UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

April 6, 2017
Jim Medina

Dirty Linen

A hooded Iraqi man stands on a box in a crucifixion-like pose at Abu Ghraib prison. Wires attached to his hands suggest the possibility of electrocution. The photo, dated 2004, became a shocking symbol of human rights violations committed during the presidency of George W. Bush — including some torture tactics supported by the current administration.

So writes UC Santa Barbara professor Elisabeth Weber in her new book, “Kill Boxes: Facing the Legacy of U.S.-Sponsored Torture, Indefinite Detention, and Drone Warfare” (punctum books, 2017).

“Unfortunately, we have been forced to become accustomed to the fact that the new president of the most powerful country in the world displays either ignorance of or disdain for U.S. and international law,” Weber said, noting that President Donald Trump has argued that “torture works.”

In contrast, her aim is to make people more aware of the devastation caused by unethical warfare. Scholars have the privilege and responsibility to go beyond news sound bites, she said, when they see “blatant injustice.” That was her motivation for writing “Kill Boxes.” In the succinct definition of French philosopher Grégoire Chamayou, Weber noted, a kill box is a “temporary autonomous zone of slaughter,” where “one may fire at will.”

A professor of German and of comparative literature, Weber — who grew up in post-Nazi Germany — focuses on ways that literature and critical theory can contribute to

the exploration of trauma and human rights violations. Obtaining reliable information was difficult during the Nazi era, she said, but the internet solved that problem and rendered irrelevant every excuse for not being informed about what's happening in the world now.

"Nevertheless, many citizens don't know what Abu Ghraib stood for; only a few are aware of the ongoing scandal of Guantánamo; and even fewer are aware of the expanding drone war," Weber said, adding that it's "troubling that those things don't seem to occupy the minds" of American citizens very much.

Situated 20 miles west of Baghdad, Abu Ghraib prison was used as a detention facility by the U.S.-led coalition forces occupying Iraq beginning in 2003. It was at the center of a torture and prisoner abuse scandal that involved reserve soldiers from a police battalion. The U.S. transferred complete control of the prison to the Iraqi government in 2006, and it was shut down in 2014.

The Guantánamo Bay detention camp, located within Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, was established by the Bush administration in 2002 and continues to operate as a military prison, albeit with only a fraction of its original detainee population.

According to Weber, since the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. government has been involved in torture, detention without due process and a mostly secret drone war — all in the name of the country's "security."

"The humanities have a lot to contribute to the debate on torture that is again in the news," Weber said. "There is a long tradition, in the humanities, of thinking about the effects of the massive denial of rights that happens in torture and indefinite detention, and there is an important philosophical tradition of thinking about which forms of warfare are ethically justifiable." She cited 18th century legal philosopher Christian Thomasius, who denounced the practice of torture by the Christian courts in 1705. He insisted that the Bible "abhors" torture and criticized the practice as a "godless perversity."

The "echoes" of Jesus Christ's crucifixion, Weber said, is what made the photo of the Iraqi man standing on a box with his hands attached to electrical wires resonate so powerfully with the public.

"The response of the highest members of government at the time was that those pictures were evidence of the depraved minds of a few bad apples," she said. "While

it was at first impossible to ignore the atrocities that had been committed, none of those who had explicitly encouraged U.S. servicemen and women to take the gloves off and to become creative in the ways of abusing prisoners, was ever held responsible. In other words, only low ranking soldiers were put on trial,”

In her book, Weber attempts to explore “shocks of recognition” in both cruelty and suffering — which she described as one of the major responsibilities and major promises of the “practice called the humanities.”

“We own the photograph of the hooded man from Abu Ghraib,” she wrote, “and must own up to what it tells us about ourselves.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.