. And it's important for us not to feel too sanctimonious in retrospect about the tough job that those

folks had. And a lot of those folks were working hard under enormous pressure and are real patriots” (Obama 2014a).

4 Noah Feldman writes, “the core of their [Office of Legal Counsel of the Department of Justice] theory followed from the accurate observation that the Al Qaeda terrorists (and the Taliban, who harbored them) were not playing by the rules of war, and never would. Al Qaeda was a terrorist organization, rather than a state actor covered by the conventions. Worse, the enemy had broken the model of reciprocal respect for the laws of war. . . . It therefore made no sense to follow those laws in fighting the terrorists” (Feldman 2006, 268).

5 See, for example, McCaskill 2016: Michelle Obama says: “This right now is the greatest country on Earth.”

6 In fact, even using the self-identifier “American” to refer only to citizens of United States of America—as opposed to all inhabitants of Americas (South, North, and Central)—is itself often a symptom of our arrogance. The article uses the term *American* for the sake of expediency to refer to United States citizens but does so at a high risk of reinforcing the arrogance contained within the self-identification.

7 It was interesting that after generations had passed, Ben Affleck, an actor, was embarrassed that his ancestors owned slaves, and he asked a TV show about his genealogy to hide that information. Instead of that revelation being a moment of self-reflection about how his family’s (and countless other white families’) generational privilege is in part a direct result of slavery and white-supremacist ideology, Affleck perceived it as a personal embarrassment.

8 In April 2016, the Department of Justice indicated that it will not try to block a lawsuit filed by the ACLU on behalf of three victims. The lawsuit demands modest reparations (\$75,000 for each victim).

9 Incidentally, the only prosecution and imprisonment of a CIA employee (John Kiriakou) was done not because he sanctioned torture, but because he violated the Intelligence Identities Protection Act in his attempt to expose the practice of torture to the American public.

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