

On Torture: Abu Ghraib

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The torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib is neither exceptional nor singular, as many—Donald Rumsfeld and the Bush administration, the U.S. military establishment, and even good liberals—would have us believe. We need think only of the fact that so many soldiers facing prosecution for the Iraqi prisoner situation came from prison guard backgrounds, reminding us of incarceration practices within the prison industrial complex, not to mention the treatment of Palestinian civilians by Israeli army guards, or even the brutal sodomizing of Abner Louima by police officers in New York City. Neither has it been possible to normalize the incidents at Abu Ghraib as business as usual even within the torture industry. As public and governmental rage alike made clear, a line had been crossed. Why that line is so demarcated at the place of so-called sexual torture—specifically, violence that purports to mimic sexual acts closely associated with deviant sexuality or sexual excess such as sodomy and oral sex, as well as S/M practices of bondage, leashing, and hooding—and not, for example, at the slow starvation of millions due to U.S. sanctions against Iraq, the deaths of thousands of Iraqi civilians since the U.S. invasion in April 2003, or the plundering and carnage in Falluja, is indeed a spectacular question. The reaction of rage, while to some extent laudable, misses the point entirely—or, perhaps more generously, upstages a denial of culpability. The violence performed at Abu Ghraib is not an exception to, nor an extension of, imperialist occupation. Rather, it works in concert with proliferating modalities of force, an indispensable part of the so-called shock-and-awe campaign blueprinted by Israelis on the backs of Palestinian corpses. Bodily torture is but one element in a repertoire of techniques of occupation and subjugation that include assassinations of top leaders, house-to-house roundups

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often involving interrogations without interpreters, the use of tanks and bulldozers in densely populated civilian residential areas, helicopter attacks, and the trashing and forced closure of hospitals and other provisional sites.

The sexual humiliation and ritual torture of Iraqi prisoners enabled the Bush administration to forge a crucial distinction between the supposed depravity of Abu Ghraib and the “freedom” being built in Iraq. Days after the photographs from Abu Ghraib had circulated in the domestic and foreign press, President George W. Bush stated of the abused Iraqi prisoners, “Their treatment does not reflect the *nature* of the American people.”¹ Not that I imagine our president to be so thoughtful or profound (though perhaps his speechwriters are), but his word choice is intriguing. Which one, exactly, of the acts perpetrated by American soldiers is inimical to the “natural” tendencies of Americans? Is it the behavior of the U.S. soldiers conducting the abuse? The ones clicking the digital shutter? Or is it the perverse behaviors forcibly enacted by the captured prisoners? What, exactly, is it that is “disgusting”—a word commonly used during the first few days of the prison scandal—about these photos? The U.S. soldiers who are grinning, stupidly waving their thumbs in the air? The depicted sex acts themselves, simulated oral and anal sex between men? Or the fact that the photos were taken at all?

Bush’s efforts to refute the idea that the psychic and fantasy lives of Americans are depraved, sick, and polluted by suggesting instead that they remain naturally free from such perversions—not only would one never enjoy the infliction of such abuse but one would never even have the mindset or capacity to think of such acts—reinstantiate a liberal regime of multicultural heteronormativity intrinsic to U.S. patriotism. The state of exception surrounding these events is produced on three interrelated planes: that of the rarity of this particular form of violence (the temporality of emergency as excessive in relation to the temporality of regularity); that of the sanctity of the sexual and of the body (the site of violation as extreme in relation to the individual rights of privacy and ownership accorded to the body within liberalism); and that of the transparency of abuse (as overkill in relation to other wartime necropolitical [referring to the right to kill] violence and as defying the normative standards that guarantee the universality of the human in human rights discourses). Here is an extreme example, but one indicting on all three counts nonetheless: in May 2004, Rev. Troy Perry of the Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) circulated a press release in reaction to incidents at Abu Ghraib in which he condemned “the use of sexuality as an instrument of torture, shame, and intimidation,” arguing that the fact “that prisoners were forced to perform sexual acts that violate their religious principles and personal consciences is particularly heinous.” The press release concluded by declaring that “MCC pledges to continue to work for a world in which all people are treated with dignity and equality and where sexuality is celebrated, respected and used for good.”²

Hardly exceptional, as Veena Das argues, violence is not set apart from sociality, nor is sociality resistant to it: “Violence is actually embedded in sociality and could itself be a form of sociality.”³ Rita Maran, in her study of the application of torture in the French-Algerian war, demonstrates that torture is neither antithetical nor external to the project of liberation; rather, it is part and parcel of the necessary machinery of the civilizing mission. Torture is the underside, indeed, the accomplice of the civilizing mission. Furthermore, Maran, citing Roger Trinquier, notes that “torture is the particular bane of the terrorist,”⁴ remarking that the “rational equivalency” plays out as follows: “As the terrorist resorts to extremes of violence that cause grievous individual pain, so the state replies with extremes of violence that, in turn, cause grievous individual pain.”⁵ Any civilizing mission is marked precisely by this paradox: the civilizing apparatus of liberation is exactly that which delimits the conditions of its possibility. Thus torture is at the very least doubly embedded in sociality: it is integral to the missionary/savior discourse of liberation and civilizational uplift, and it constitutes apposite punishment for terrorists and the bodies that resemble them. As I argue in this article, deconstructing exceptionalism and contextualizing the embeddedness of torture entails attending to discourses and affective manifestations of sexuality, race, gender, and nation that activate torture’s corporeal potency.

The Production of the Muslim Body as Object of Torture

“Such dehumanization is unacceptable in any culture, but it is especially so in the Arab world. Homosexual acts are against Islamic law and it is humiliating for men to be naked in front of other men,” Bernard Haykel, a professor of Middle Eastern studies at New York University, explained. “Being put on top of each other and forced to masturbate, being naked in front of each other—it’s all a form of torture,” Haykel said.⁶

Those questioned for their involvement—tacit and explicit—in torture at Abu Ghraib cited both the lack-of-training and the cultural-difference argument to justify their behavior: “If we had known more about them, about their culture and their way of life” whined one soldier plaintively on the U.S. news, “we would have been better able to handle the situation.” The monolith of Muslim culture constructed through this narrative (performatively reiterated by Bush’s tardy apology for the Abu Ghraib atrocities, bizarrely directed at the token Muslim visiting at the time, King Abdullah of Jordan) aside, the cultural-difference line has also been used by conservative and progressive factions alike to comment on the particularly intense shame with which Muslims experience homosexual and feminizing acts. For this, the prisoners receive vast sympathy from the general public. The taboo of homosexuality within Islamic cultures figures heavily in the equation for why the torture has been so “effective”; this interpretation of sexual norms in the Middle

East—sexuality is repressed, but perversity is just bubbling beneath the surface—forms part of a centuries-long Orientalist tradition, an Orientalist phantasmatic that certainly informed the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib. (A longer exposition on this subject would perhaps draw out the continuities between these photos and the paintings of Delacroix and other photographs and art considered in Said's *Orientalism*.) In "The Gray Zone," Seymour Hersh delineates how the U.S. military made particularly effective use of anthropological texts in order to determine effective torture methods:

The notion that Arabs are particularly vulnerable to sexual humiliation became a talking point among pro-war Washington conservatives in the months before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. One book that was frequently cited was *The Arab Mind*, a study of Arab culture and psychology, first published in 1973, by Raphael Patai, a cultural anthropologist who taught at, among other universities, Columbia and Princeton, and who died in 1996. The book includes a twenty-five-page chapter on Arabs and sex, depicting sex as a taboo vested with shame and repression. "The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of the women . . . and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world," Patai wrote. "Homosexual activity, or any indication of homosexual leanings, as with all other expressions of sexuality, is never given any publicity. These are private affairs and remain in private." The Patai book, an academic told me, was "the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior." In their discussions, he said, two themes emerged—"one, that Arabs only understand force and, two, that the biggest weakness of Arabs is shame and humiliation." The government consultant said that there may have been a serious goal, in the beginning, behind the sexual humiliation and the posed photographs. It was thought that some prisoners would do anything—including spying on their associates—to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends. The government consultant said, "I was told that *the purpose of the photographs was to create an army of informants, people you could insert back in the population.*" The idea was that they would be motivated by fear of exposure, and gather information about pending insurgency action, the consultant said. If so, it wasn't effective; the insurgency continued to grow.⁷

I quote these passages from Hersh's article at length to demonstrate how the intricate relations between Orientalist knowledge production, sexual and bodily shame, and espionage informed the context of Abu Ghraib. As Yoshi Furuhashi has astutely pointed out, Patai's *The Arab Mind* actually surfaced in Edward Said's *Orientalism* as an example of the contemporary conduits of Orientalism,⁸ which also include the knowledge formations of foreign and public policy, terrorism studies, and area

studies.⁹ (We should add to Said's list the interrogation and intelligence-gathering industry: Titan Corporation and CACI International have been accused of "outsourcing torture" to Iraq and of refining, honing, and escalating torture techniques in order demonstrate proven results, thus winning lucrative U.S. government contracts and ultimately directing the illegal conduct at Abu Ghraib.)¹⁰ Patai, who also authored *The Jewish Mind*, writes of the molestation of the male baby genitals by doting mothers, the routine beatings and stabbings of sons by fathers, the obsession with sex among Arab students (as compared to American students), and masturbation: "Whoever masturbates . . . evinces his inability to perform the active sex act, and thus exposes himself to contempt."¹¹ *The Arab Mind* constitutes a mainstay text in diplomatic and military circles, and the book was reissued in November 2001 with an introduction by Norvell B. De Atkine, director of Middle East Studies at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg in North Carolina.¹² Clearly, not only is the lack of knowledge with respect to cultural difference irrelevant (for would knowing have ended or altered the use of these torture tactics?) but it is precisely through this knowledge that the U.S. military has been diplomatically instructed. It is exactly this unsophisticated notion of (Arab/Muslim/Islamic) cultural difference that military intelligence capitalized on to create what it believed to be a culturally specific and thus effective matrix of torture techniques. Furthermore, though originally the photographs at Abu Ghraib had a specific information-retrieval purpose, they clearly took on a life of their own, informed by what Slavoj Žižek recalls as the "unknown knows"—the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values."¹³

In another example of the transfer of information, the model of terrorism used by the State Department swerves between a pyramid structure and a network structure: the former represents a known, rational administrative format, one that is phallic and, hence, castratable; the latter represents chaotic and unpredictable alliances and forces. (The pyramid form also appears in the *Battle of Algiers* [1966, Italy/Algeria, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo], viewed for brainstorming purposes by the Pentagon in September 2003.) Perhaps it is mere coincidence that in several of the Abu Ghraib photos, Iraqi prisoners are arranged naked in human pyramids, in which they are seen to be simulating both the "passive" (feminized) prone position necessary to receive anal penetration and the "active" mounting stance of anal sex. What is significant here is not that the meaning of the pyramid has been understood and translated from one context to another, but rather that the transfer of information and its mimicry does not depend on contextual meaning to have symbolic and political effect.

Such transnational and transhistorical linkages—including unrelated but no less relevant examples drawn from Israeli surveillance and occupation mea-

tures, the behavior of the French in Algeria, and even the 2002 Gujarat pogrom in India—surge together to create the Muslim body as a particular typological object of torture.¹⁴ During the Algerian war, for instance, one torture of Arabs “consisted of suspending them, their hands and feet tied behind their backs . . . with their head upwards. Underneath them was placed a trestle, and they were made to swing, by fist blows, in such a fashion that their sexual parts rubbed against the very sharp pointed bar of the trestle. The only comment made by the men, turning towards the soldiers present: ‘I am ashamed to find myself stark naked in front of you.’”¹⁵ This kind of torture directed at the supposed Muslim terrorist is not only subject to the normalizing knowledges of modernity that mark him (or her) both as sexually conservative, modest, and fearful of nudity (and it is interesting how this conceptualization is rendered both sympathetically and as a problem) as well as queer, animalistic, barbarian, and unable to control his (or her) urges. Thus the shadow of homosexuality is never far off. In *Brothers and Others in Arms: The Making of Love and War in Israeli Combat Units*, author Danny Kaplan, looking at the construction of hegemonic masculinity and alternative sexual identities in the Israeli military, argues that sexualization is neither tangential nor incidental to the project of conquest but, rather, is central to it: “[The] eroticization of enemy targets . . . triggers the objectification process.”¹⁶ This eroticization always inhabits the realm of perversion:

An instance where the image of mehablim [literally, “saboteurs”—a general term for terrorists, guerilla soldiers, or any Arab groups or individuals that operate against Israeli targets]—in this case, Palestinian enemy men—merges with another image of subordination, that of actual homosexual intercourse. It seems that the sexual-targeting drive of masculinized soldier could not resist such a temptation. This is one way to understand Shaul’s account of one of the brutalities he experienced in the Lebanon War. During the siege on [Palestinian Liberation Organization, PLO] forces in Beirut, he was stationed next to a post where Israeli snipers observed PLO activity in city houses. Suddenly, something unusual appeared in the sniper’s binoculars:

“One of them said to me, ‘Come here; I want you to see something.’ I looked, and I saw two mehablim, one fucking the other in the ass; it was pretty funny. Like real animals. The sniper said to me, ‘And now look.’ He aims, and puts a bullet right into the forehead of the one that was being fucked. Holy shit, did the other one freak out! All of a sudden his partner died on him. It was nasty. We were fucking cruel. Cruelty—but this was war. Human life didn’t matter much in a case like this, because this human could pick up his gun and fire at you or your buddies at any moment.”¹⁷

Kaplan concludes this vignette by remarking that despite the episode’s brutal ending, the gender position of the active partner is what was ultimately protected:

“It is striking that even in this encounter it is the passive partner who gets the bullet in his ass, while the active partner remains unscathed.”¹⁸ This exemplifies the literalization of performativity whereby the faggot Muslim receives his torture as a faggot Muslim. Violence is naturalized as the inexorable and fitting response to non-normative sexuality. But not only is the Muslim body constructed as pathologically sexually deviant and as potentially homosexual, and thus read as a particularized object for torture, but the torture itself is constituted on the body as such: as Brian Axel has argued, “the performative act of torture produces its object.”¹⁹ The body informs the torture, but the torture also forms the body, thus suturing the double entrenchment of perversion into the circuitry of becoming. (So while it is questionable whether the acts of torture should be read as simulating “gay sex” acts, a conundrum I discuss later in this essay, they nonetheless perform an initiation, confirmation, or even conversion in the eyes of the perpetrators.) Furthermore, the faggot Muslim as torture object is splayed across five continents, prominently in Arab countries through the “transnational transfer of people” in a tactic called “renditions,” the U.S. practice of holding terrorist suspects in third-country locations such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and, most recently, Syria, thereby sustaining a “worldwide constellation of detention centers” and rendering these citizenship-stripped bodies, about whom the United States can deny having any knowledge, as “ghost detainees.”²⁰

As the space of “illicit and dangerous sex,”²¹ the Orient is the site of carefully suppressed animalistic and perverse homo- and hypersexual instincts. This paradox lies at the heart of Orientalist notions of sexuality that are reanimated through the transnational production of the Muslim terrorist as torture object. Underneath the veils of repression sizzles an indecency waiting to be unleashed. The most recent invocation of the perverse, deranged terrorist and his naturalized proclivities is found in this testimony by one of the prisoner guards at Abu Ghraib: “I saw two naked detainees, one masturbating to another kneeling with its mouth open. . . . I saw [Staff Sergeant] Frederick walking towards me, and he said, ‘Look what these animals do when you leave them alone for two seconds.’ I heard PFC England shout out, ‘He’s getting hard.’”²² Note how the Iraqi prisoner, the one in fact kneeling in the submissive position, is referred to as “it.” Contrary to the public debate recently generated on torture, which foregrounds the site of detention as an exemplary holding cell that teems with aggression, this behavior is hardly relegated to prisons, as an especially unnerving moment in Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (United States, 2004) reveals. A group of U.S. soldiers are shown loading a dead Iraqi, presumably recently killed by them, covered with a white sheet onto a stretcher. Someone yells, “Look, Ali Baba’s dick is still hard!” while others follow in disharmonized chorus, “You touched it, eeewww you touched it.” Even in death, the muscular virility of the Muslim man cannot be laid to rest in some humane manner;

not only the Orientalist fantasy transcends death but the corpse's sexuality does, too—it rises from death, as it were. Death here becomes the scene of the ultimate unleashing of repression.

Wither Feminism

Despite the recurring display of revulsion for attributes associated with the feminine, the United States apparently still regards itself as the arbiter of feminist civilized standards. Writing in the *Gully*, a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) political news forum, Kelly Cogswell worries about homophobic and misogynist backlash, as if the United States had not already demonstrated its capacity to perpetuate their most extreme forms. “Images of men forced to wear women’s underwear over their faces and engage in homosexual activity,” Cogswell writes, “will also inflame misogyny and homophobia. Forget about Bush’s anti-gay marriage stand in the United States. By tolerating this behavior in Iraq and elsewhere, his administration has made homosexuality abhorrent world-wide. The image of an American woman holding a prisoner’s leash will be used as a potent argument against modernization and the emancipation of women.”²³ Barbara Ehrenreich expresses similar concerns: “It was [Lynndie] England we saw with a naked Iraqi man on a leash. If you were doing PR for Al Qaeda, you couldn’t have staged a better picture to galvanize misogynist Islamic fundamentalists around the world. Here, in these photos from Abu Ghraib, you have everything that the Islamic fundamentalists believe characterizes Western culture, all nicely arranged in one hideous image—imperial arrogance, sexual depravity, and gender equality.”²⁴ It is surely wishful thinking to assume that U.S. guards, female or not, having forced prisoners to wear women’s underwear, among other derogatory “feminizing” acts, would then be perceived by the non-West as a product of the West’s gender equality. In fact, misogyny is perhaps most easily understood between captor and captive. Former prisoner Dhia al-Shweiri notes: “We are men. It’s OK if they beat me. Beatings don’t hurt us; it’s just a blow. But no one would want [his] manhood to be shattered. They wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel, and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman.”²⁵

The picture of Lynndie England, dubbed “Lynndie the Leasher,” leading a naked Iraqi on a leash (also being referred to as “pussy whipping”) has now become a surface on which fundamentalism and modernization, apparently dialectically opposed, can wage war. One could argue that this image is about both the victories of liberal feminists, who claim that women should have equal opportunities within the military, and the failures of liberal feminists to adequately theorize power and gender beyond male-female dichotomies that situate women as less prone toward violence and as morally superior to men. Writes Zillah Eisenstein: “When I first saw the pictures of the torture at Abu Ghraib I felt destroyed. Simply heart-broken. I thought ‘we’ are the fanatics, the extremists; not them. By the next day as I con-

tinued to think about Abu Ghraib I wondered how there could be so many women involved in the atrocities?²⁶ Why is this kind of affective response to the failures of Euro-American feminisms, feminisms neither able to theorize gender and violence nor able to account for racism within their ranks, appropriate to vent at this particular moment, especially when it works to center the Euro-American feminist as victim, her feminism having fallen apart? Another example: brimming with disappointment, Ehrenreich pontificates: “Secretly, I hoped that the presence of women would over time change the military, making it more respectful of other people and cultures, more capable of genuine peacekeeping. . . . A certain kind of feminism, or perhaps I should say a certain kind of feminist naiveté, died in Abu Ghraib.”²⁷ Similarly, Patrick Moore articulates the death of a parallel yearning, as if gay male sexuality had never chanced on its own misogyny: “The idea that female soldiers are as capable as men of such atrocities is disorienting for gay men who tend to think of women as natural allies.”²⁸ Nostalgically mourning the loss of the liberal feminist subject, this emotive convergence of white liberal feminists and white gay men unwittingly reorganizes the Abu Ghraib tragedy around their desires.

But the sight of England with her leash also hints at the sexual perversions associated with S/M, something not mentioned at all in the popular press. The comparisons now proffered between the depraved, cigarette-toting, dark-haired, pregnant-and-unmarried, racialized England (now implicated in making a pornographic film with another guard) and the heroic girl next door Jessica Lynch, informed by their working class background similarities but little else, speak also of the need to explain away the solid presence of female Abu Ghraib torturers as an aberration.²⁹ While the presence of women torturers should at least initially give us pause, it is a mistake to exceptionalize these women as well; the pleasure and power derived from their positions and actions cannot be written off as some kind of false consciousness or duping by the military, nor as what Eisenstein refers to as “white female decoys.”³⁰ If, as Veena Das argues, violence is a form of sociality, then women are not only the recipients of violence but are actually connected to and benefit from forms of violence in a myriad of ways, regardless of whether they are the perpetrators of violence themselves.³¹ That is to say, the economy of violence produces a circulation whereby no woman is strictly an insider or an outsider. Rather, women can be subjects of violence but also agents of it, whether it is produced on their behalf or perpetuated directly by them.³² In this regard, three points are at stake: How do we begin to understand the literal presence of women, and possibly of gay men and/or lesbians, in both the tortured and the torturer populations? How should one explore the analytic of gender positionings and sexual differentiation beyond masculine and feminine? And finally, what do we make of the participation of U.S. guards in the photos, behind the cameras, and in front of computer screens, and of ourselves, as curious and disturbed onlookers?

Gay Sex?

Male homosexuality is deeply shameful in Arab culture; to force naked Arab prisoners to simulate gay sex, taking pictures you could threaten to show, would be far worse than beating them.

— Gregg Easterbrook, “Whatever It Takes”

Deploying a parallel homophobic logic, conservative and progressive pundits alike have claimed that the illegal status of homosexual acts in Islamic law demarcates sexual torture in relation to the violence at Abu Ghraib as especially humiliating. Republican senator Susan Collins of Maine, for example, was skeptical that the U.S. guards elected to inflict “bizarre sexual humiliations that were specifically designed to be particularly offensive to Muslim men,”³³ while sexual humiliation became constituted as “a particular outrage in Arab culture.”³⁴ But from a purely military security perspective, however, the torture was very effective and, therefore, completely justified.³⁵ Bush’s administration claims that the torture in the forms it took was particularly necessary and efficacious for interrogation because of the ban of homosexuality in Islam. That “nakedness, homosexuality and control by a woman might be particularly humiliating in Arab culture” has been a sentiment echoed by many.³⁶

Madhi Bray, executive director of the Muslim American Society, a non-profit Islamic organization located in Virginia, says that Islam calls for “modesty in dress”—“being seen naked is a tremendous taboo and a tremendous humiliation in Muslim culture”—and that homosexuality, considered a sin, “only becomes a problem when it is flaunted, affecting the entire society.”³⁷ Faisal Alam, founder and director of the international Muslim LGBTIQ organization, Al-Fatiha, states that “sexual humiliation is perhaps the worst form of torture for any Muslim.” The press release from Al-Fatiha continues: “Islam places a high emphasis on modesty and sexual privacy. Iraq, much like the rest of the Arab world, places great importance on notions of masculinity. Forcing men to masturbate in front of each other and to mock same-sex acts or homosexual sex, is perverse and sadistic, in the eyes of many Muslims.” In another interview, Alam maintains that the torture is an “affront to their masculinity.”³⁸ In a very different context, Patrick Moore, author of *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sex*, opines:

Because “gay” implies an identity and a culture, in addition to describing a sexual act, it is difficult for a gay man in the West to completely understand the level of disgrace endured by the Iraqi prisoners. But in the Arab world, the humiliating techniques now on display are particularly effective because of Islam’s troubled relationship with homosexuality. This is not to say that sex between men does not occur in Islamic society—the shame lies in the gay identity rather than the act itself. As long as a man does not accept the supposedly female (passive) role in sex with another man, there is no shame

in the behavior. Reports indicate that the prisoners were not only physically abused but also accused of actually being homosexuals, which is a far greater degradation to them.³⁹

The Foucauldian act to identity telos spun out by Moore delineates the West as the space of identity, while the Arab world is relegated, apparently because of “Islam’s troubled relationship to homosexuality,” to the backwards realm of acts. The fiction of identity—not that identity is a fiction but, rather, that identity based on the concept of progressive coherence is—effaces men who have sex with men (MSM), such as those men on the down low (DL), so that the presence of gay- and lesbian-identified Muslims in the Arab world becomes inconceivable. But let us follow Moore’s logic to its conclusion: since the acts are allegedly far more morally neutral for Muslims than they are for men in the West, being forced to do them in the obvious absence of an avowed identity should actually not prove so humiliating. Given the lack of any evidence that being called a homosexual is much more degrading than being tortured, Moore’s rationalization reads as an Orientalist projection.

I want to underscore the complex dance of positionality that Muslim and Arab groups, such as the Muslim American Society and especially Al-Fatiha, must perform in these times, during which a defense through the lens of culture easily becomes co-opted into racist agendas. Gay conservative Andrew Sullivan, for example, capitalizes on the cultural-difference discourse, nearly claiming that the repressive culture of Muslim extremism is responsible for the potency of the torture, in effect blaming the victims. Islamophobia has become central to the subconscious of homonormativity.⁴⁰ In general, however, either deliberately or unconsciously, these accounts by LGBTQ progressives tend to uphold versions of normative masculinity—that is, being in the feminized passive role is naturalized as bad. This comes, perhaps, as an unintended side effect of the focus on homosexuality, which tends to reproduce misogyny in the effort to disrupt homophobia. Furthermore, in both conservative and progressive interpretations of the abuse at Abu Ghraib, we see the trenchant replay of what Michel Foucault termed the “repressive hypothesis”: the notion that a lack of discussion or openness regarding sexuality reflects a repressive, censorship-driven apparatus of deflated sexual desire. (Indeed, considering the centrality of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* to the field of queer studies, it is somewhat baffling that some queer theorists have accepted at face value the discourse of Islamic sexual repression. That is not to imply that Foucault’s work should be transparently applied to other cultural and historical contexts; rather, his insights deserve evaluation as a methodological hypothesis about discourse.) In Said’s *Orientalism*, the illicit sex found in the Orient was sought out in order to liberate the Occident from its own performance of the repressive hypothesis. By contrast, in the case of Abu Ghraib, it is the repression of the Arab prisoners that is highlighted in order to efface the rampant hypersexual excesses of the U.S. prison guards.

This gives us a clear view of the performative privileges of what Foucault described as the “speaker’s benefit”: those who are able to articulate sexual knowledge appear to be freed, through the act of speech, from the space of repression. Given the unbridled homophobia demonstrated by the U.S. guards, it is indeed ironic, yet somehow also predictable, that in these accounts the United States nonetheless emerges as more tolerant of homosexuality (and less tainted by misogyny and fundamentalism) than the repressed, modest, nudity-shy Middle East. As Sara Ahmed notes, this hierarchy between open (liberal democracy) and closed (fundamentalist) systems obscures “how the constitution of open cultures involves the projection of what is closed onto others, and hence the concealment of what is closed and contained ‘at home.’”⁴¹

What, then, is closed, and what is contained at home? In the gay press, the Abu Ghraib photos are continuously hailed as “evidence of rampant homophobia in the armed forces.”⁴² Aaron Belkin, for example, decries them as symbolic representations of “the most base, paranoid, or extreme elements of military homophobia,”⁴³ while Paula Ettelbrick, the executive director of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, maintains that “this sort of humiliation” becomes sanctioned as a result of the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies implemented during the Clinton administration,⁴⁴ as if therein lies the brunt of the military establishment’s cruelty, and not in the murders of thousands of civilian Iraqis. Humiliation becomes sanctioned because the military functions as a reserve for what is otherwise seen as socially unacceptable violence, sanitizing all aggression in its wake under the guise of national security. In these accounts, the homophobia of the U.S. military is pounced on, with scarce mention of the linked processes of racism and sexism. Patrick Moore, who admits that the photos “evoked in me a deep sense of shame as a gay man,” in particular sets up the (white) gay male subject as the paradigmatic victim of the assaulting images, stating that “for closeted gay men and lesbians serving in the military, it must evoke deep shame.”⁴⁵ But how prudent is it to foreclose unequivocally on the chance that there might be gay men or lesbians among the perpetrators of the torture at Abu Ghraib? To foreground homophobia over other vectors of shame is to miss that these photos are not merely representative of the homophobia of the military; they are also racist, misogynist, and imperialist. To favor the gay male spectator—here, presumably white—is to negate the multiple and intersectional viewers implicated by these images and, oddly, is also to privilege as victim the coherently formed white gay male sexuality in the West (and those closeted in the military) over acts-qualified bodies, not to mention the bodies of the tortured Iraqi prisoners themselves. Moore complicates this audience vectorship in another interview: “I felt the government had found a way to use sexuality as a tool of humiliation both for Arab men and for gay men here.” The drawing together of (presumably straight) Arab men and (presumably white) gay men is yet another moment where the sexuality of Arab men is qualified

as repressed and oriented toward premodern acts, the precursor to the identity-solidified space of “here.”⁴⁶

Further complicating this issue is the long-standing debate among LGBTQ communities about whether or not, and to what degree, the war on terror is in fact a gay issue. Mubarak Dahir, writing for the *New York Blade*, intervenes by arguing that the depiction of “gay sex” is central to the images: “The claim by some members of the gay and lesbian community that the invasion and occupation of Iraq is not a ‘gay’ issue crumbled last week when photos emerged of hooded, naked Iraqi captives at the Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad being forced to simulate gay sex acts as a form of abuse and humiliation.” And later: “As a gay man and as a person of Arab descent, I felt a double sting from those pictures. Looking at the blurred-out photos of hooded Iraqi prisoners being forced to perform simulations of gay oral sex on one another, I had to wonder what it was that my fellow Americans in uniform who were directing the scene found the most despicable: the fact that the men were performing gay sex, or that they were Arabs.”⁴⁷

Given the resounding silence of national and mainstream LGBTQ organizations, currently obsessed by the gay marriage agenda, the political import of Dahir’s response on the war on terror in general, and on Abu Ghraib in particular, should not be dismissed. In fact, on May 28, 2004, in the midst of furious debate regarding sexual torture, the Human Rights Commission, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, and the American Veterans for Equal Rights jointly released “Fighting for Freedom,” a press statement highlighting brave and patriotic LGBT soldiers in the military and announcing the release of *Documenting Courage*, a book on LGBT veterans. Driven by “stories [that] go unmentioned,” both the statement and the book privilege the testimonial voice of authenticity. In the absence of any commentary about or position on Abu Ghraib, this might be read as a defensive move to restore honor to U.S. soldiers while reminding the public of the struggles LGBT soldiers face in the military, thus shifting the focus of victimhood away from Iraqi prisoners.⁴⁸

Declaring that the torturous acts are simulations of “gay sex,” however, invites other consequences, such as the response from Egyptian protestors in Cairo calling for the removal of the “homosexual American executioners,”⁴⁹ which reaffirmed that homosexuality is an unwanted import from the West. Such an accusation feeds nicely into Bush’s anti-gay marriage agenda. Right-wing organizations such as Concerned Women for America have similarly condemned the torture as a direct result of homosexual cultural depravity. But are, in fact, the acts depicted in these photographs specifically and only referential of gay sex (and here, *gay* means “sex between men”)? Is it the case that, as Patrick Moore argues, homosexuality has been deployed as the “ultimate tool of degradation,” and as a “military tactic [that] reaches new levels of perversity”?⁵⁰ Certainly this rendition evades a conversation about what exactly constitutes the distinction between gay sex and straight sex,

and also presumes some static normativity about gender roles as well. Saying that the simulated and actual sex scenes replicate gay sex is an easy way for all—mass media, Orientalist anthropologists, the military establishment, and even LGBTQ groups and organizations—to disavow the “perverse” proclivities inherent in heterosexual sex and the gender normativity immanent in some kinds of gay sex. (It should be noted that Amnesty International is among the few organizations that did not make reference to homosexuality, homosexual acts, or same-sex sexuality in its press release condemning the torture.)⁵¹ These readings reproduce what Gayle Rubin calls the “erotophobic fallacy of misplaced scale.” “Sexual acts,” Rubin argues, “are burdened with an excess of significance”;⁵² this excess produces a misreading and perhaps even an exaggeration of the scale by which the significance of sex is a measure done that continually privileges humiliation (mental, psychic, cultural, social) over physical pain. In fact, it may well be that these responses by Westerners reveal what we might deem as the worst form of torture—that is, sexual torture and humiliation rather than extreme pain—more than any comprehension of the experiences of those tortured. The simulated sex acts must be thought of in terms of gendered roles rather than through a universalizing notion of sexual orientation. But why talk about sex at all? Was anyone having sex in these photos? (One could argue that in the photos, the torturers were turned on, erotically charged, and looked as one might when having sex.)

The focus on gay sex also preempts a serious dialogue about rape—the rape of Iraqi male prisoners, but also, more significantly, the rape of female Iraqi prisoners, the occurrence of which appears neither news- nor photograph-worthy. Indeed there has been a complete underreporting of the rapes of Afghani and Iraqi women both inside and outside of detention centers. As Trishala Deb and Rafael Mutis point out:

Women’s rights advocates in the U.S. have made the distinction between sex and rape for a long time. By defining rape and sexual assault as an act of violence and not sex, we are placing the validity in the voice of the assaulted, and accepting their experience as central to the truth of what happened. . . . Again, what we understand by centering the perspective of the assaulted people is that there was no sex happening regardless of the act.⁵³

Major General Anthony Taguba’s report notes that among the some 1,800 digital photos, there are unreleased pictures of females being raped and women forced at gunpoint to bare their breasts, as well as videotape of female detainees forced to strip and rumors of impregnated rape victims.⁵⁴ Why are there comparatively few photos of women, and why have they not been released? Is it because the administration found the photos of women even more appalling? Or has the wartime rape of women become so unspectacular, so endemic to military occupation, as to render its impact moot? How, ultimately, do we begin to theorize the connections and

disjunctures between male and female tortured bodies, and between masculinities and femininities?

Although feminist postcolonial studies have typically theorized women as the bearers of cultural continuity, tradition, and national lineage, in the case of terrorism the line of transmission seems always to revert to the male body. The locus of reproductive capacity is, momentarily, expanded from the female body to the male body. This expansion does not mark a shift away from women as the victims of rape and pawns between men during wartime. But the principal yet overriding emphasis on women's rape as a weapon of war can displace the importance of castrating the reproductive capacities of men. It is precisely masculinity, the masculinity of the terrorist, that threatens to reproduce itself. Writing about the genital and anal torture of Sikh men in Punjab, Brian Keith Axel argues that torture produces sexual differentiation not as male and female, but rather as what he calls national-normative sexuality and antinational sexuality:

Torture in Punjab is a practice of repeated and violent circumscription that produces not only sexed bodies, but also a form of sexual differentiation. . . . National-normative sexuality provides the sanctioned heterosexual means for reproducing the nation's community, whereas antinational sexuality interrupts and threatens that community. Torture casts national-normative sexuality as a fundamental modality of citizen production in relation to an antinational sexuality that postulates sex as a "cause" of not only sexual experience but also of subversive behavior and extraterritorial desire ("now you can't be married, you can't produce any more terrorists" . . .). The form of punishment corresponds to the putative source of transgression: sexual reproduction, identified as a property of masculine agency within the male body.⁵⁵

It is important to emphasize, of course, that there exist multiple national-normative sexualities and, likewise, multiple antinational sexualities, as well as entities that make such distinctions fuzzy. It is equally important to recognize that, for all of its insights, Axel's formulation cannot be entirely and neatly transposed onto the Abu Ghraib situation, as Punjabi Sikh detainees form part of both the Indian nation and the religious fundamentalist terrorists that threaten to undo that nation. In other words, for Punjabi detainees, torture works to finalize expulsion from the nation-state. What I find most compelling is Axel's formulation of national differentiation as sexual differentiation. However, I would argue that it is precisely feminizing (and thus not the categories of male and female, as Axel notes), and the consequent insistence of mutually exclusive positions of masculine and feminine, that strips the tortured male body of its national-normative sexuality. This feminizing divests the male body of its virility and, thus, compromises its power not only to penetrate and reproduce its own nation ("our" women) but to contaminate the Other's nation ("their" women) as well. Furthermore, the perverted sex of the terrorist is a priori

cast outside the domain of normative national sexualities: that is to say, “the form of punishment,” that is, meddling with penis and anus, “corresponds to the putative source of transgression,” not only because of the desire to truncate the terrorist’s capacity to sexually reproduce but also because of the (homo)sexual deviancy always already attached to the terrorist body. These two attributes, the fertility of the terrorist (in the case of Muslim men, always interpreted through polygamy) and the (homo)sexual perversions of the terrorist, are rendered with extra potency given that the terrorist is also a priori constituted as stateless, thus lacking national legitimization or national boundaries. In the political imagination, the terrorist serves as the monstrous excess of the nation-state.

Torture, to compound Axel’s formulation, works not merely to disaggregate national from antinational sexualities—for those distinctions (the stateless monster-terrorist-fag) are already in play—but also, in accordance with nationalist fantasies, to reorder gender and, in the process, to corroborate implicit racial hierarchies. The force of feminizing, then, lies not only in the stripping away of masculinity, the “faggotizing” of the male body, or in the robbing of the feminine of its symbolic and reproductive centrality to national-normative sexualities. Rather, it is the fortification of the unenforceable boundaries between masculine and feminine, the rescripting of multiple and fluid gender performatives into petrified sites of masculine and feminine, the regendering of multiple genders into the oppressive binary scripts of masculine and feminine, and the interplay of it all within and through racial, imperial, and economic matrices of power. That is the real force of torture.

Axel writes that “torture casts national-normative sexuality as a fundamental modality of citizen production.” But we can also flip these terms around: national-normative sexuality casts torture as a fundamental modality of citizen production. One could scramble this further still: citizen production casts national-normative sexuality as a fundamental modality of torture. And so on. The point is that in the metonymic chain linking torture, citizen production, and national-normative sexualities, torture surfaces as an integral part of a patriotic mandate to separate off the normative-national genders and sexualities from the antinational ones. As Joanna Bourke elaborates: “It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, for some of these Americans, creating a spectacle of suffering was part of a bonding ritual. Group identity as victors in an increasingly brutalized Iraq is being cemented: this is an enactment of comradeship between men and women who are set apart from civilian society back home by acts of violence. Their cruel, often carnivalesque rites constituted what Mikhail Bakhtin called ‘authorised transgression.’”⁵⁶ The bonding ritual, culminating in an authorized transgression, is authorized not from above but between actors seeking to redirect animosity toward each other. In this sense, the bonding ritual of the carnival of torture—discussing it, producing it, getting turned on by it, recording it, disseminating the proof of it, gossiping about it—is the ultimate performance

of patriotism. Here all internal tensions (the working class, “white trash” Lynndie, the African American sergeant, and so forth) are focused outwards, toward the hapless bodies in detention, so that a united front of American multicultural heteronormativity can be not only performed but, more important, affectively felt.

Technologies of Simulacrum

As voyeurs, conductors, dictators, and dominatrices, those orchestrating these acts, several of whom appear erotically riled in the Abu Ghraib photographs, are part of, not external to, the torture scenes themselves, sometimes even explicitly so. For example, convicted Specialist Jeremy Sivits, who took many of the photographs, testified that “Staff Sergeant Frederick would take the hand of the detainee and put it on the detainee’s penis, and make the detainee’s hand go back and forth, as if masturbating. He did this to about three of the detainees before one of them did it right.”⁵⁷ This is hardly indicative of a detached, objective, distanced observer behind the camera, positioned only to capture the events via the click of the shutter. Reports of U.S. soldiers sodomizing Iraqi prisoners with chemical light sticks and broomsticks, and inserting fingers into prisoners’ anuses, also fully implicate the U.S. guards and raise specters of interracial and intercultural sex. Less overtly, the separation of participant from voyeur becomes complicated by the pleasures of taking, posing for, and looking at pictures, especially as the use of cameras and videos as an intermediary tool of sexual pleasure inform varied practices (such as watching porn) between partners of all genders in all kinds of sex.

Many of the photos, originally cropped for damage-controlled consumption, are now revealing the presence of multiple spectators, bystanders, and participants. In the case of the widely disseminated and discussed photo of a hooded man made to stand on a box with wires attached like appendages to his arms, legs, and penis—a classic torture pose known predominantly to interrogation experts as the “Vietnam”—the full photograph reveals a U.S. soldier on the periphery, nonchalantly examining his digital camera. The Vietnam, explains Darius Rejali, derives from an amalgamation of the forced-standing techniques used by torturers in the British army (where it was known as the “crucifixion”) and in the French army (where it was known as the “Silo”) during the early twentieth century, and among those employed by U.S. police, Stalin’s People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), the Gestapo in 1930s Germany, and South African and Brazilian police (who added the electrical supplement) in the 1970s.⁵⁸ In fact it is indeed this image, deemed by many to be the least sexually explicit and therefore less horrifying to view, that has been most reproduced around the world, its simulacra taking shape on billboards and murals and parodied through antiwar protest attire worn on the streets of Tehran, London, and New York and through fake iPod adverts done in hot pink and lime green. Performance artists, such as the New York City–based Hieronymous

Bang, use the American flag as a substitute for the black cloak. In Salah Edine Sallat's mural in Baghdad, the hooded prisoner on the box is paired with a shrouded Statue of Liberty holding up an electric gadget connected to the circuit breaker that threatens to electrocute them both.

To what can we attribute the now iconic status of this image? For starters, it is the only released photo to date that exposes almost no skin—only the legs and shins of the victim can be seen, preserving an anonymity of body that simultaneously incriminates the viewer less than some of the more pornography-like images and also radiates a distressing mystique. The hoods hark back to the white hoods of the Ku Klux Klan, but they also resemble veils. Indeed, the cloaking of nearly the entire body references another iconic image, that of the oppressed Muslim woman in her *burkha*, covered head to toe in black and in need of rescue. It is plausible, then, that this image of the Vietnam resonates as yet another missionary project in the making. It is the male counterpart to the Muslim-woman-in-*burkha* that liberal feminist organizations (like the National Organization for Women [NOW] and the Feminist Majority Fund), the Bush administration (especially Laura), and the conservative right-wingers who tout rhetorics of democracy and freedom love so well. There is another, more sinister reason why the photo echoes so acutely. Called “stealth torture that leaves no marks,” the Vietnam is traceless, leaving the bodies of its victims undifferentiated from unscathed ones. As happens with cloaking, the body remains both untroubled and unseen, and “if it were not for the photographs, no one would know that it had been practiced.”⁵⁹ The only evidence of the Vietnam comes in the form of the photograph. Its mass multiplication and mutations may speak to the need to document and inscribe into history and our optic memories that which otherwise leaves no visual proof. As Susan Sontag proclaimed, “the pictures will not go away.”⁶⁰ Noting that “soldiers trained in stealth torture take these techniques back into civilian life as policemen and private security personnel,” Rejali claims that the Vietnam is found throughout U.S. policing and imprisonment tactics,⁶¹ another likely rationale for the intense reverberations of this photo.⁶²

Claiming that “theatricality leads us to the crux of the matter,” Slavoj Žižek argues that the pictures “suggest a theatrical staging, a kind of tableau vivant, which brings to mind American performance art, [Antonin Artaud's] ‘theatre of cruelty,’ the photos of [Robert] Mapplethorpe or the unnerving scenes in David Lynch's films.”⁶³ The facile comparison of the evidence of brutal wartime violence to spaces of artistic production might put the reader on edge. Indeed, the Right is concocting similar conjectures: in the *American Spectator* George Neumayr writes, “Had Robert Mapplethorpe snapped the photos at Abu Ghraib, the Senate might have given him a government grant.”⁶⁴ But the point, as I understand it, is not so much that these photos resemble works of art, but more that the pictures look indeed as if the U.S. guards felt like they were on stage, hamming it up for the proud parents

nervously biting their lips in the audience. The affect of these photos is one of exaggerated theatricality; jovial and void of any somberness, it invites the viewer to come on and jump on stage as well. As Richard Goldstein points out, “One reason why these photos are such a sensation is that they are stimulating.”⁶⁵

Even more trenchant is the collapsing, in the Abu Ghraib photographs, of production and consumption, image and viewer, onto the same vectors, the same planes. There is no inside or outside here; rather, there are only movement, circulation, contingent temporalities, momentary associations and disassociations. One could argue that if there is anything exceptional about these photographs, it is not the actual violence itself but, rather, the capturing of this violence on film, the photographic qualities of which are reminiscent of vacation snapshots, mementos of a good time, victory at last, or even the trophy won at summer camp. Unlike images of the purportedly unavoidable collateral deaths of war, these photos divulge an irrefutable intentionality. We have proof, finally, of what we suspect might be true, not only in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay but in our very own detention centers and prisons.⁶⁶ These photos not only depict the techniques of torture; they also depict how both process (the photographing) and product (the pictures) constitute shaming technologies and function as a vital part of the humiliating, dehumanizing torture itself: the giddy process of documentation, the visual evidence of corporeal shame, the keen ecstatic eye of the voyeur, the haunting of surveillance, the dissemination of the images on the Internet, the speed of transmission—aphrodisiacs unto themselves, “swapped from computer to computer throughout the 320th Battalion,”⁶⁷ perpetuating humiliation ad nauseam.

Thus these images not only represent specific acts and allude to the procedural vectors of ever-expansive audiences but they also reproduce and multiply the power dynamics that made these acts possible in the first place. As Sontag famously asserted in the *New York Times Magazine*, “the photographs are us.” Comparing the images to the photographs of black lynching victims, taken between 1880 and 1930, that depicted “Americans grinning beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree,” Sontag argues that a shift has occurred in the utility of photos. Once collectible items for albums and display in frames at home, photos are now “less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated.”⁶⁸ Obviously, technology has been a major catalyst in this transition from trophy to propaganda: the digital camera, sexy and absorbing software to assist in manipulating and perfecting images, and Internet sites that serve as virtual photo albums seem ubiquitous. It is a transition from stillness to proliferation, from singularity to fertility, like ejecting dandelion spores into the wind. More important, mobility, motility, speed, and performance function as primary erotic and addictive charges of modernity: clicking the send button marks the ultimate release of productivity and consumption; dissemination is the ultimate form of territorial

coverage and conquest, one more layering of the sexual matrix. While the visages and corpses of American casualties in Iraq remain protected material—even the faces of deceased soldiers were considered unseemly in a television program honoring them—Iraqi bodies are accessible to all, available for comment, ridicule, shaming, scrutiny. If we were to honor Žižek’s invocation of the theatricality of the Abu Ghraib photos, they would indeed qualify as what Cynthia Mahmood, writing about the display of tortured Sikh bodies in Sikh living rooms and *gurdwaras* (temples), calls “massacre art”: “In their very gruesomeness, [they] assert themselves in a room; they are impossible to ignore, and intrude in conversation, meditation, and everyday activities. Their potency derives only in part from their blood; it also derives from their unwillingness to be masked, covered, or distorted.”⁶⁹ Abu Ghraib’s massacre art disrupts the caricature of the placid, Pleasantville-like aura of the American family room, the streaming images from the television set mesmerizing us into silence. They are potent not only for their naked honesty but also because they are the evidence of how much power we can actually, and stunningly, command over others. Unlike the reports of prison abuses compiled by Amnesty International, the Red Cross, and other humanitarian organizations, as well as the testimonies of hundreds of detainees and released prisoners, all easily ignored by the Bush administration, the photos and their circulatory modalities double as representation and information, as the representation of information, and the only information taken seriously and validated by corporate media sources.

Calling the torture an initiation, for those subjected, into the “obscene underside” of “American culture,” Žižek avers: “Similar photos appear at regular intervals in the U.S. press after some scandal explodes at an Army base or high school campus, when such rituals went overboard.”⁷⁰ Again, Žižek’s limp analogizing effectively evacuates the political context of forced occupation and imperial expansion within which specificity and singularity must be retained. While the comparison to fraternity house hazing (I assume that Žižek means college campus rather than high school) or army pranks is not without merit—for certainly proliferating modalities of violence need and feed off one another—there is an easy disregard of the forced, nonconsensual, systemic, repetitive, and intentional order of violence hardly attributable to “rituals” that have gone “overboard.” (We might also ask, in another essay perhaps, whether these acts of torture really reveal anything intrinsic or particular to “American culture,” or whether they can instead be linked more broadly to war cultures and states of occupation at large.) Again, this slippery analysis is fodder for the conservative Right: Rush Limbaugh sanctioned a similar statement by a caller on his radio show by responding thusly:

Exactly my point. This is no different than what happens at [Yale University’s secret fraternity] Skull and Bones initiation, and we’re going to ruin people’s lives over it, and we’re going to hamper our military effort, and then we are

going to really hammer them because they had a good time. . . . You know, these people are being fired at every day. I'm talking about people having a good time, these people. You ever heard of emotional release?⁷¹

Later, Limbaugh opined: “This is something you can see onstage at Lincoln Center from an N.E.A. grant, maybe on ‘Sex and the City.’” Once more, the references to theatricality and staging draw together liberal and right-wing commentators, efface the power dynamics of occupation, war, and empire, and ultimately leave a distasteful sense of smugness or satisfaction—from Limbaugh—at having neatly trivialized something into next to nothing.

Conclusion

We now know more about Lindsey [*sic*] England and Charles Grainer (two of the accused military police) than we do about any of the people who were the prisoners in those pictures. We know very little of their own narratives, identities, or their perspective on the U.S. occupation. Given that, we have to remember that their own histories, genders, and sexualities are as complex as our own. The U.S. media has managed to once again make them subjects of a war that are marginal in their own story. And the question remains: for which culture would these acts of sexual assault, rape, and murder be less appalling? — Trishala Deb and Rafael Mutis, “Smoke and Mirrors”

What emerges, then, from most interpretations in terms of narratives regarding homosexuality and its intersections with the violence at Abu Ghraib can be summed up thusly:

1. The sexual acts simulated are all specifically and only gay sex acts.
2. Homosexuality is taboo in Islamic cultures, making such acts the worst forms of humiliation for Muslims to endure. This insinuates that these forms of torture would be easier for other, less homophobic populations to tolerate (this appears preferable to a more expansive notion of bodily torture as violating for all) and discounts the presence of gay-identified Muslims in Arab societies, what Joseph Massad terms the “gay Arab international,” while also obscuring those engaging in same-sex erotics even if not within the rubric of identity.⁷²
3. American tolerance for homosexuality is elevated in relation to that of Islamic societies, as symptomized by the unspecific, ahistorical, and generalized commentary on the taboo of homosexuality for Muslims.
4. The enactment of “gay sex” (consolidated around the act of sodomy) constitutes the worst form of torture, sexual or otherwise.

5. Iraqi prisoners, having endured the humiliation of gay sex, are subjects worthy of sympathy—an affective, emotive response more readily available than a sustained political critique of the U.S. occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq.
6. The question of race and how it plays out in these scenarios is effaced via the fixation on sexuality; gender likewise becomes effaced when the acts are said to originate from a homophobic military culture, instead of from a misogynist one.
7. Sexuality is isolated within the purview of the individual, as opposed to situated within an integrated diagrammatic vector of power.
8. The language favoring gay sex acts over torture once again casts the shadows of perversity outside, onto sexual and racial others, rather than contextualizing the processes of normalizing bodily torture.
9. Technologies of representation work to occlude the lines of connectivity (sexual, bodily, in terms of proximity, in terms of positionality) between captors and their prisoners.

Despite the widespread absence of sexuality in public debates about 9/11 and the war on terror, the “prisoner sexual abuse scandal,” as it is now termed, vividly reveals that sexuality constitutes a central and crucial component of American patriotism. The use of sexuality—in this case, to physically punish and humiliate—is not tangential, unusual, or reflective of a state of exception. Of course, not all of the torture was sexual, and thus the odd acts—threatening dogs, for example—need to retain their idiosyncrasy. Nudity itself is not automatically and innately sexual; it must be made to signify erotics. Therefore the terms *scandal*, *sexual*, and *abuse* need to be semiotically discharged. This does not mean that this treatment is not sexual or abusive, but rather that such abuse is a commonplace occurrence in detention. Thus, following what Achille Mbembe describes as “necropolitics,” in which systems of domination become increasingly “anatomical, tactile, and sensorial,” we can say simply that sexualized bodily abuse is a normalized facet of prisoner life, and that the sexual is always already inscribed in necropolitics.⁷³ Furthermore, as postcolonial scholars such as Ann Stoler and Anne McClintock have aptly demonstrated, the sexual is part and parcel of the histories of colonial domination and empire building—conquest is innately corporeal. That is to say, this scandal, rather than being cast as exceptional, needs to be contextualized within a range of practices and discourses, perhaps ones less obvious than the Iraqi prisoner abuse, that pivotally links sexuality to the deployment and expansion of U.S. nationalism, patriotism, and, increasingly, empire. Despite the actions of those in charge of Abu Ghraib, perversity is still withheld for the body of the queer Muslim terrorist, insistently deferred to the outside. This outside is rapidly, with precision and intensity, congealing into the population of what Giorgio Agamben has called *homo sacer*, “those

who can be killed with impunity since, in the eyes of the law, their lives no longer count.”⁷⁴ Žižek considers this space “between the two deaths”—dead in the eyes of history but still alive for the countdown—as the fate of the prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the ghost detainees.⁷⁵ As with the systemic failure of U.S. military operations at the prison, not the fault of a handful of individuals but rather due to the entire assemblage of necropolitics, sexuality itself is not the barometer of exception, a situation out of control, an unimaginable reality. Rather, it constitutes a systemic, intrinsic, and pivotal module of power relations.

Notes

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1. “Bush Voices ‘Disgust’ at Abuse of Iraqi Prisoners,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2004; emphasis mine.
2. “A Pastoral Statement from Metropolitan Community Churches Statement by the Reverend Dr. Troy D. Perry,” *Office of the Moderator*, May 2004, Metropolitan Community Churches home page, www.MCCchurch.org.
3. Thomas Cushman, “A Conversation with Veena Das on Religion and Violence, Suffering and Language,” *Hedgehog Review* (Spring 2004), www.virginia.edu/iasec/hedgehog.html.
4. Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare* (New York: Praeger, 1964), xv.
5. Rita Maran, *Torture: The Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 82.
6. Seymour M. Hersh, “Torture at Abu Ghraib,” *New Yorker*, May 10, 2004, 43.
7. Seymour M. Hersh, “The Gray Zone,” *New Yorker*, May 24, 2004, 42; emphasis mine.
8. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 308–9, 311, 312, 349.
9. Yoshi Furuhashi, “Orientalist Torture,” *Critical Montages*, May 20, 2004, montages.blogspot.com/2004/05/orientalist-torture.html.
10. The Center for Constitutional Rights has filed a lawsuit against private firms participating in the so-called torture conspiracy. See www.ccr-ny.org/v2/reports/report.asp?ObjID=cBct36Qkps&Content=401. Trishala Deb and Rafael Mutis elaborate on the implications of outsourcing torture: “CACI is a corporation that generates over \$930 million dollars in profit a year, 65% of its budget coming from government contracts. The question remains how these private contractors are accountable to US and international laws, not to mention the international public. Given the restrictions on access to information about the functioning of the war machine since the establishment of the USA PATRIOT Act and Department of Homeland Security, we have even less access to information and accountability regarding some of the most important and dangerous aspects of this permanent war. The relevance of this information is that it exposes one of the most insidious sides to this story the cycle of government expenditures on private contractors as enforcement agents in this war, and profits made by US corporations which are awarded those contracts. In this way the prison industrial complex is at once exposed and expanded; not only were severe crimes against humanity committed but at least one corporation has profited from those crimes. For those corporations who are being paid to provide interrogators and intelligence, war crimes are not a consideration, just a consequence.” Trishala Deb and Rafael Mutis, “Smoke and Mirrors: Abu Ghraib and the Myth of Liberation,” *Colorlife*, May 2004: 2.

11. Patai quoted in Emram Qureshi, "Misreading *The Arab Mind*," *Boston Globe*, May 30, 2004.
12. Ibid.
13. Žižek points out that it is not the known knowns, the known unknowns, or the unknown knowns that matter most here, but rather the unconscious, the knowledge that does not know itself. Slavoj Žižek, "What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know That He Knows about Abu Ghraib," *In These Times*, May 21, 2004, www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/what_rumsfeld_doesnt_know_that_he_knows_about_abu_ghraib/ (accessed May 30, 2004).
14. During February and March of 2002, over two thousand Muslims were killed and tens of thousands more were displaced from their homes in rioting by Hindus; the police were complicit with this violence, and the Hindu nationalist BJP is accused of premeditated orchestration of the pogroms. In regards to Muslim masculinity, the International Initiative for Justice writes: "Muslim men, in the Hindu Right discourse, are not seen as 'men' at all: they are either 'oversexed' to the extent of being bestial (they can satisfy four wives!) or they are effeminate and not masculine enough to satisfy their women. . . . [As] a symbol of the 'sexual superiority' the emasculated Hindu man must recover by raping and defiling Muslim women . . . there have been calls to Hindu men to join gyms and develop muscular bodies to counter the 'animal' attraction of the over-sexualized Muslim man. Of course, when Hindu men commit rape and assault their actions are not seen as bestial or animal-like but are considered signs of valor. Simultaneously, there is an attempt to show that Muslim men are not real men, but rather homosexuals or *hijras* (eunuchs)—considered synonymous and undesirable and are therefore unable to satisfy their women. As a VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) leaflet called *Jihad* (holy war) boasts:

We have untied the penises which were tied till now
 Without castor oil in the arse we have made them cry
 Those who call religious war, violence, are all fuckers
 We have widened the tight vaginas of the bibis (women) . . .
 Wake up Hindus there are still Miyas (Muslim men) left alive around you
 Learn from Panvad village where their mother was fucked
 She was fucked standing while she kept shouting
 She enjoyed the uncircumcised penis."

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15. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (London: Pan Books, 2002), 197–98.
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