

# Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib

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To articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

The question is still open: what is the purpose of Guantánamo Bay? Is it a prison for “terrorists”? Is it an interrogation camp for suspects? Or is it perhaps something altogether more harrowing?

By now it has been established that most of the men and, yes, the teenagers imprisoned, and many of them tortured, at Guantánamo are neither terrorists nor “enemy combatants” but innocent people.<sup>1</sup> By now it has also been established that most of the men and, yes, the women and children imprisoned, and many of them tortured, at Abu Ghraib and other US bases in Iraq and Afghanistan are likewise neither terrorists nor enemy combatants but

1 I’m deeply indebted to the following indispensable books: Tara McKelvey, *Monsterring: Inside America’s Policy of Secret Interrogations and Torture in the Terror War* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2007); Steven Strasser, ed., *The Abu Ghraib Investigations: The Official Reports of the Independent Panel and the Pentagon on the Shocking Prisoner Abuse in Iraq* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004); Seymour M. Hersh, *Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004); S. G. Mestrovic, *The Trials of Abu Ghraib: An Expert Witness Account of Shame and Horror* (London: Paradigm, 2007); and Alfred W. McCoy, *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Metropolitan, 2006). Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure* (New York: Penguin, 2008) and Jane Mayer *The Dark Side: The Inside Story of How the War on Terror Turned Into a War on American Ideals* (New York: Doubleday, 2008) both appeared after this article had been completed. No engagement with the issue of US torture would be complete without the acknowledgment of the exemplary and indispensable interventions of the Center for Constitutional Rights and of all the other lawyers and human rights activists worldwide who are working tirelessly to challenge the abuses.

innocent people, most often picked up in random sweeps or handed over for considerable bounty: taxi drivers, shepherds, shopkeepers, laborers, prostitutes, relatives of possible “suspects,” and in some cases children and the very elderly, people who, by the government’s own admission, could not provide and have not provided “actionable intelligence.”<sup>2</sup>

The specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib place in our hands a profound and compromising question: what is the motive for torturing people whom the government and the interrogators know are innocent? This may appear to be a simple question, but it is not. It is a terrible question with terrible implications, not only for the people immiserated by ruinous US occupation but also for how we understand what kind of empire it is that now extends its ghostly filaments beyond Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib throughout the shadowy, global gulag of secret interrogation prisons, “black sites,” torture ships, and off-shore internment camps now known to straddle the world. Simply to ask the question, why torture innocent people? is to enter a dark labyrinth, a labyrinth of imperial paranoia marked on all sides by flashpoints of violence and atrocity (the massacres at Haditha, Fallujah, Nisour Square, Azizabad, and Nadali only a handful among many), a labyrinth haunted by the historical ghostings and half-concealed specters that I call “imperial déjà vu.”<sup>3</sup>

By now it is fair to say that the United States has come to be dominated by two grand and dangerous hallucinations: the promise of benign US globalization and the permanent threat of the “war on terror.” I have come to feel that we cannot understand the extravagance of the violence to which the US government has committed itself after 9/11—two countries invaded, thousands of innocent people imprisoned, killed, and tortured—unless we grasp a defining feature of our moment, that is, a deep and disturbing doubleness with respect to power. Taking shape, as it now does, around fantasies of global omnipotence (Operation Infinite Justice, the War to End All Evil) coinciding with nightmares of impending attack, the United States has entered the domain of paranoia: dream world and catastrophe. For it is only in paranoia that one finds simultaneously and in such condensed form both deliriums of absolute power and forebodings of perpetual threat. Hence the spectral and nightmarish quality of the “war on terror,” a limitless war against a limitless threat, a war vaunted by the US administration to encompass all of space and persisting without end. But the war on terror is not a real war, for “terror” is not an identifiable enemy nor a strategic, real-world target. The war on terror is what William Gibson calls elsewhere “a consensual hallucination,”<sup>4</sup> and the US government can fling its military might against ghostly apparitions and hallucinate a victory over all evil only at the cost of catastrophic self-delusion and the infliction of great calamities elsewhere.

2 See especially Clive Stafford Smith, *Eight O’Clock Ferry to the Windward Side: Seeking Justice in Guantánamo Bay* (New York: Nation Books, 2007); Michael Ratner and Ellen Ray, *Guantánamo: What the World Should Know* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2004); Clive Stafford Smith, *Bad Men: Guantanamo Bay and the Secret Prisons* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007); Joseph Margulies, *Guantánamo and the Abuse of Presidential Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); and Andy Worthington, *The Guantanamo Files: The Stories of the 774 Detainees in America’s Illegal Prison* (London: Pluto, 2007).

3 I elaborate on my notion of “imperial déjà vu” in my unpublished manuscript “Paranoid Empire: Specters from Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib,” solicited by Yale University Press.

4 See William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace, 2000), 51.

I have come to feel that we urgently need to make visible (the better politically to challenge) those established but concealed circuits of imperial violence that now animate the war on terror. We need, as urgently, to illuminate the continuities that connect those circuits of imperial violence abroad with the vast, internal shadowlands of prisons and supermaxes—the modern “slave-ships on the middle passage to nowhere”—that have come to characterize the United States as a super-carceral state.<sup>5</sup>

Can we, the uneasy heirs of empire, now speak only of national things? If a long-established but primarily covert US imperialism has, since 9/11, manifested itself more aggressively as an overt empire, does the terrain and object of intellectual inquiry, as well as the claims of political responsibility, not also extend beyond that useful fiction of the “exceptional nation” to embrace the shadowlands of empire? If so, how can we theorize the phantasmagoric, imperial violence that has come so dreadfully to constitute our kinship with the ordinary, but which also at the same moment *renders extraordinary* the ordinary bodies of ordinary people, an imperial violence which in collusion with a complicit corporate media would render itself invisible, casting states of emergency into fitful shadow and fleshly bodies into specters? For imperialism is not something that happens elsewhere, an offshore fact to be deplored but as easily ignored. Rather, the force of empire comes to reconfigure, from within, the nature and violence of the nation-state itself, giving rise to perplexing questions: Who under an empire are “we,” the people? And who are the ghosted, ordinary people beyond the nation-state who, in turn, constitute “us”?

We now inhabit a crisis of violence and the visible. How do we insist on seeing the violence that the imperial state attempts to render invisible, while also seeing the ordinary people afflicted by that violence? For to allow the spectral, disfigured people (especially those under torture) obliged to inhabit the haunted no-places and penumbra of empire to be made visible as *ordinary people* is to forfeit the long-held US claim of moral and cultural exceptionalism, the traditional self-identity of the United States as the uniquely superior, universal standard-bearer of moral authority, a tenacious, national mythology of originary innocence now in tatters. The deeper question, however, is not only how to see but also how to theorize and oppose the violence without becoming beguiled by the seductions of spectacle alone.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps in the labyrinths of torture we must also find a way to speak with ghosts, for specters disturb the authority of vision and the hauntings of popular memory disrupt the great forgettings of official history.

5 Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 1999), 170. On the issue of the super-carceral state, see also Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); and Michelle Brown, “‘Setting the Conditions’ for Abu Ghraib: The Prison Nation Abroad,” *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 973–98.

6 For a brilliant analysis of the role of spectacle, see Retort (Iain A. Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (New York: Verso, 2005).

## Paranoia

Even the paranoid have enemies.

—Donald Rumsfeld

Why paranoia? Can we fully understand the proliferating circuits of imperial violence—the very eclipsing of which gives to our moment its uncanny, phantasmagoric cast—without understanding the pervasive presence of the paranoia that has come, quite violently, to manifest itself across the political and cultural spectrum as a defining feature of our time? By paranoia, I mean not simply Hofstadter’s famous identification of the US state’s tendency toward conspiracy theories.<sup>7</sup> Rather, I conceive of paranoia as *an inherent contradiction with respect to power*: a double-sided phantasm that oscillates precariously between deliriums of grandeur and nightmares of perpetual threat, a deep and dangerous doubleness with respect to power that is held in unstable tension, but which, if suddenly destabilized (as after 9/11), can produce pyrotechnic displays of violence. The pertinence of understanding paranoia, I argue, lies in its peculiarly intimate and peculiarly dangerous relation to violence.<sup>8</sup>

Let me be clear: I do not see paranoia as a primary, structural *cause* of US imperialism nor as its structuring *identity*. Nor do I see the US war on terror as animated by some collective, psychic agency, submerged mind, or Hegelian “cunning of reason,” nor by what Susan Faludi calls a national “terror dream.”<sup>9</sup> Nor am I interested in evoking paranoia as a kind of *psychological diagnosis* of the imperial nation-state. Nations do not have “psyches” or an “unconscious”; only people do. Rather, a social entity such as an organization, state, or empire can be spoken of as “paranoid” if the dominant powers governing that entity cohere as a collective community around contradictory cultural narratives, self-mythologies, practices, and identities that oscillate between delusions of inherent superiority and omnipotence, and phantasms of threat and engulfment. The term *paranoia* is analytically useful here, then, not as a description of a collective national psyche, nor as a description of a universal pathology, but rather as an analytically strategic concept, *a way of seeing and being attentive to contradictions within power*, a way of making visible (the better politically to oppose) the contradictory flashpoints of violence that the state tries to conceal.

7 Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1967).

8 Paranoia has been an aspect of US political life at least since the Great Depression. See Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). According to Bacevich, Sherry’s *In the Shadow of War* tells a narrative that spans six decades, revealing a pervasive American sense of vulnerability, anxiety and impotence, alongside a “relentless process of militarization” (*New American Militarism*, 5). As Bacevich tells it, “The new American militarism made its appearance in reaction to the 1960s and especially to Vietnam, evolving over a period of decades, rather than being spontaneously induced by a particular event such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001” (6). This overdetermined atmosphere of vulnerability and humiliation, and compensating with fantasies of grand militarism (especially after Vietnam)—9/11 only made spectacularly visible the “new” American militarism long in the making. Bacevich continues: “For Americans who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s—that is to say, for the generation that today dominates national life—Vietnam was a defining event, the Great Contradiction that demolished existing myths about America’s claim to be a uniquely benign great power and fueled suspicions that other myths might also be false” (34).

9 Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan, 2007). While I am a great admirer of Faludi’s work, in a forthcoming essay I express my reservations about her analysis of the “terror dream.”

Paranoia is in this sense what I call a *hinge phenomenon*, articulated between the ordinary person and society, between psychodynamics and socio-political history. Paranoia is in that sense dialectical rather than binary, for its violence erupts from the force of its multiple, cascading contradictions: the intimate memories of wounds, defeats, and humiliations condensing with cultural fantasies of aggrandizement and revenge, in such a way as to be productive at times of unspeakable violence. For how else can we understand such debauches of cruelty?

A critical question still remains: does not something terrible have to happen to ordinary people (military police, soldiers, interrogators) to instill in them, as ordinary people, in the most intimate, fleshly ways, a paranoid cast that enables them to act compliantly with, and in obedience to, the paranoid visions of a paranoid state? Perhaps we need to take a long, hard look at the simultaneously humiliating and aggrandizing rituals of militarized institutions, whereby individuals are first broken down, then reintegrated (*incorporated*) into the larger corps as a unified, obedient fighting body, the methods by which schools, the military, training camps—not to mention the paranoid image-worlds of the corporate media—instill paranoia in ordinary people and fatally conjure up collective but unstable fantasies of omnipotence.<sup>10</sup> In what follows, I want to trace the flashpoints of imperial paranoia into the labyrinths of torture in order to illuminate three crises that animate our moment: the crisis of violence and the visible, the crisis of imperial legitimacy, and what I call “the enemy deficit.” I explore these flashpoints of imperial paranoia as they emerge in the torture at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib. I argue that Guantánamo is the territorializing of paranoia and that torture itself is paranoia incarnate, in order to make visible, in keeping with Hazel Carby’s brilliant work, those contradictory sites where imperial racism, sexuality, and gender catastrophically collide.<sup>11</sup>

## The Enemy Deficit: Making the “Barbarians” Visible

Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.  
Some people arrived from the frontiers,  
And they said that there are no longer any barbarians.  
And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?  
Those people were a kind of solution.  
—C. P. Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians”

The barbarians have declared war.  
—President George W. Bush

C. P. Cavafy wrote “Waiting for the Barbarians” in 1927, but the poem haunts the aftermath of 9/11 with the force of an uncanny and prescient *déjà vu*. To what dilemma are the “barbarians”

10 See especially Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*; and Todd Ensign, *America’s Military Today: The Challenge of Militarism* (New York: New Press, 2004).

11 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

a kind of solution? Every modern empire faces an abiding crisis of legitimacy in that it flings its power over territories and peoples who have not consented to that power. Cavafy's insight is that an imperial state claims legitimacy only by evoking the threat of the barbarians. It is only the threat of the barbarians that constitutes the silhouette of the empire's borders in the first place. On the other hand, the hallucination of the barbarians disturbs the empire with perpetual nightmares of impending attack. The enemy is the abject of empire: the rejected from which we cannot part. And without the barbarians the legitimacy of empire vanishes like a disappearing phantom. Those people were a kind of solution.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the grand antagonism of the United States and the USSR evaporated like a quickly fading nightmare. The cold war rhetoric of totalitarianism, Finlandization, present danger, fifth columnist, and infiltration vanished. Where were the enemies now to justify the continuing escalation of the military colossus? "And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?" By rights, the thawing of the cold war should have prompted an immediate downsizing of the military; any plausible external threat had simply ceased to exist. Prior to 9/11, General Peter Schoomaker, head of the US Army, bemoaned the enemy deficit: "It's no use having an army that did nothing but train," he said. "There's got to be a certain appetite for what the hell we exist for." Dick Cheney likewise complained: "The threats have become so remote. So remote that they are difficult to ascertain." Colin Powell agreed: "Though we can still plausibly identify specific threats—North Korea, Iran, Iraq, something like that—the real threat is the unknown, the uncertain." Before becoming president, George W. Bush likewise fretted over the post-cold war dearth of a visible enemy: "We do not know who the enemy is, but we know they are out there." It is now well established that the invasion of Iraq had been a long-standing goal of the US administration, but there was no clear rationale with which to sell such an invasion. In 1997 a group of neocons at the Project for the New American Century produced a remarkable report in which they stated that to make such an invasion palatable would require "a catastrophic and catalyzing event—a new Pearl Harbor."<sup>12</sup>

The 9/11 attacks came as a dazzling solution, both to the enemy deficit and the problem of legitimacy, offering the Bush administration what they would claim as a political *casus belli* and the military unimaginable license to expand its reach. General Peter Schoomaker would publicly admit that the attacks were an immense boon: "There is a huge silver lining in this cloud. . . . War is a tremendous focus. . . . Now we have this focusing opportunity, and we have the fact that (terrorists) have actually attacked our homeland, which gives it some oomph." In his book *Against All Enemies*, Richard Clarke recalls thinking during the attack, "Now we can perhaps attack Osama Bin Laden." After the invasion of Afghanistan, Secretary of State Colin

12 General Peter Schoomaker, quoted in "Wars 'Useful,' Says U.S. Army Chief," BBC News, 22 January 2004; Dick Cheney, quoted in Howard Zinn, *The Twentieth Century: A People's History*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 422; Colin Powell, quoted in James David Meernik, *The Political Use of Military Force in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Ashgate, 2004), 65; George W. Bush, quoted in Frances Fitzgerald, "George Bush and the World," *New York Times Book Review*, 26 September 2002; Project for the New American Century, *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* (Washington DC: Project for the New American Century, 2000), 51.

Powell noted, “America will have a continuing interest and presence in Central Asia of a kind we could not have dreamed of before.” Charles Krauthammer, for one, called for a declaration of total war. “We no longer have to search for a name for the post-Cold War era,” he declared. “It will henceforth be known as the age of terrorism.”<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, 9/11 presented an instant dilemma. On that spectacularly memorialized day, the most powerful state in the world was brought to a catastrophic halt by the murderous temerity of nineteen young men with weapons no grander than box cutters and the will to die. For a few chaotic hours, the state was paralyzed, the Pentagon and White House all but evacuated, all ports closed, all planes grounded. The silver harbingers of calamity had appeared as if from nowhere, evading the vigilance of the world’s most potent surveillance and intelligence system. The stunned impotence of the administration was all the more humiliating in that the military was in the middle of a NORAD exercise called Vigilant Warrior. Clarke described the impotent chaos at the center of power at the Pentagon and the White House: “[This was] bigger than anything we had imagined,” he recalls. “The horror, the horror.”<sup>14</sup>

Most pertinently, the attackers, having with the utmost ostentation flaunted their power to subject the United States to surprise attack and global humiliation, instantly vanished, leaving only a charred void in the realm of vision, a gaping tear in the smooth, controlled flow of the image-world, a rupture in the realm of vision to which the network cameras returned again and again with the repetitious fascination and horror of the fetish, making the attack the most recorded single event of all time. Far from being the “barbarians” they would incessantly be called, the attackers understood, with murderous precision, the logic of modernity: “All that is solid melts into air.”

Although the attacks would be incessantly interpreted as “new,” they were nothing of the sort. The continent had been attacked long before, during the invasion of white settlers. US airplanes had unleashed nuclear cataclysm on two Japanese cities. More recently, the World Trade Center had already been attacked in 1998. The fiction of newness was necessary only to bolster the legitimacy of illegal forms of war. What was, however, genuinely new about the aftermath of the 9/11 attack was that, for the first time, control of the technologies of the image-world had swiveled in orientation: instead of the West looking at the rest of the world through the God-eye of modern visual technologies, it was as if the globe had swung on its axis and the ex-colonized world was now gazing at the West with technologies of vision believed for centuries—by the West—to be under the West’s control. With the Enlightenment, seeing was made equivalent with knowing, and the eye became the privileged organ of knowledge and authority. The power to see became equated with the power to *know* and to *dominate*. In the aftermath of 9/11, the world was no longer—and, I believe, will never again

13 Schoomaker, “Wars ‘Useful’”; Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 26; Colin Powell, quoted in Vernon Loch, “Footprints in Steppes of Central Asia,” *Washington Post*, 9 February 2002; Charles Krauthammer, “This Isn’t a ‘Legal’ Matter, This Is War,” *Seattle Times*, 13 September 2001.

14 Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, 17.

be—under Western eyes. Instead, a wounded United States was looked at, watched, and surveyed during a moment of great exposure, devastation, and loss. In short, what disappeared into the immense catastrophe of grey and crimson smoke were not only thousands of ordinary lives but also the West's privilege of being the bearers of God-vision.

Can we fully understand the extravagance of the US response to the attacks without grasping the implications of this global reorientation of the privilege of vision? Was it any accident, for example, that one of the first US assaults inside Iraq was on the Baghdad offices of Al Jazeera—as if to blind the insolent eye of the watching “Orient”? That 9/11 presented a trauma in the realm of vision (the *visibility* of the United States to attack and the *invisibility* of the enemy) is testified by the images of “shadowy,” “invisible,” and “unseen” enemies that quickly proliferated: Attorney General Gonzalez complained, “We face an enemy that lies in the shadows.” President Bush stated, “This is a conflict with opponents who believe they are invisible.” Krauthammer warned, “This is going to be a long twilight struggle: dirty and dangerous.” And Seymour Hersh summed it up, “The Al Qaeda terrorists were there to be seen, but there was no system for seeing them.”<sup>15</sup> In short, this would be a war not only over oil, water, and the resources of globalization but for control of the global image and data worlds.

The suicide attackers, deliberately flying passenger planes into buildings as they did, had instantly obliterated themselves in the fiery cataclysm, removing their bodies from the realm of visible retribution and thereby at the same time removing all means for the Bush administration to be seen to recuperate its wounded potency. The state was faced with an immediate dilemma: how to *embody* the invisible enemy and *be visibly seen* to punish it? The US state *had to turn ordinary people into enemy bodies*, bodies that could be subordinated to what I call “super-vision” and put on display for retaliation.

In the humiliated aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration set out to embody the enemy in three ways. First, the “enemy” was *individualized* as a recognizable *face*—the epic, male, super villain and archenemy Bin Laden—a strategically disastrous tactic, as it turned out, for not only could the administration *not* put Bin Laden on display, either dead or alive, but whenever the state might have hoped Bin Laden would be forgotten by the public, he would inconveniently send in another video, flaunting his ability to manipulate the global image-world on *his* terms. And surely the most risible attempt to make the enemy visible as *faces* was the pack of playing cards of “top” Baath Party members that were touted around Iraq.

Second, the dispersed, transnational forces of al Qaeda, traversing as they do over sixty countries, were *nationalized* and equated with two nation-states. The invasion of Afghanistan was justified as within international law by identifying Afghanistan as a nation-state that had given sanctuary to al Qaeda. This would later present a critical contradiction, for the men who would be captured and imprisoned at Guantánamo would be defined by the United States as lying outside the protection of the Geneva Conventions on the precisely contradictory grounds

15 Alberto Gonzalez, quoted in Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 5; George W. Bush, radio address, 15 September 2001; Charles Krauthammer, “A Humanitarian War,” *Jewish World Review*, 12 October 2001, 25; Hersh, *Chain of Command*, 88.



that Afghanistan was a failed state, a nonstate. Iraq presented a deeper problem. Because it had nothing whatsoever to do with the 9/11 attacks in the first place, there was no *casus belli* for the invasion and (following the lessons of Vietnam) the illegitimate war would have to be kept as invisible as possible from public scrutiny and protest. As conservative commentator David Brooks asked: “How are we going to wage war anymore, with everyone watching?”<sup>16</sup>

Not for nothing was the first camp inside Abu Ghraib named Camp Ganci after a firefighter killed in 9/11. As Tara McKelvey notes: “Many people believe that naming Camp Ganci in memory of firefighter Peter J. Ganci Jr. is part of an attempt to connect Iraq with the 9/11 attacks.”<sup>17</sup> The enemy was thereby symbolically territorialized, but the problem of legitimacy, the enemy deficit, and the crisis of the visual remained: how to embody and make visible an “enemy” in Iraq that wasn’t an enemy to begin with, while keeping the war itself as invisible as possible from the US public.

The third solution to the enemy deficit, I argue, was to produce the “enemy” as *bodies*, placing them under permanent US super-vision, and rendering them most dreadfully subject for retaliation and revenge in the labyrinths of torture. The prisoners’ confessions under torture—confessions not to anything they had done, nor to any information they had, but rather to the absolute power of their torturers and by extension the United States—would be made visible and fixed in the act of photography.

## Pornography: Photography and Forgetting

The camera relieves us of the burden of memory. It surveys us like God, and it surveys for us. Yet no other god has been so cynical, for the camera records in order to forget.

—John Berger, *About Looking*

Spectacle is a form of camouflage.

—Jared Sexton and Steve Marinot

I have become preoccupied and perplexed by the persistent presence of photography in the scene, or should we say the obscene, of torture. I am concerned, however, less with what the photos appear to reveal than with what lies half-hidden in broad daylight in the shadows and fringes beyond them. I am preoccupied, in other words, not by the seduction of the spectacle but rather by what the photos conceal, what they allow us to forget. What do the photographs from Abu Ghraib record—in order to forget? How does spectacle become a form of camouflage?

16 Cited in David Levi Strauss, “Breakdown in the Gray Room: Recent Turns in the Image War,” in *Abu Ghraib: The Politics of Torture*, Terra Nova Series (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2004), 96.

17 McKelvey, *Monstering*, 273.

In February 2004, the revelation of the photographs from Abu Ghraib presented the US administration with a potential political debacle. We now know that over sixteen thousand photographs were taken, of which fewer than two hundred were leaked to the public.<sup>18</sup> Only a handful have entered public circulation, and of that handful only two have achieved iconic status: one of an Iraqi prisoner standing on a box with electric wires attached to his genitals, toes, and fingers, and one of prison guard Lynndie England holding a wounded Iraqi prisoner on a tie-down strap.

Should we not ask, from the outset, why so many modern states have recorded in such meticulous detail their own atrocities (the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, apartheid South Africa, Saddam Hussein, and now the United States)? Do states scrupulously record their own atrocities (in photographs, videos, archives) in order to cloak themselves in the semblance not of vengeful, whimsical, and terrible power but rather of disinterested rationality: performing and recording their own violence as no more than the bureaucratized, rational calculus of cause and effect, the states' debauches of cruelty dutifully recorded not as arbitrary revenge or paranoid power but as no more than the abstract, disinterested punishment of an enemy body on behalf of the security of the public?

What then of the photographs? Susan Sontag has reminded us that “cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for the masses) and as an object of surveillance.”<sup>19</sup> John Berger has likewise noted the state's early interest in photography as an instrument of surveillance: “Within a mere 30 years of its invention as a gadget for an elite, photography was being used for police filing, war reporting, military reconnaissance.”<sup>20</sup> At Abu Ghraib, I argue, US military intelligence, the CIA, the contractors, and the interrogators photographed the prisoners as part of a performance of bureaucratic rationalization: to *produce* the bodies of “the enemy” and make the prisoners *legible* as enemies, thereby putatively “legitimizing” the occupation. At the same time, the photographs served as an instrumental means of perfecting the methods of torture (now dubbed by the ghastly euphemism “enhanced interrogation measures”) by using the visual archive of cruelty to gaze, again and again, at the scenes of torture in order to perfect through retrospective analysis the ever-refinement of techniques for breaking people down. The photos were also used to directly terrorize and humiliate the prisoners, to intimidate other prisoners, and, when shown outside the prison, to intimidate the prisoners' families and communities. In some cases, they were used to attempt to blackmail prisoners into becoming infiltrators of the resistance. Finally, subjecting the prisoners to constant photographic surveillance became in itself a form of humiliation, torment, and torture; many of the prisoners so photographed fell into deep depression and some became suicidal.

18 Mestrovic, *The Trials of Abu Ghraib*, 3.

19 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (1973; reprint, New York: Picador, 2001), 178.

20 John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 52.

But then something extraordinary happened at Abu Ghraib. At the prison, the two (generally historically distinct) functions of the camera that Sontag and Berger define (as an instrument of state surveillance and as a means of private pleasure and spectacle for the masses) fatally and unprecedentedly collided. This collision—taking place as it did in the digital space of the Internet—threatened to rupture the function of state surveillance and plunge the administration into crisis.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, as consumer capital made the digital camera available to ordinary people on a scale never before possible, the recording of atrocity became not simply a function of the state but also a means of private aggrandizement for the soldiers. Throughout the “theater of war” countless US soldiers, military police, and prison guards took thousands of photographs, certainly as personal trophies but also, I propose, as a means of fixing as *spectacle*, in the photographs’ fraudulent promise of permanence, their own unsteady oscillations of paranoia. The photographs promised to memorialize, in the fixity of the image, what was ephemeral in the realm of power. In a context of great fear and vulnerability, the photographs promised to capture and fix, in the stopped-time of the image, the soldiers’ fleeting moments of grand omnipotence. The camera became thereby a technology of witnessing, a means for performing *rituals of recognition* of the soldiers’ brief but absolute dominion over their prisoners. The photograph fixed the unsteady oscillation of paranoia at the moment of omnipotence. But because this omnipotence was borrowed and phantasmagoric, it could not be sustained and was therefore destined to recur for ritualistic repetition. The photographic moment had to be repeated, replicated, and endlessly disseminated: the photographs were handed around to other soldiers, used as computer wallpaper, and sent back home. But in the process, the photographs became public, and in becoming public, they suddenly exposed to the illuminated glare of international scrutiny the shadowy atrocities of imperial violence and threatened to throw the Bush administration into crisis. Yet the crisis was managed and averted. How?

As the Abu Ghraib scandal reverberated, two master narratives emerged to contain the enormity of the debacle. First, the classic (in fact, centuries-old) imperial “bad apple” narrative was mobilized: the notion that the macabre cruelties were only the isolated, late-night shenanigans of a few under-supervised, Robotripping, trailer-trash guards.<sup>21</sup> The bad apple story allowed the scandal to be contained as aberrant, certainly, but isolated; as deviant, yes, but unrepresentative; as morally repellant, no doubt, but as ultimately unofficial and, of course, un-American. Three investigations concurred with President Bush that the abuse was merely “the disgraceful conduct by a few American troops, who dishonored our country and disregarded our values.” James Schlesinger, former secretary of defense, dismissed Abu Ghraib as “*Animal House* on the night shift.”<sup>22</sup> That much is now familiar. What we still need

21 The “bad apple” narrative is a classic, long-standing defense deployed by countries accused of torture—Britain used it in Kenya during the Mau-Mau revolt, for example.

22 President Bush, cited in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, 27; James Schlesinger, quoted in Julian Borger, “Pentagon Blamed over Jail ‘Sadism,’” *Guardian*, 25 August 2004.

to grasp is the astonishing speed and pervasiveness with which the bad apple story morphed into a second master narrative: the “pornography made them do it” story. Critic after critic, on both sides of the political spectrum, saw the military police (MPs) as inspired to their nightly theatrics of torment not by House policy, nor by the military or intelligence chain of command, but by pornography.

Let a few examples suffice. Celebrity preacher Charles Colson argued before the Family Research Council that the guards had been corrupted by a “steady diet of pornography.” As it happens, Colson (the “evil genius” of the Nixon administration) is also the “father” of the “faith-based prison” idea and a central figure in the theo-con movement behind the contracting firm Blackwater. Robert Knight of the Culture and Family Institute, also associated with Blackwater, claimed that gay porn gave soldiers the “idea to engage in sadomasochistic activity.” Rush Limbaugh saw nothing in the photos to be steamed up by; they were just “standard good old American pornography.” The photos were quickly mobilized for a Christian supremacist, right-wing agenda as cultural pundits hijacked the imperial war beyond the United States and directed it into the “culture wars” within the United States, averting the public gaze away from the calamitous scenes of *imperial misrule* unfolding in Iraq, which fell once more under the administration of forgetting, and pointing the media spotlight instead at the familiar cultural bogeymen of *gender misrule* inside the United States. Pornography, S/M, gays, women in the military, feminists, dominatrices, and drugs were all named as culprits, with women singled out for special opprobrium and judicial censure. Maureen Dowd called her column “Torture Chicks Gone Wild.”<sup>23</sup>

More tragically complicit in this regard, however, were critics in the liberal middle—Slavoj Žižek, Arthur Danto, Katherine Viner, Rochelle Gurstein, Maureen Dowd, and even Susan Sontag, to mention only a few—who likewise argued that it was pornography and the culture of S/M that made the guards do it. Even as sophisticated a reader of images as Sontag, for one, saw the relation between porn and torture as one of explicit causality and mimetic iteration: “How much of the sexual tortures inflicted on the inmates of Abu Ghraib,” she wondered, “was *inspired* by the vast repertoire of pornographic imagery on the Internet . . . which ordinary people try to *emulate*?”<sup>24</sup> Žižek argued that the abuses were incited by a culture of gay S/M going back to Mapplethorpe.

23 Charles Colson, quoted in Susie Linfield, “The Dance of Civilizations: The West, the East, and Abu Ghraib,” *Dissent* 52, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 47; Robert Knight, “Iraq Scandal Is ‘Perfect Storm’ of American Culture,” 12 May 2004, [http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE\\_ID=38462](http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=38462); Rush Limbaugh, quoted in Eric Boehlert, “Rush’s Forced Conscripts,” *Salon.com*, 26 May 2004, [http://dir.salon.com/story/news/features/2004/05/26/rush\\_limbaugh/](http://dir.salon.com/story/news/features/2004/05/26/rush_limbaugh/); Maureen Dowd, “Torture Chicks Gone Wild,” *New York Times*, 30 January 2005. For more on Blackwater, see Jeremy Scahill’s indispensable *Blackwater: The Rise of the World’s Most Powerful Mercenary Army* (New York: Nation Books, 2008).

24 Susan Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others,” *New York Times*, 23 May 2004; emphasis mine. See also Slavoj Žižek, “Between Two Deaths: The Culture of Torture,” *London Review of Books*, 3 June 2004, 12; Arthur Danto, “American Self-Consciousness in Politics and Art,” *ArtForum*, September 2004, <http://artforum.com/inprint/id=7391&pagenum=2>; Katherine Viner, “The Sexual Sadism of Our Culture in Peace and War,” *Guardian*, 22 May 2004; Rochelle Gurstein, “On the Triumph of the Pornographic Imagination,” *New Republic Online*, 15 May 2005, <http://209.212.93.14/doc.mhtml?i=w050516&s=gurstein051805>.

Upon the merest scrutiny, the “porn made them do it” argument fissures into a welter of contradictions, particularly striking with respect to gender agency, causality, and conditions of production and consumption. Most of the images leaked to the public were not in fact pornographic or even sexual in the first place. Yet Sontag writes, “Most of the torture photographs have a sexual theme.” A moment’s scrutiny of the photos shows this is not the case. Sontag continues, “Pictures of prisoners bound in painful positions, or made to stand with outstretched arms, are infrequent.”<sup>25</sup> Again, a brief scrutiny shows this is not the case.

The critics’ responses are in fact rife with startlingly contradictory perceptions of *gender agency*: was it men abusing women or women abusing men that was the problem? Was it gay porn or straight porn? Rochelle Gurstein denounced the photos as yet more evidence of standard male subjugation of women in porn (“pathetic” Lyndie England, she declares, is the new Linda Lovelace).<sup>26</sup> In striking contrast, Arthur Danto, in an astounding piece in *ArtForum*, saw the same images as pornographic but for precisely the *opposite* reason. Danto is most incensed not by the torture of Iraqis but by the evidence that the photos offer a long, and to him deplorable, history of “males in a posture of humiliation before women.”<sup>27</sup> Contradictions of *causality* also abound. The standard condemnation of S/M is that it mimics and replicates patriarchal state power in the private sexual realm through a relation of mimetic causality (monkey see, monkey do).<sup>28</sup> In denunciations of the Abu Ghraib photos, the causal flow is reversed, as patriarchal, state power is viewed as mimicking and replicating private sexual rituals (torturer see, torturer do). All told, the vast majority of the images from Abu Ghraib are not standard pornography at all, not at the descriptive level of the imagery itself nor in their conditions of production or of consumption and distribution.

A double strategy was mobilized: of conflation and occlusion. Conflating torture with porn *banalized the torture*, underplaying the extremity of the atrocities slowly being divulged not only at Abu Ghraib but also at Guantánamo and in Afghanistan. At the same time, conflating porn with torture once more *monsterized pornography* as an ahistorical, unchanging, universal realm of inherent violence and torture, which it demonstrably is not. But porn is our normal monster, the monster we know how to hate. Porn is the sexual abject, “something rejected from which one does not part.”<sup>29</sup> As our normal monster, porn serves as a screen onto which are projected a host of gender anxieties (about violence against women, gender subversion, women’s sexual agency, non-procreative sexuality, among them) that can then be condemned without exploring the deeper sources of gender violence. At the same time, condemning the porn as *images* made it far easier to screen out the far worse *events* emerging at Abu Ghraib.

25 Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others.”

26 Gurstein, “Pornographic Imagination.”

27 Danto, “American Self-Consciousness.”

28 For a retort to this conventional condemnation of S/M, see Anne McClintock, “Maid to Order: S/M and Gender Power,” in Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, eds., *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power* (London: BF, 1993), 28–43.

29 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

Paradoxically, sexualizing the atrocities made it easier to dismiss them. The outcry over the photos as sexual images eclipsed the evidence of the actual torture of prisoners (including women and children) who were raped, stripped, sexually assaulted and humiliated; forced to stir vats of feces until they passed out; and forced to witness the torture of others: women forced to watch men being abused and men forced to watch women being abused. The pornography argument turned the question of torture abroad back to a question about *us* in the United States: *our* morality, *our* corrupt sexualities, *our* loss of international credibility, *our* gender misrule. In the storm of moral agitation about *our* pornography and *our* loss of the moral high ground, the terrible sufferings of ordinary, innocent people in two occupied and devastated countries were thrown into shadow. In the floodlit glare of the media, Abu Ghraib rose up as an isolated, monstrous event, looming horrifying but exceptional, and casting into ever deeper darkness the systematic culture of imperial violence that existed long before and extended well beyond Abu Ghraib.

By focusing on pornography (which is generally discussed—mistakenly, I believe—as an issue primarily of gender and sexuality alone), questions of race and imperialism also fell into shadow, cloaked by the corporate media culture of amnesia and the administration of forgetting. But the specific techniques used at Abu Ghraib are not new (some go back to the Inquisition); they are continuous with a long imperial archive of colonial and racist cruelty. They belong to a well-established, imperial regime of discipline and punishment in which colonized people were for centuries depicted by the West as historically “primitive,” as animalized, as sexually deviant: the men feminized, homosexualized, or hypersexualized; and the women figured as sexually lascivious (it is no accident that the one photo from Abu Ghraib of a woman is of a prostitute), a long-standing and tenacious imperial narrative of racial “degeneration” that, at the very moment of its redeployment, was once more elided in the storm of moral agitation about pornography. Photography records in order to forget. Spectacle becomes a form of camouflage.

Most culpably, equating torture with porn allows us to *look away* and not ask questions: disturbing questions about the long, continuing history of US torture, questions about current military policy, questions about why people torture in the first place, and, most harrowing, why the US government tortures people who are innocent and who, being innocent, have no information to surrender that can halt their agonies.

What then are the imperial circuits that we need to illuminate in order to challenge them politically? First, the *vertical* chain of command: from Bush and Cheney, through Rumsfeld’s secret Special Access Program, through the private contractors from Titan, who were all over Abu Ghraib, down to the guards.<sup>30</sup> Second, the *horizontal* circuits of global continuities: the torture, murder, and rape that are widespread throughout Iraq and Afghanistan, extending to the gulag of secret prisons and interrogation centers around the world. Third, as Carby has

30 See Scahill, *Blackwater*.

insisted, we need to see the *historical* continuities of torture that haunt US history from its inception: the torture of American Indians; slavery; lynching; torture in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Central America in the 1980s. Finally, we need to make visible the continuities of imperial torture with the carceral violence in the national prison system and the rituals of military training.<sup>31</sup> In the Abu Ghraib photos, these circuits of violence are forgotten at the moment of their revelation.

As diversionary and exculpatory narratives go, the porn argument was also, as it happens, exceptionally effective. In the trials that followed, the government and the military were officially exonerated of war crimes. Not a single senior official above the rank of sergeant has been prosecuted. As Ian Provance, one of the whistleblowers, put it, “Those people used the scandal to their advantage to misdirect attention away from the real abuse and the damage. Generals were shooting at the feet of interrogators and telling them to dance. But for all eternity, the only thing people are going to say is, ‘Oh, it was that one little girl.’”<sup>32</sup>

If porn did not produce the torture, what did? The Abu Ghraib atrocities were not isolated, aberrant, or exceptional; they were systematic, typical, and widespread. Abu Ghraib is only one (accidentally illuminated) site along a vast, concealed network of paranoid violence, including Guantánamo Bay.

## Guantánamo Bay: Paranoia Territorialized

Alive in the grave.

—Maher Arar (a Canadian deported by the United States to Syria, where he was tortured)

Let me return to the question with which I began: what is the purpose of Guantánamo Bay? Why torture ordinary people whom the interrogators know to be innocent and who have no information to confess to halt their torment?

Who are the men held in Guantánamo? The administration has called them “all masterminds,” “among the most dangerous, best trained, vicious killers on the face of the earth,” “the worst of the worst,” “the worst of a very bad lot,” “very dangerous people who would gnaw hydraulic lines in the back of a C-17 to bring it down,” legally summed up as “unlawful combatants” who “do not have any rights.”<sup>33</sup>

On the contrary, the majority of the men held at Guantánamo were arbitrarily detained. As early as 2002, Michael Dunlavey, head of interrogations at Guantánamo, himself complained that he was receiving only what he called “Mickey Mouse” prisoners.<sup>34</sup> Only 8 percent of the prisoners have been classified by the Pentagon as al Qaeda. In 2004 the *New York Times*

31 See McCoy, *A Question of Torture*.

32 McKelvey, *Monstering*, 26.

33 The most comprehensive and brilliant account of Guantánamo is Worthington's *The Guantanamo Files*. See also Stafford Smith's two incisive books on the subject, *Eight O'Clock Ferry* and *Bad Men*.

34 Margulies, *Guantanamo and the Abuse of Presidential Power*, 65.

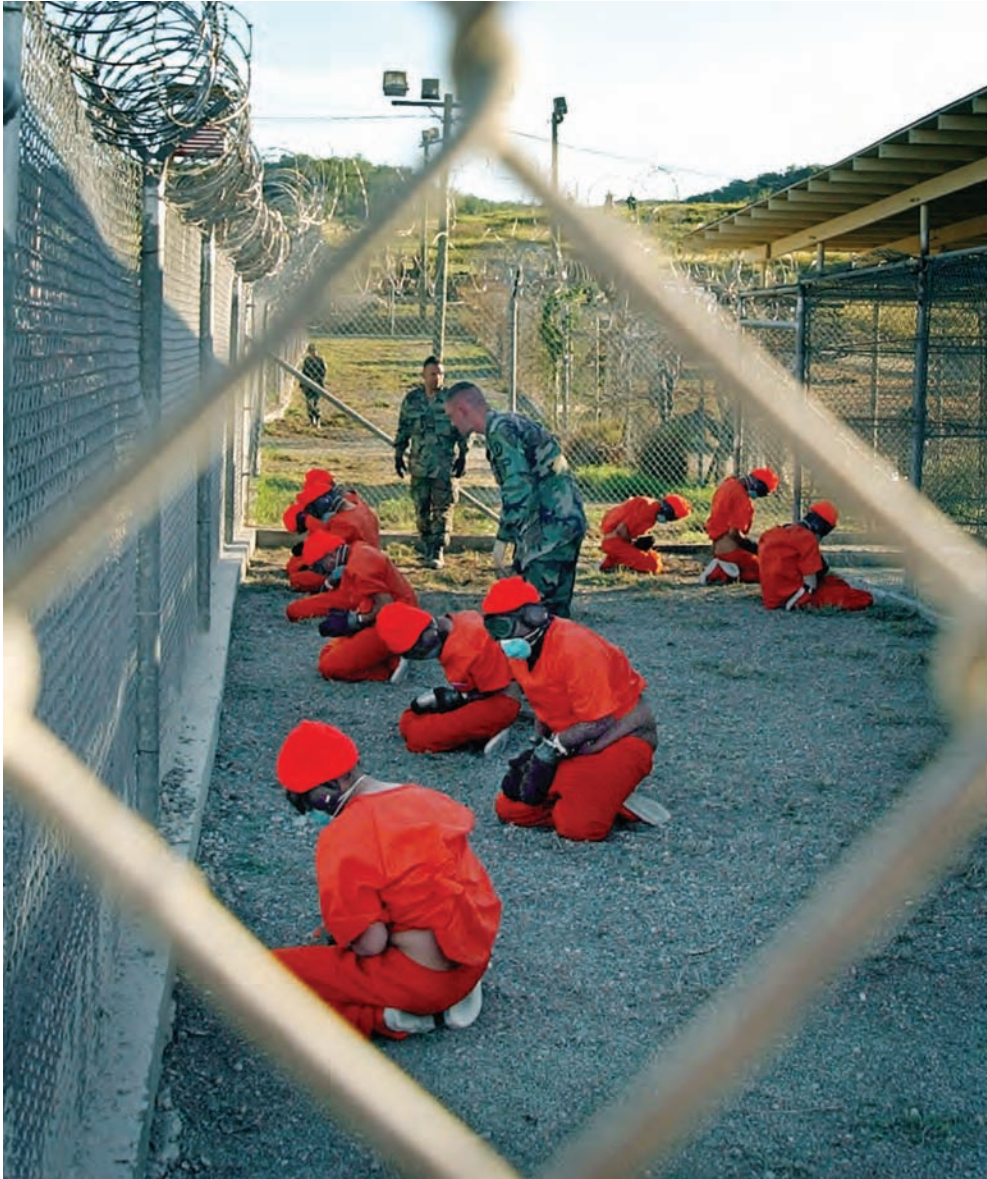
conducted an extensive investigation that yielded the consensus that of nearly seven hundred men held at Guantánamo, “only a relative handful,” could yield any information at all. Only 5 percent were “scooped up” on anything that could be called a battlefield. In a majority of cases they were not even picked up by the US military but by such dubious forces as the Northern Alliance, the Pakistani military and intelligence, and frequently handed over for considerable bounties (US\$5,000 to \$10,000), sometimes betrayed by neighbors or by people simply seeking remuneration. Some of the early prisoners were juveniles; one was an Afghan man 101 years old. Overwhelming evidence now exists that the vast majority of those detained at Guantánamo are there not because of anything they have done but simply because of where they were. Why, then, imprison and torture them?

Consider the photograph on page 66. In this image, the US officers bend over their prisoners in a scene of power so absolute it stops short only at death. What is striking about this scene is that it appears at first not to be a scene of violence at all. There are no weapons or floggings, no rackings or mutilations, no visible agony or fright. There is an aura of calm and ordered *hyper-rationality*: an excess of geometrically ordered space, equivalence, and repetition. The officers bend over their charges with a formality that might almost be solicitude. The prisoners do not appear to be suffering: they kneel quietly; they might even be praying. Peering at this scene as we do from the outside, through the single, blurred frame of the wire mesh, it’s not immediately obvious that we are privy to a scene of torture. The airy, open enclosure does not, despite the kennel-like cages and razor wire, seem to belong in the visual archive of torture. Nonetheless, torture is in progress. We are witness here to a new regime of torture: the breaking down of the self through radical sensory deprivation, disorientation, and extreme stress—torture administered without visible trace or touch. The US administration even has a name for it: they call it “touchless” torture. One can say that the camps at Guantánamo were built to perfect it.

Look closer at the image and you will see that the men are wearing blackened ski-goggles, thermal mittens, ear muffs, and surgical masks. They cannot see, touch, taste, move, or breathe properly. Unbearably loud music is possibly being blasted into their ears, a common form of torment. There is a terrible tension here between the bright *visibility* of the *scene* and the unseeable darkness of the prisoners’ torment, the *invisible obscene* of their suffering. Their suffering has been composed with the utmost rationalized calculation, so that it cannot be seen, so that no traces are left on the body. The *hyper-visibility* of the men as *bodies* is here staged as precisely, rationally, exactly equivalent as their *invisibility* as *human beings*. Look at the blurred wire that frames the image: the frame of vision is here exactly equivalent to the frame of carceral power. At Guantánamo the long Western regime of super-vision finds its apotheosis. Not for nothing was the first camp called Camp X-Ray.

If any image should become paradigmatic of postmodern imperialism, surely it is this one. The men are reduced to zombies, unpeopled bodies, dead men walking, bodies as imperial property. This image is hypermodern and yet, alongside it, unbidden, the history of American





Associated Press / United States Department of Defense

Fig. 1. Prisoners held at Camp X-Ray, Guantánamo Naval Base, 11 January 2002.

slavery rises up—imperial déjà vu. When each new prisoner is brought off the plane, his ear muff is lifted and a US marine says in his ear, “You are now the property of the U.S. Marine Corp.”<sup>35</sup> Called “packages” by the Marines, these men are unpeopled bodies, reduced to

35 Ibid., 64.

subhuman status, mere property of the state. Is this not why the state has gone to such lengths to prevent them from committing suicide: to show that John Locke's Enlightenment dictum, "Each man has a property in his own person," does not apply to them; that their bodies belong not to them but to the absolute, suprallegal power of the United States? When some prisoners did manage to commit suicide, the commander at Guantánamo called it a "unilateral declaration of war."<sup>36</sup> If embodying the invisible enemy is the only act that can legitimize imperial violence, then for the men to remove their bodies through suicide is tantamount to robbing the empire of its only legitimacy.

Guantánamo perfects touchless torture as a rational calculus of cause and effect: the megalomaniacal violence of the United States staged as a purely rational and thereby legitimate *effect* of the danger of the enemy, an enemy made visible as orange-suited bodies. Hence the double function of the orange suits: on the one hand, orange signifies danger and national security threats to Western viewers; on the other hand, in the Muslim world, men wear orange suits before execution. Many of the prisoners arriving at Guantánamo believed that the orange suits signaled their imminent death.

Guantánamo is a terrain of terror, where a shadowy, globally dispersed, perpetually multiplying but invisible enemy could be embodied and put on display under permanent supervision, in however phantasmagoric a form. Guantánamo is a geography of paranoia, where the power of the United States to subject the enemy to absolute dominion is territorialized and made visible (fantasies of omnipotence); at the same time, these orange-suited men, caged, blinded, shackled, and transported around on trolleys present a phantasmagoria of perpetual, immense global danger. If producing the enemy is the only act that legitimizes imperial violence, then the torture of the prisoners is necessary *not* to provide information, *not* to prevent future acts of violence, *not* for reasons of national security, but to *display* the bodies of the enemy and keep these bodies under hyper-surveillance in see-through cages and mesh cells. At the same time, these men are made juridically spectral, conjured into legal ghosts. Guantánamo is a historical experiment in supra-legal violence, an attempt to invent new "legal" rules of exclusion, obliteration, disappearance, and absolute domination.

Can one not, in this regard, see the military commissions now underway at Guantánamo as, likewise, not an anarchic attempt to set up a wild, lawless zone of arbitrary state power, but as something rather more different and rather more sinister: as attempts, without doubt, to arbitrarily and autocratically bypass the restraints of the Constitution and to ransack the ancient right of habeas corpus, but to do so, not anarchically, but rather with all the calculated and rationalized appearance, trappings, architectural décor, props, and rituals of "legitimacy"? In other words, Guantánamo embodies less the unleashing of a wild, irrational anarchy, but something more ominous: the meticulous setting up of a parallel, ritualized (if cynically controlled) *theater of judicial semblance*, an elaborate *performance* of legality, an attempt to

theatrically display state violence as legitimate—a perverse Alice-through-the-looking-glass simulacrum of legality where none exists.

Most harrowing, I believe, Guantánamo is a torture laboratory, an unspeakable experiment in touchless torture, an experiment in perfecting ever more sophisticated techniques for breaking down human beings.

## Abu Ghraib: Cascades of Paranoia

In the summer of 2003, a memo was dispatched from US military intelligence at Combined Joint Task Force 7 Headquarters as an “ALCON” (to all concerned): “The gloves are coming off, gentlemen, regarding these detainees. Colonel Bolz has made it clear we want these individuals broken.”<sup>37</sup> In early 2004, General Geoffrey Miller, former commander of Guantánamo, was sent to Abu Ghraib to “Gitmoize” the prison, and it was only after Miller’s arrival that the atrocities began. It cannot be stressed enough that according to Red Cross reports, statements by military intelligence, and testimony at the Abu Ghraib trials, up to 90 percent of all the prisoners at Abu Ghraib were arrested by mistake or had no intelligence-gathering value whatsoever. Indeed, *all* of the victims in the notorious photos were innocent. So if neither porn nor extracting intelligence motivated the macabre cruelties, what did?

By late fall 2003, the war in Iraq was imploding. Two years after 9/11, Bin Laden was still at large, al Qaeda was expanding, and the US military and intelligence were unable to penetrate the largely domestic and swelling resistance. The military felt increasingly humiliated and impotent and were desperate for results. In October 2003, Operation Iron Hammer was launched. Again, paranoid phantasms of megalomania merged with fears of engulfment as soldiers began arresting huge numbers of ordinary Iraqi civilians in “cordon and capture” sweeps. Thousands of Iraqis were simply pulled randomly off the streets, out of their homes, shops, and fields. In short order, Abu Ghraib was filled to overcapacity with six to seven thousand prisoners, many of whom were women and children, a fact the administration has assiduously tried to keep hidden.<sup>38</sup> Why, indeed, were such lengths taken to conceal the presence of women and children? Disclosing the fact that women were imprisoned, raped, and tortured would have ruptured the questionable legitimacy of the occupation in two ways. First, the Bush administration insisted on referring to the prisoners as “terrorists,” as “al Qaeda,” but al Qaeda does not have female members. Second, the centuries-long, imperial “rescue myth” used to rationalize imperial invasion as a benevolent act of saving women of color from colonized men could not be upheld if the United States itself was revealed to be raping and torturing captive women.

37 McCoy, *A Question of Torture*, 131.

38 See McKelvey, *Monsterring*, 194–208; and Mestrovic, *The Trials of Abu Ghraib*, 100.

By 2004, Abu Ghraib was a vast fortress, with five separate complexes, eight guard towers, and a fifteen-foot wall. Saddam had kept thirty thousand prisoners there: there were rape rooms, torture chambers, gallows rooms. A more abominable place could hardly have been chosen as the central US prison. Abu Ghraib was, moreover, located in the middle of the hostile Sunni triangle, under constant mortar fire. By all accounts, conditions were horrific.<sup>39</sup> Overseen by Janet Karpinski, who had no foreign language skills and no corrections experience, the place was massively underequipped. There was no centralized management, no procedures for processing prisoners, no standard procedures for discipline. Conditions for the prisoners were appalling: they were filthy, often stripped naked (a violation of the Geneva Conventions), or dressed only in ragged prison garb, blankets, or hospital gowns. Food was poor; sanitation, medical attention, and electricity, barely existent. Death after death was described as due to “natural causes.”

Despite the grandiose names of the camps—Camp Victory and Camp Vigilance—the soldiers and guards were under daily attack. Everyone, “prisoners, soldiers, officers—all—were frightened by the violence.”<sup>40</sup> The guards were also under constant fear of attack by the prisoners: the usual prisoner-to-guard ratio in the United States is 4:1; at Guantánamo it is 1:1; at Abu Ghraib it was 75:1. Most of the MPs lived in filthy, squalid conditions, many of them sleeping in jail cells themselves. They were exhausted, frightened, undersupervised, and in some cases very depressed and traumatized.

Is this not precisely the climate of paranoia? At Abu Ghraib, a terrible doubleness reigned with respect to power: fear and impotence oscillating dangerously alongside omnipotence. On the one hand, the MPs lived in daily frustration and impotence. Young people in an utterly foreign world, they were vastly outnumbered by the unruly prisoners with whom they shared no language. They were also at the bottom of a long chain of command, their superiors on occasion firing shots at their feet in order to frighten them into producing “results.” On the other hand, these disoriented and frightened MPs were given god-like power over the desperate, unruly prisoners under their control. For the MPs, the enemies beyond the walls were also terrifyingly invisible. Hydrue S. Joyner, for one, expressed his anger and impotence: “If it’s my time to go, I at least want to face the enemy head on.”<sup>41</sup> Where the soldiers and MPs did face the “enemy” head-on was in the dark, wet, filthy corridors, showers, and cells of their own torture world, the world of paranoid power that Charles Graner called “Bizarro World.”<sup>42</sup>

I make this point not to exonerate the MPs, but rather to argue that torture emerges at the flashpoint of a long cascade of paranoia, overdetermined by a complex of conditions: most fundamentally, *imperial competition* for control over the diminishing resources of globalization (oil, land, water, and labor); by the *political interests* of an aggrieved group of neoconservatives

39 These horrific conditions are documented in McKelvey, *Monstering*, 87–163, and Mestrovic, *The Trials of Abu Ghraib*, 34–72; and filmically illustrated in Errol Morris’s 2008 documentary, *Standard Operating Procedure*.

40 McKelvey, *Monstering*, 70.

41 Hydrue S. Joyner, quoted in McKelvey, *Monstering*, 90.

42 Quoted in David S. Cloud, “Private Found Guilty in Abu Ghraib Abuse,” *New York Times*, 27 September 2005.

in the White House; a conglomerate of *corporate interests* (oil, energy, construction, security, and the “new economy” of private contractors); *competing powers within the United States* (not least, fissures between the military, FBI, CIA, and, later, the judiciary)—in other words, a set of overdetermined conditions cascading down through the chain of command from Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, the CIA, and military intelligence, and erupting in the paranoid culture of fear and megalomania that engulfed the MPs. External conditions for torture at Abu Ghraib were governed and choreographed by a long chain of political and military command that authorized the violence from the highest quarters. The MPs may have carried out the atrocities but they did not originally initiate them. It cannot be stressed enough that if Abu Ghraib was anarchic and chaotic, the abuses were neither isolated nor exceptional, but part of a systematic attempt by the US government to circumvent the Geneva Conventions in order to terrorize the Iraqi population and quell the uncontrollable resistance. Moreover, the techniques inflicted on the prisoners did not originate at Abu Ghraib but have long historical precedents in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Central America. Hooding, making people stand on boxes, hanging them in “stress positions,” sleep deprivation, and rape and sexual humiliation were widespread and systematic, migrating from Afghanistan and Guantánamo to Iraq.

## Torturing as Paranoia Incarnate

Has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet  
between the unclean and the clean?

—J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

A profound and disturbing question remains: does not something terrible have to happen to those ordinary people at the bottom of the chain of command to motivate them *personally* to actually carry out acts of torture? Is it not precisely the conditions of paranoia experienced at the most intimate, fleshly level—oscillations between humiliation, vulnerability and engulfment, and fantasies of almost godlike potency—that provided the emotional climate for the MPs participation?

If any specific cultural texts helped choreograph the tortures, two are indisputable and neither is pornographic. The first is a lamentable academic book by the anthropologist Raphael Patai that circulated widely through the neocon establishment shortly before the invasion in 2003. The second is the CIA interrogation manual, *The Kubark Manual*, first drafted in 1963, which draws on postwar research into the psychology of human behavior as a comprehensive theory of interrogation. The manual emphasizes that the techniques it elaborates are in essence “methods of inducing regression of the personality to whatever earlier or weaker level

is required for the dissolution of resistance and the inculcation of dependence.”<sup>43</sup> The methods it outlines are specifically designed to provoke feelings in the victim of

being cut off from the known . . . , plunged into the strange. . . . Control of the source’s environment permits the interrogator to determine his diet, sleep patterns, and other fundamentals. Manipulating these into irregularities, so that the subject becomes disoriented, is very likely to create feelings of fear and helplessness.<sup>44</sup>

The manual proceeds to adumbrate the various techniques most successfully likely to successfully produce this regression to a disorientation, fear, helplessness, and dependence.

Torture techniques widely practiced throughout Iraq, Afghanistan, and at Guantánamo followed the *Kubark Manual* in inducing a radical dissolution of the self through hoodings, sensory deprivation, sleep disruption, extreme cold or heat, rape and sexual humiliation, and extreme “stress positions.” A widespread form of torture, called “the Palestinian” because of its use in Israeli prisons, involved shackling people’s hands behind their backs and suspending them with the full weight of their bodies hanging from dislocated shoulders, often for hours or entire nights in extreme pain. Prisoners were forced to wear female underwear over their faces, were forced to crouch on all fours and bark like dogs, were called by animal names, and were forced to defecate and urinate on themselves. All this, down to the most extreme and successful near-death torture of “waterboarding.”

Consider the following possibility. Are not the conditions advocated by the *Kubark Manual* (shock, disorientation, profound fear, loss of self, and a consequent willingness to surrender) precisely the paranoid conditions of the Abu Ghraib MPs’ “Bizarro World,” conditions where they were “cut off from the known . . . plunged into the strange,” conditions designed to produce “a kind of psychological shock,” to disorient and frighten and thereby induce radical submission? Then, given brief, godlike power over the prisoners, would not these scared, frustrated, and angry MPs, paranoid and dangerously wounded people as they were, become capable, in turn, of mercilessly wounding and humiliating others? To ask these questions is not to exonerate the MPs; rather, it is to account both for their complicity and for the wider, imperial conditions that shaped a pervasive climate of military paranoia.

Charles Graner, in particular, can be seen as the embodiment of paranoia. Among the MPs, Graner was the ringleader and master of ceremonies. Sergeant Ivan Frederick, a corrections officer and a son of a Virginia coal miner, met Graner at Hillah, a city south of Baghdad, in June 2003. Frederick testified that he saw Graner write the words “Po White Trash” on the back of a Hummer. Frederick also testified that the MPs at Abu Ghraib “saw Graner as God.”<sup>45</sup> At night Graner organized theme parties, one of which he called “Naked Chem-Light Tuesday.”<sup>46</sup>

43 *The Kubark Manual*, quoted in Danner, *Torture and Truth*, 17. See also Margulies’ analysis of the role of the *Kubark Manual*, in *Guantanamo and the Abuse of Presidential Power*, 33–43.

44 Danner, *Torture and Truth*, 15.

45 Cloud, “Private Found Guilty.”

46 Chem-Lights, light sticks filled with chemicals that glow for hours, were widely used to rape male prisoners in Afghanistan and Iraq and at Guantánamo.

At one party, Graner pulled down his shorts, poured a Chem-Light onto his penis, and walked around showing everyone his glowing phallus.<sup>47</sup> Is this not the oscillation of paranoia perfectly captured as spectacle: a “Po White Trash” God with an incandescent penis?

Perhaps this helps explain the ritualistic proliferation of the photographs. Graner took hundreds if not thousands of photographs. According to Frederick, Graner “always talked about Desert Storm and the things he saw and did and he had no way to prove these things happened, so this time around, he said, he was going to take pictures to take home as proof.” Proof of what? If Graner’s prowess in Desert Storm went unwitnessed, was invisible, now, in the photos he incessantly took, his precarious masculinity could be magnified and witnessed *in rituals of recognition*, and his oscillating paranoia (Po White Trash / God with a glowing penis) could be momentarily fixed in its unstable moment of omnipotence. The photos were rituals of recognition that promised to capture, in permanent form, a fleeting moment of grandeur, hence their necessary and ritualistic proliferation. Graner flaunted the photos, passing them around to the other MPs and sending them home. For Graner, the photographs had *exhibition value*, as evidence of and witness to his all-too-transient moments of exaggerated power.

Graner also made Lynndie England visible. Revealed at the trials as deeply insecure, depressed, and unable to fully grasp what was going on, England saw Graner as a glamorous “outlaw.”<sup>48</sup> Graner paid her attention; *he made her visible* by having her pose in the photos. For England, the photos bore witness to her love for him. For Graner, persuading England to pose in his depraved theatrics flaunted his power to make her “do things.” In the notorious photo of England holding a prisoner on a tie-down strap, Graner had choreographed the scenario, dragging the prisoner from the cell himself then placing the strap in England’s reluctant hand. Photographing the scene bore double witness: to Graner’s gender power over England and to his racial power over a humiliated, animalized Iraqi prisoner. He e-mailed the photo home: “Look at what I made Lynndie do.”<sup>49</sup>

In sum, torture is ultimately not the extraction of information from terrorists; it is a diabolical manifestation of paranoia, the determination to break down the tortured person’s being and force them to “confess”: not to crimes they have committed, which mostly they have not, nor to provide actionable intelligence, which mostly they do not have, but rather to confess to one thing alone—the godlike domination of the torturer and by extension the vindication of the United States as global superpower.

I can find no more eloquent expression of this motive for torture than the words of Tony Lagouranis, a torturer himself:

One other change happened, in parallel with our increasing torture: we moved from seeking intelligence, our original justification, to seeking confessions. It was as if the domination we exercised over our prisoners was not complete until they admitted what they had done. This

47 McKelvey, *Monstaring*, 88.

48 Mestrovic, *The Trials of Abu Ghraib*, 165.

49 McKelvey, *Monstaring*, 100.



Associated Press / John Moore

Fig 2. Man in cage cell on outskirts of Abu Ghraib, Monday, 2 April 2005.

was the most frightening change that came over us, because it signaled a shift from torture for an intelligence purpose to torture for the sole purpose of controlling another. . . .

Those [9/11] attacks . . . made us want to respond in kind. Suddenly, their defeat was not enough. Standard military operations using high-tech weaponry and the utter obliteration of the enemy via cruise missiles and five-thousand pound bombs was not enough. They should be made to feel the same pain we felt, and America, the mightiest power in history, should be able to dominate this enemy utterly and tyrannically. It came to be perceived as our right, due to us as a hegemonic power. So we suddenly had no problem putting absolute tyrannical power in the hands of army specialists. They would show each terrorist the face of America, and they would dominate the terrorists' very souls. . . . That's the kind of victory I believe many Americans want.

. . . This kind of dominance requires evil. The prisoner will not break unless he believes the potential for escalation is endless and the only way to convince him of that is to be the embodiment of evil. For a truly evil person, the rules of civilization do not apply, and any course of action is possible. The prisoner who faces an evil captor is transported to a totally alien world that makes no sense and that he finds impossible to fathom. This is where true terror and panic set in. . . .

. . . Who are we? We are a nation that overwhelmingly supports torture. This is what we want. This puts me beyond despair.<sup>50</sup>

50 Tony Lagouranis and Allen Mikaelian, *Fear Up Harsh: An Army Interrogator's Dark Journey through Iraq* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2007), 246–48.



Torturers are thieves of the soul. The tortured person is slowly unraveled, a person unmade, a body unpeopled, a person forced, unspeakably, to inhabit the wounded carapace of a body once tenanted by life but refused that final, sacred right to die; the solitary self watching itself dissolve from the tiny, unhallowed corner of its cell, knowing that its self has irretrievably gone but its body is still not allowed to die. In the words of the Polish poet Wisława Szymborska: “The body is and is and is and has no place of its own.”<sup>51</sup>

Let me close with a final photograph. In the image on page 73, the prisoner extends his hand beyond the edges of his cage in an unforgettable invitation to be witnessed as human— to have his humanity returned. I want to close with this hand, this gesture that reaches beyond the cage of torture, this hand held out to us not only as an invitation to compassion, which is necessary but not sufficient, but as an invitation to political action. If we are told in due course that the war in Iraq has been “won” (one can recall Agricola’s famous description of the Roman empire: “They create a desolation, and call it peace”) and if the prison at Guantánamo is eventually shut down, it is urgent that we keep in mind that the United States is now building a much bigger, far more secret, multimillion-dollar prison complex at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> Who, indeed, are the people that this immense carceral complex is designed to encage? Even now in the jubilant aftermath of Barack Obama’s electoral victory, as the Democrats commit themselves to continuing the war on terror, only relocating its center to Afghanistan, there is a grave risk that the circuits of imperial violence and the consequent sufferings of thousands of ordinary people will fall ever deeper into shadow. So this hand reaches out to us from the cage of torture as an invitation: for outrage at the images alone cannot challenge imperial power, only collective action can.

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Rob Nixon for his unstintingly generous support and help in the writing of this article.

51 Wisława Szymborska, “Tortures,” in *Poems, New and Collected, 1957–1997*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998).

52 Cited in Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999), 16.