Exceptional torture: Abu Ghrayb and rituals of viewing

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the media attention and impacts from the photographs arising out of the Abu Ghrayb prison in number of contexts. The discussion includes political, socio-cultural, feminist, homosexual and racist perspectives. While the emphasis is clearly on the interactions of America and Iraq, it is suggested that much of what is considered "exceptional" about this specific case of abuse, namely the presence of women torturers, the sexual acts depicted, and the very presence of photographic evidence, mask the ability of viewers to conceive of the torture as having a direct link to long histories of colonial violence and racist subject formations.

Keywords: Abu Ghrayb; America; Iraq; media effects; prison; torture

The fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq comes this year without the media spectacle that surrounded its inaugural year. Aside from the presidential election campaigns that find candidates proposing a swift and productive end along with a plethora of other populist promises of universal healthcare and equality in education, it appears that the intense moral debate and public discussion of the war has numbed itself. With the war waging on and deaths on both sides as frequent as ever, it seems troubling that the most memorable moments and images are from years ago. One could think of Bush's *Top Gun* theatre of "mission accomplished" on a navy ship, Hussein's statue crashing to the ground, Jessica Lynch's rescue, or the video and photograph documentation of the hundreds of thousands of people who took to the streets in protest all over the world. Even the images of the dead citizens and destroyed communities in Iraq no longer seem be front-page fare. No moment or image has sparked the kind of outraged response and public scrutiny, however, as the 2004 photographs leaked from the Abu Ghrayb (Abu Ghraib) prison (also known as Baghdad Correctional Facility) which show male hooded prisoners naked and placed in sexually explicit positions alone and with each other while male and female prison guards pose nearby, pointing and smiling.

One might be hard pressed to find, among the magnitude of locations where these photographs have been reproduced or described, an opinion in favor of such tactics. But does the mere presence of these photographs in tandem with a text or voice that criticizes the acts or the larger war in Iraq alleviate the author, reporter, or artist from the risk of reproducing the power inequalities and the racist and sexist assumptions inherent in the photographs? Instead, much reporting of the photographs and the scandal side-stepped the tortured bodies and focused instead on the political scandal and the soap-opera like drama that implicates high level government officials with low level officers. The scandal is not that the photographs exist or that torture was inflicted upon prisoners, but that these photographs were seen by millions. How can we take into account both the outrage and disgust elicited from the photographs as well as the ease for which they have been reprinted and circulated, analyzed and dissected? There exists an undeniable familiarity in these photographs, a familiarity that calls upon histories of race based violence, the U.S. prison system, and the colonial use of photographs to depict abject, racially othered bodies. The presence of women torturers and "homosexual" acts within the photographs create an illusion of exceptionalism and newness, and create a space to investigate the photographs without calling attention to the photographs themselves and their existence as devices of torture.

Contextualizing the U.S. imperialist mission in the middle east with its deep history of colonial expansion, institutionalized violence, the prison-industrial complex's rampant growth, as well as the history of Abu Ghrayb prison, one must question the exceptionalism inherent in the response to these digital photographs which have appeared ad nauseum within the mainstream media, academia, and in "re-imagined" forms by art and media practitioners. What exactly is exceptional about photograph and video documentation of torture? What is exceptional about women who torture or the use of sexual violence in war and colonialism?

Chow (2003) explores the desire of many theorists and researchers to find the "subjectivity" of the native among what might be imagined as defiled, inauthentic representations of the subaltern in photography. The subjectivity of prisoners depicted in the Abu Ghrayb photographs have not been explored except in connection and complicity with already preconceived notions of Muslim male hyper-masculinity and heterosexuality. The subjectivity most interesting to Western cultural critics is that of Lyndie England, a prison guard who seems entirely too happy to be involved in the horrific scenes she helps stage. Is she as monstrous and soulless as these pictures might suggest, or is she merely a pawn in a man's game? In many representations Ms England comes to symbolize a woman who became a tool in torture so that she might find acceptance and safety within the sexist military, where she apparently found love with a fellow guard. Ms England is not the "native" in the photograph, although her gendered body represents a supposed outsider to violence. She is not supposed to be there. Finding the "real" men and women prisoners behind the scandal in the media is reduced to sworn statements used as evidence in the courtroom where the objective is to document with as much detail as possible the violence and torture that took place in the prisons. Perhaps, the lack of theorizing around the victims is testament to the reality that finding the truth behind the hoods is a questionable, if not entirely impossible endeavor. Not knowing enough about the victims, their situation, their lives and thoughts is not the dilemma but rather the lack of recognition of the photographs as a means of torture. "The most important aspect of the image - its power precisely as image and nothing else," (Chow, 2003, p. 326) is side-stepped in favor of political and social drama played out in the mainstream media.

The exceptionalism propagated in the distribution and reaction to the photographs points to not only the violence and ugliness of the photographs themselves, but what cannot be captured by a digital camera. Before the U.S. invasion in 2003 Abu Ghrayb was a prison used by Suddam Hussein to incarcerate an estimated 15,000 inmates, many of whom were brutally tortured or executed. It was built by British contractors in the 1960's (the UK is second only to the U.S. in number of troops stationed in Iraq) and occupies over 280 acres. Under the US-led coalition the prison was officially renamed the Baghdad Central Confinement Facility (Abu Ghurayb, 2008). Considering one of the many reasons for war propagated by the Bush administration was the auspice of a civilizing mission in which democracy and human rights would be bestowed upon the Iraqi people, the events that unraveled in Abu Ghrayb are more than ironic. Exceptionalism saves the U.S. civilizing project from de-legitimizing itself through bestowing the prison guards with monstrous powers that exceed the limits of sanctioned U.S. behavior and violence in Iraq and in prisons within its own borders. In a statement that could send chills down the spine of anyone concerned with the growth and power of the U.S. prison-industrial-complex President Bush proclaims:

> A new Iraq will also need a humane, well-supervised prison system. Under the dictator, prisons like Abu Ghrayb were symbols of death and torture. That same prison became a symbol of disgraceful conduct by a few American troops who dishonored our country and disregarded our values. America will fund the construction of a modern, maximum security prison. When that prison is completed, detainees at Abu Ghrayb will be relocated. Then, with the approval of the Iraqi government, we will demolish the Abu Ghrayb prison, as a fitting symbol of Iraq's new beginning. (Abu Ghurayb, 2008).

Only when Abu Ghrayb, previously a symbol "of death and torture" enacted under Hussein becomes disgraced publicly by more of the same from the United States, is it time to retire the building. The promise of a more modern maximum-security prison apparently assumes more humane project inline with the goals of civilizing the Iraqi people and dealing with justice the American/right way. Abu Ghrayb, which exists as a set of repulsive images of naked, sexualized brown men in the minds of Americans, is constructed as what happens when good people, even women, are confronted with the backwardness and self destructiveness of terrorism and Islamic society.

In one widely publicized video, guards are seen bursting into a jail cell, forcing prisoners to strip and crawl on the floor. Attack dogs on leashes are brought in to terrify and physically injure the prisoners. This was not in Abu Ghrayb. It was eight years before those photographs were introduced to the world, and it was in Brazoria, Texas. The then governor, George W. Bush, publicly denounced the treatment of the prisoners (London, 2005). In both Brazoria and Abu Ghrayb, the scandal was not in the acts themselves, but in the images and video that were later released turning the torture from an internal criminal matter to national spectacle. Controversial tactics used to control, exploit, and demean prisoners exist throughout the United States, where one in every one hundred adults are incarcerated. The number is significantly higher for people of color, as 1 in 36 Hispanic men is behind bars and 1 in 9 black men ages 20-34 (Prison Nation, 2008). Even with the agents of torture in Abu Ghrayb being white and American, the violence depicted in the photographs has caused only passing comparison in mainstream media to the brutal violence happening everyday in our nation's prisons. This is the system of incarceration that Bush would like export to Iraq for its "new beginning," however it is neither new for Baghdad or for the United States.

The war against Iraq is often compared to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Both are cited as unnecessary expressions of U.S. foreign policy and military might when the direct threat against the U.S. is intangible, nonexistent, or entirely fabricated. The Red Scare that fueled the deaths of more than 2 million Vietnam citizens and previously resulted in an attack on the rights of political expression of U.S. citizens has been replaced by a "brown scare" of similar proportions. The most widely circulated image of Abu Ghrayb is that of a man entirely hooded standing on top of a box with arms outstretched as if in a crucifixion position. Wires are attached to his arms, legs, and penis. It has been reproduced in a variety of forms, including art and protest against the war. It should be illuminating that this torture pose is not exclusive to the war on terror, but a classic torture pose known to interrogation experts as "the Vietnam" and is the combination of techniques used by torturers in the British, French, and other armies in the early twentieth century, even U.S. police (Puar, 2007). Here the image becomes a palimpsest on which histories of colonial aggression can be read, not a new symbol for injustice in the war on terror.

The existence of photographs suggests that viewers have seen the violence in its entirety and it is thus available for critique and appropriation for various political and social causes. The history of racial violence and of Abu Ghrayb itself could never be captured in a simple photograph, but it is interesting to consider what has been documented by camera but has yet to find its way into the mainstream discussion. The "Vietnam" photograph typically seen is one that captures the lone prisoner. Another famous photograph, that of the "dog pile" in which men are forced to stack on stop of each other's naked bodies lacks a visible guard subject. While no doubt exists of the staged nature of these photographs, perhaps it is telling that "although many of the images of prisoner abuse from Abu Ghrayb feature soldiers within the frame watching and constructing the horrific incidents, the images that have become the most iconic do not feature them," (Thompson, 2008). Images that might include a candid guard seem almost accidental, (Thompson, 2008, p. 141) while those that include a posed guard, for example England holding a dog leash attached to the neck of a prisoner and giving a thumbs up to the camera are entirely purposeful and are meant to be captured. There is no doubt that these photographs were staged to create a very specific kind of effect in the viewer

and it should be alarming that while photographs that seem to disrupt the theatre of torture exist, they have not been taken up by the mainstream media. Thus we do not have as readily available such different takes of the photographs as England holding the leash while another female guard watches complicitly beside her, hands in pocket. (Thompson, 2008, p. 14).

Among the 1,800 digital photographs taken by U.S. guards inside the prison are images of U.S. military policeman "having sex" with an Iraqi woman other photographs show women forced to strip off their clothing at gun-point. These images have been seen by Congress but have not been released for public viewing (Harding, 2004). Why? Some have called the pictures of men being tortured unfathomable and extremely explicit. One would have to assume that the idea of women being raped and abused in Iraq would not only disrupt one of the supposed motivating factors of U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the emancipation of women, but also create a direct link between Abu Ghrayb and the use of sexual violence against women as a tool of war throughout U.S. and world history. This also points to the extent to which the kind of "full disclosure" insinuated in the circulation of these leaked photographs is mediated by a variety of governmental and censorship interests that can greatly determine the meaning and context of the photographs. Even the initial release of the photographs to the public via "60 minutes" was closely monitored by the Department of Defense.

The Abu Ghrayb photographs were always meant to be seen. At the time of their "discovery" they existed on a file sharing network of military personnel and they were also believed to be sent back home to family and friends like "postcards" from the war (Soussloff, 2007). The messages implied in the photographs sent home was clear enough in the sexualized torture and demasculinization that only made sense through the white gaze and essentialized differences between the Other/Terrorist/Arab and U.S. guard. "These images ritualize the abject, nude body in order to racialize the victims and codify the controlling power of the white/right gaze," (Thompson, 2008, p. 129). The purpose behind these photographs as both methods to document the torture as well as to construct meaning out of it in a staged, performed way might give pause to the way in which these photographs are so easily distributed and reproduced without attention to the continued violence in the embarrassment and assault that supposedly makes these photographs so powerful in the first place.

For black cultural critic Hazel Carby and others, the photographs are not exceptional but a clear reminder of the histories of lynching and racial aggression within the US. Photography of lynching and the torturing of black bodies were widely available and sent a very clear message of white aggression. The photographs existed in newspapers, personal collections, as well as postcards which documented a "great day out," (Carby, 2004). Similarly, the Abu Ghrayb photographs were originally intended for the same purpose.

> This continuity of message is revealed in photographs where participants in a lynching stand grinning beside the bodies of African Americans, exhibiting pleasure and pride in their participation in torture. The fact that in these images the bodies are often very carefully posed emphasises that pleasure is not produced spontaneously; rather, in both lynching photographs and in the photographs from Abu Ghraib we can see a consciously staged and highly ritualised performance as if the actors were following a script. (Carby, 2004).

The dead body of the lynching victim cannot gaze back, and thus they are entirely subject to the white gaze. Similarly, the prisoners in Abu Ghrayb were photographed with hoods on. We cannot see their faces and they are not allowed to look back. If torture as a tactic of war and interrogation works to keep its victims alive at the worst possible expense on their bodies and minds, lynching must be seen as a categorically a different kind of punishment. It may contain acts of torture, it most certainly ends in death. The exposed and staged bodies of the prisoners coupled with their inability to look back are stark reminders of racialized violence in the US.

The circulation of the photographs point to the ways in which the photographs are not merely memories or warnings of torture, they exist as torture in and of themselves.

If certain photographs such as those containing candid guards are seen as ineffective or in the case of female prisoners entirely unacceptable for public viewing, then one might begin to see those photographs which have found their way into public sight as reprehensible, but only in such a way that can be comprehended and accepted in this time of war. The presence of Lyndie England and other women torturers in the photographs has sparked intense debate over the supposed failure of feminism and the prevalence of sexism in the military. There is no doubt that England muddles the supposed sanctity of white femininity and progressiveness that is often juxtaposed against oppressed Muslim women and the reason for U.S. intervention in radical Islamic societies. If there exists an exceptional quality to these photographs and the scandal itself perhaps it is the realization of U.S. society that, as Angela Davis stated, "today we might say we have been offered an equal opportunity to perpetrate male dominance and racism", as well as the equal opportunity "to kill, to torture, to engage in sexual coercion," (McKelvey, 2007). To suggest that feminism should have to answer to the racist, sexist, and colonial actions that took place in Abu Ghrayb is also to ignore the well-known reality that white women have often been complicit in patriarchal and racist violence for as long as it has existed.

In addition, the gay sex acts staged in the photographs have led many to consider the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy and the overall homophobia of the military, as well as the supposed hyper homophobia of Muslim men that makes the torture all the more effective and embarrassing for the victims. These kinds of discussions serve to qualify the images as exceptional and new, despite their place within a larger history of colonial aggression, racism, and sexualization of the 'Other'. Questions concerning what this means for feminists, gays in the military, etc, or to foreground homophobia or sexism as the key elements of shame in the photographs "is to miss that these photographs are not merely representative of the homophobia of the military [or the sexism]; they are also racist, misogynist, and imperialist". We should not "negate the multiple and intersectional viewers implicated by these images," (Puar, 2007, p. 95).

Puar notes that the images reinforce what Foucault describes as our speaker's benefit, "an exemplar of sexual exceptionalism whereby those who are able to articulate sexual knowledge (especially of themselves) then appear to be freed, through the act of speech, from the space of repression," (Puar, 2007, p. 94). This might be extended to an understanding of a viewer's benefit whereby the Western viewer is able to acknowledge the sexuality and dehumanization in the photographs and discuss their meanings and implications for Feminism and Western homosexuality while the victims themselves are merely delegated to the space of homophobic victim. In this sense, the prisoners are victims of their own homophobia and sexism, which only makes sense against the backdrop of the assumed U.S. progressiveness. These questions cannot be answered by the mere publication of the photographs, instead, these imagined categories are stabilized by viewing. The viewer can be gay, feminist, and/or progressive while the prison guards are sexist and heterosexual. The victims remain seen as male, homophobic, and abject.

It is important to note that the distribution of the Abu Ghrayb photographs and the ensuing political scandal has not stopped the use of torture by the U.S. military. At the very least the images serve as a concrete point of reference for many to the ways in which a history of racist violence has been re-imagined and re-appropriated for a new war and enemy. A responsibility exists in showcasing images of violence, especially when a position of viewership is contingent upon the torture and objectification of another. While the gendered, sexual, and political meanings of the acts and individuals seen in the photographs have been the topic of widespread debate and criticism, the power of the photographs as devices of torture that contain the power to stabilize constructed categories of difference seems to have garnered less

enthusiasm in the mainstream press, as evident in their widespread circulation and availability.

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