

Transnational Feminism and Women Who Torture: Re-imag(in)ing Abu Ghraib Prison Photography

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1. Introduction

Despite the passage in 1960 of the U.N. Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, which aimed to protect native populations from subjugation, domination, and exploitation by foreign powers, the United States has continued to expand its power across the globe in the footsteps of European colonial powers. In a post 9/11 world, as the United States waged high tech warfare on defenseless civilians of other nations, and as entire populations were coded as terrorists in US politico-military parlance, little did the empire realize that technology, its blue-eyed boy, would come back to jolt the empire's own foundations. In 2004 an innocuous camera would not only capture the terror, violence, and pain inside Abu Ghraib—the US military prison in Iraq, but would also bring it home to millions across the world. Unprecedented in the history of the empire, images of imperial torture at Abu Ghraib would be splashed across the Internet and print media of all sorts.¹

With this, a kind of naïve feminist assumption that perpetrating state violence is gender exclusive to men would give way to feminisms that had to explore the dynamics of female on male violence. Out of eleven soldiers of the 372nd Military Police Company charged with detainee abuse at Abu Ghraib prison, three were women—Private First Class Lynndie England, Specialist Sabrina Harman, and Specialist Megan Ambuhl. Some of the most circulated images from the archive of Abu Ghraib torture photography include England and Harman posing as dominatrix and torturing naked Arab men. US-centric feminisms at once leapt to the rescue of these women and portrayed them merely as tools manipulated by the military establishment to disenfranchise women in the US military. However, a transnational feminist critique arrives at a different understanding of the torture of bodies criminalized as “enemies” in these photographs. Such an examination of torture asks crucial questions: Where does transnational feminism stand with respect to enemies of the nation? How do we carry out a responsible transnational feminist inquiry into figures of female torturers of male bodies that are differently raced, cultured, and nationed in war photography? In an

attempt to respond to such questions, this essay both draws on and extends Laura Sjoberg's argument about the "relational autonomy" or agency of white women soldiers at Abu Ghraib in performing violence on Arab bodies. In Sjoberg this agency is derived from the imperial connections of US women soldiers despite functioning within the rank and file of the military. My argument re-imag(in)es Abu Ghraib torture photography and its graphic testimonies about the empire's women, largely interpreted by US-centric feminisms as the inevitable captivity of US women soldiers within the iron-grip of the military's stern patriarchy. Instead, this essay argues for a transnational feminist point of view that privileges an understanding of the personal and collective stakes for white imperial women in the torture of brown male bodies of the "enemy other."

II. Situating a Transnational Feminist Inquiry: Dialogue with Other Critical Voices

In 2007 American journalist Tara McKelvey edited an anthology on Abu Ghraib detainee torture entitled *One of the Guys: Women as Aggressors and Torturers*. It included contributions from thinkers ranging from Eve Ensler to Angela Davis. Barbara Ehrenreich's foreword argues for the vital need to question a "feminist naiveté" which assumes that justice is achieved when women become equal to men (2). Developing a concrete rationale to lay bare this naiveté, I maintain that in *liberal feminist thought*, premised on equality, the male remains normative, and patriarchy is undisturbed as the onus lies on women to enter structures of privilege. According to this theory, women who control male detainees have successfully reversed the power inequalities, at least for themselves. Exercising power violently consolidates their status within patriarchal structures into which they have assimilated.

Conversely, a *transnational feminist perspective* examines the interplay of the gender locations of detainees and tormentors together with other social locations such as race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion, and class. Cynthia Enloe's Afterword to the collection *One of the Guys* poses a crucial question about studying women who torture:

[V]irtually all of the immediate wielders of militarized violence here—in Sudan, Congo, Columbia, Chechnya/Russia, Palestine, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and Afghanistan—are male. So, why create—and, as a reader, join in—a feminist conversation now about women's relationships to the wielding of violence? (230)

Enloe argues that it is by exploring minorities like women perpetrators of violence that patriarchal practices of "masculinized exclusion" (231), as well as the "complexity in the politics of femininities" (232), are likely to be seen and analyzed. My argument acknowledges Enloe's observations about structures and ideologies that mark perpetrators. Nonetheless, it also pushes for a transnational feminist response to torture that recognizes an

ethics of personal *response-ability* in one's encounter with the "enemy"—the radical other of the nationalist imaginary. The response-ability to the "enemy other" thus becomes the response-ability to the trans(national). This is not the same as seeing the torturer as the agent of free will—the atomistic individual of liberal humanism, who is not unfettered by unequal power structures. Such reasoning would lead us to the argument that what happened at Abu Ghraib was the act of a few bad apples. In fact, Anne McClintock has succinctly described the systemic relationship among the "torture culture" at Abu Ghraib, the direct agents of such brutalities, and the state:

External conditions for torture at Abu Ghraib were governed and choreographed by a long chain of 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. (70)

McClintock goes on to show the historical linkage between the structures of torture at Abu Ghraib and at other sites where the United States has exercised its military might, such as the Philippines, Vietnam, and Central America. She states: "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 Guantanamo to Iraq" (70). Thus, McClintock situates the perpetrators at Abu Ghraib in the culture of imperial torture in which the United States has historically engaged.

Though I recognize that Abu Ghraib torturers are implicated in a governmentality that requires them to torture, my interest lies in a feminist ethics at the limits of imagination—in moments of encounter between the torturer and the tortured. To elaborate on this, I draw on "Terror: A Speech After 9-11" where Gayatri Spivak elaborates on a feminist politics of "how [to ethically] respond in the face of the impossibility of response" in moments of encounter with the enemy (81). Spivak argues that such responses are about the possibility of "moving away from [our own] identity as reference" to the enemy "other" as the point of reference—"the most succinct lesson in the imagination" (111), and against the tide of conformist thinking. If it were at all possible to imagine such a feminist politics, what would it look like? In such a world of feminist ethics, women like Lynndie England would, at their own risk, resist patriarchal manipulation of military women by defying the chain of command that requires military women to engage in torture. In this epistemological and ethical paradigm shift preserving the "self" will no longer be the point of reference. Such a feminist politics asks: How can we negotiate with governmentality in the face of the impossible—in the face of a coercive system that rewards violence against the radical other and punishes non-compliance with an ideology of torture? Moreover, why is such an

analysis a political necessity for feminism? I contend that framing ethical transnational feminist responses to women who torture enemy men is *an act of responsibility* to the politics of feminism. It is an attempt to deter torture in the name of women's emancipation, an attempt to stop imperialism from marching under the banner of women's rights, and an attempt to intervene in a liberal feminist politics that advocates for the unconditional empowerment of individual women. It is an act of critical feminist self-reflection that engages in difficult dialogues around violent locations of women's empowerment like race, class, ethnicity, and nationality vis-à-vis the othered male. Bargaining for the possibility of ethics in the face of near impossibility—at the limits—also holds accountable US-centric feminist responses that clears torturers of personal response-ability by arguing that women soldiers are captives in the hyper-masculine military establishment that compels them to participate in torture.

III. Torture as Imperial Governance: Exorcizing Africans and Arabs

One of the central arguments that this essay attempts to make is that being a woman in itself does not constitute disempowerment since women are variously located in their relationship to other forms of power like race, nationality, and culture. This essay will bring figures of women in a lynching image from the pre-civil-rights era together with women's participation in torture as depicted in the Abu Ghraib photographs. By doing so it will demonstrate how the women in Abu Ghraib prison photography, iconic of the white empire's governance through torture of bodies that are differently raced, nationed, and cultured, lie on a continuum with the women portrayed in the violent archive of lynching images of black bodies.

Dora Apel has eloquently pointed out this connection within the genre of torture photography by pointing out how “[t]he word “RAPEIST” [sic], written on the leg of one of the prisoners [at Abu Ghraib], echoes the charges against black lynching victims and becomes a bitter parody of blaming the victim for the crime of the perpetrator (“Torture Culture” 96). In her book *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* Apel discusses the photograph of the 1935 lynching of Rubin Stacey at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, that depicts women and young girls among the onlookers. Apel observes that “the evident satisfaction on the faces of the white girls who have come to observe the body testify to their certainty, gleaned from the grown ups, that he got what he deserved” (41). Stacey, a homeless tenant farmer, had begged Mrs. Marion Jones for food, and when his presence left her screaming he was lynched within her sight by a mob. Apel asserts: “The climate of racial animosity that constructed African-American men as “black beast rapists” was sufficient to induce

terror at the sight of a black man's face at a woman's door and to justify a lynching" (41). The figure of the black man on the border between the human and the animal not only naturalized the impulse to civilize him through annihilation, but also normalized torture as justice for white women.

Joseph Pugliese, in constructing a genealogy of exhibitionistic torture sports, observes that in lynching operations as well as in Abu Ghraib, perpetrators would often interrupt the torture to pose for photographs with their victims. Moreover, the archive of lynching "is also constituted by the gramophone records that recorded the screams of the victims of lynchings; these gramophone records were sold and distributed within white supremacist economies of consumption of torture as entertainment" (262). Pugliese highlights that white supremacist displays of lynching sometimes took on aspects of stage theater, complete with "the use of floats, stage-like platforms and theater props" as in the case of Henry Smith who was seared to his bones with hot irons before being set ablaze (262). About the images of prisoner abuse in Iraq, Pugliese asserts: "the material existence of this white supremacist shadow archive points to the very historical, discursive and performative politico-cultural conditions of possibility that both enabled and informed the exercise of torture at Abu Ghraib" (263). As in the lynching photographs, the agony and humiliation of Arab prisoners at Abu Ghraib were captured through visual technology to be disseminated as neo-fascist imperial aesthetics as well as spectator sport among an audience of family and friends at home in the United States. In one image a pyramid of naked male detainees is caught on camera, their buttocks toward the camera as their genitals touch the bare back of the tortured man below them in the human pyramid. Their heads hang down, as they face Lynndie England and her then boyfriend, Specialist Charles Graner, who smile at the camera. Graner has his right arm flung around England's shoulder as both give the thumbs-up sign. In fact, at Abu Ghraib the camera and the act of photographing constituted, in part, the act of torture.

IV. Paranoid Governmentality

The continuities in imperial governance become clearer as one studies the *exorcism/torture* of Africans and Arabs with reference to the ideological structures of the "paranoid empire," as Anne McClintock calls it. The tense simultaneity of grandeur and threat in McClintock's paranoid empire also lies at the core of a paranoid American womanhood—something encountered earlier in the lynching of Rubin Stacey. The lynching of Rubin Stacey resulted from the paranoia about the "black beast rapist", bequeathed by the scientific racism of eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Enlightenment science was crucial in justifying European imperial presence in Africa. Within its classification the African was primitive, and

thus his sexuality was more bestial than human. Humans, unlike animals, were guided by rationality, and hence could control their libido. As such, the black man was a perpetual threat to the purity and grandeur of white womanhood. It was legitimate to be paranoid of him, and torture him to death to reassure frightened white women.

Anne McClintock situates the torture culture of the War on Terror in this frame of paranoia. For her paranoia is an “*inherent contradiction with respect to power*” (53). The paranoid empire “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” (53). The author draws our attention to the ideological and structural linkages of the War on Terror with the slave trade and the racially marked captive bodies in prisons within the US today:

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. (52)

McClintock’s understanding of the paranoid empire here is different from how I have deployed the concept of paranoid governmentality to discuss the production of subject-citizens who lynched Rubin Stacey and fought in the War on Terror. Whereas I have traced how Enlightenment epistemology generated an ideology of racial terror that controlled subject-citizens and maintained the racist social structures of 1935 United States, McClintock uses paranoia as “an analytically strategic concept” to underline the empire’s oscillation between a sense of eminence and terror. While I am interested in a transnational feminist analysis of the gender ideology that controls the white empire’s subject-citizens who torture racial others, McClintock is interested in the contradictions of imperial power that marked military police torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Her argument about imperial contradictions is especially useful for me in understanding the representation of power in torture photographs that portray women perpetrators and tortured male bodies.

However, though the prison images are on the same spectrum of torture photography as the visual archive of lynching, Abu Ghraib demands a distinctive theorization of the persecuted male body when women are the direct agents of torture rather than its spectators, as with Stacey. In the following sections I develop such a transnational feminist theory by drawing on various critics who discuss imperial women.

V. Women of the Empire as Good Subject-Citizens

The violence wreaked by the women of the empire on racially othered male bodies is intimately connected to the production of American women as good subject-citizens. In the United States of 1935 good American womanhood was calibrated by the ability of white women to respond to an ideology of racial terror by setting in motion white male violence against black male bodies. In post 9/11 governmentality the production of good subject-citizens happens when women of the empire become direct agents of racial violence. Gargi Bhattacharya's observation about the "displays of this emancipated Western Woman" in the War on Terror is especially helpful here. She contends that in addition to the "deployment of high profile women; the Condoleezza Rice[s] of the world, Cherie Booth and Laura Bush giving press conferences before Afghanistan is invaded," there is also the "emancipated Western Woman" in the war zone itself. Bhattacharya argues:

But there is also the whole kind of Lyndsey [*sic*] England torture scenes of the liberated Western Woman showing her dominance though [*sic*] torture scenes where she gives her thumbs up, which show the physical freedom of the Western Woman by the real open domination, brutalisation of the colonised person, in these cases male because [. . .] most of the pictures of women were not so widely circulated.

Bhattacharya's argument is vividly captured in many of England's postures. In one image England stands next to naked and hooded male detainees with a cigarette dangling from her lips, as she points her forefinger at a prisoner's genitals while giving the thumbs-up sign. In another photograph two naked and hooded prisoners face the camera, their hands above their heads in a gesture of submission. One of them is made to sit on the shoulders of a third detainee, squatting on the floor, so that his buttocks and genitals touch the bare back of the other. England smiles at the camera as she points to the genitals of the man and shows the thumbs-up sign again.

Bhattacharya contends that in such a vision of imperial dominance, signified by the figure of the emancipated white woman, victorious over brown male bodies, there is "a very clear and articulated role for white women":

White, or at least Western women, are central players; not passive partners at home repressed by the practices of white femininity, they are not the angel at home now. How this story is working is Western femininity shows [*sic*] its liberation by stomping around the globe being as imperialistic as its mentor.

This is also the story of the paranoia of imperial women who are active agents of twenty-first century military invasion and colonial expansionism. Directly sharing in the imperial "delusions of inherent superiority and omnipotence, and phantasms of threat and engulfment" by the radical other (McClintock 53), the women of the empire have to be proactive in protecting the emancipated status of American womanhood

from the “barbaric” orientalism of Muslim men. They also have the added responsibility of nation building through the occupation of Iraq, and such a project of benevolent imperialism requires, as Bhattacharya argues, “an insertion of the idea of women’s rights as a criterion of successful nation building” in the best interest of Iraq’s women. In a clinching summary the author underscores the ideological link between messianic white women and the justification of American presence in Iraq: “It is not only white men saving brown women [from brown men] but this time around, or perhaps always, there are also white women doing the saving.”

Bhattacharya’s argument above has enabled me to develop my own theory about the role of white women in this imperial machine. In my reading, Bhattacharya shows how white femininity is constructed as an agent of a “transnational sisterhood” to lure Arab women into an alliance with the American enterprise. In this imperialist ideology which pits Iraqi men and women against each other, male brown bodies become a threat to the survival of female brown bodies. In the context of the British colonization of India Gayatri Spivak has pointed out how the British abolition of *suttee*—the self-immolation of the Hindu widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband—has been “generally understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men’” (297).² Spivak points out that in this contest between native patriarchy and British imperialism over native customs “the figure of the woman disappears” as the abolition of *suttee* was really about the larger politics of justifying British colonial presence in India through the empire’s messianic image of saving brown women (306). Similarly, the brutal torture and humiliation of Iraqi men at the hands of the empire’s white women is projected as a victory of Arab women over Arab men who impose Islamic cultural markers such as head scarves and veils on their women. Of course, it is also a victory for the American enterprise of messianic imperialism as well as for individual women in the enterprise who are comrades in torture with military men, and can be as tough as any of their male counterparts. This trajectory of the liberation of individual women premised on the idea of equality between men and women is what I have earlier critiqued as the dangers of a liberal feminist approach to women’s emancipation. Unlike a transnational feminist approach, it does not take into account how such brutal trajectories of “liberation” stand with respect to justice for other disenfranchised populations.

VI. Trapped as Women Soldiers? A Transnational Feminist Critical Intervention

My transnational feminist critique articulates a certain role played by white women in sustaining the empire, and the particular type of agency, autonomy, and status that they enjoy by performing violence against brown bodies. This makes way for an intervention in Howard’s and

Prividera's rather different argument about the empire's women. The authors critique the media for having overlooked the fact that the photos "were constructed, coordinated, and controlled by men serving to propagate gendered and violent militarism" (298). With this the authors sweep together abused detainees and their women torturers in one group:

England's presence functions similarly to the presence of the male detainees who also were used as props for their mutual degradation and humiliation. Both England and the detainees were transformed from agents to objects with England executing her sworn duty as a feminine object used to shame the enemy. (298)

For Howard and Prividera, firstly, it is important to contextualize England's actions against the suspension of the Geneva Conventions at Abu Ghraib, inadequate training of military personnel, and an insufficient command structure for prison administration. Secondly, England's sexual and romantic involvement with Charles Graner, her immediate superior in the chain of command, should be recognized. The authors conclude by indicating that the patriarchal politics within the US military has merely used England as a pretext to put an end to women serving in combat positions.

However, a transnational feminist critique would argue that one more person in a combat position means one more individual to unleash imperial violence on populations of color—the historic targets of the US military. The rights of soldiers in an imperial army thus remain at loggerheads with the rights of people of color. In fact, the rights of imperial soldiers are at loggerheads with the rights of women of color whose lives are devastated when their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons are tortured and humiliated, and the women are themselves raped, mutilated, and killed as their countries are invaded and conquered.

Howard's and Prividera's call to acknowledge that "the larger issues of institutional failures, organizational gender bias, military responsibility, oppression, and imperialism went unexamined as women's marginal military status was validated" (307) cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, an analysis that merely focuses on the systemic entrapment of women soldiers within the patriarchal power structures of the military, without examining the agency that women gain from being a part of an imperial army, inevitably leaves both women soldiers and the men they torture *equally* powerless. By subsuming prisoners and their women torturers in the same category as victims of patriarchal control and objectification by the military, the authors ignore the very different social locations of detainees and perpetrators in the larger transnational structures of imperialism within which the Abu Ghraib military-police torture happened. Unlike the women perpetrators, the detainees did not enjoy the symbolic and material empowerment that comes with choosing to be the representatives of a superpower's imperial mission. As McClintock reminds us, they were mostly unarmed non-combatant civilian populations—many of them

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.” (51)

McClintock points out that having no information to offer, they could do nothing to put an end to their agonies. The Abu Ghraib images speak to the continuities between twentieth and twenty-first century US neo-imperialism and earlier European colonialism. The women who tortured were the women of the empire, sharing in its brutal civilizing mission. Such a mission was based on an ideology of invincible white racial, cultural, and economic supremacy that gave the women soldiers power over their victims. By grouping together the prisoners and their women torturers, Howard and Prividera refuse to recognize the radical otherness of the detainees as the “enemy” vis-à-vis the women of the empire. Such a discursive move renders the detainees abroad and the horrible wartime atrocities on them insignificant. It serves to return the argument home to the United States where the integration of women in violent nationalist narratives of military occupation becomes central to the feminist discourse on the War on Terror. What are the stakes for transnational feminisms when such nationalist feminisms redefine the War on Terror as merely a domestic issue? What dangers do transnational feminisms envision when an imperialist venture of torture and devastation of Iraqis, combined with the imperial control of Iraq, becomes the ground on which US military men and women bargain over their rights?

VII. Militarized American Femininity: Bargaining over Tortured Bodies?

Asking uncomfortable questions of transnational feminism and its ethics of solidarity leads us to seriously wrestle with female violence under the auspices of empire. For this I now turn to Laura Sjoberg. Drawing on Cynthia Enloe, Sjoberg contends that American response to women torturers have operated from within an ideology of “militarized femininity”—gender marked identities as women soldiers rather than soldiers (83). Sjoberg asserts: “Americans cannot hear the story of wantonly violent women; when they hear about the abuse at Abu Ghraib at all, they have to hear it in a way that denies the agency of the women involved” (96). The author is critical of the mainstream US media’s denial of agency to women torturers, and argues how the judiciary also operates through an ideology of militarized femininity: “In fact, Lynndie England was denied the right to plead guilty because a court determined that she could have been so manipulated by her boyfriend as to have lost her sense of right and wrong” (96). To contend with such an ideology, Sjoberg makes a case for “a feminist understanding of relational autonomy [that]

both sheds a light onto the issue of women's agency in their violent behavior and on how to respond to women's violence" during international conflicts (97). A perspective based on relational autonomy recognizes that agency operates in a world of power disparity. Nonetheless, it also acknowledges that torture cannot be divorced from the agency of its perpetrators (98). Such an argument avoids both the liberal feminist route of unconditional individualism and the poststructuralist contention about absolute entrapment of the individual within social structures.

Sjoberg frames the War on Terror in terms of a competition between hegemonic American masculinity--courageous, benevolent, and self-sacrificing, "bestowing democracy and making the world a safer place" — and subordinate Iraqi masculinity, defined by irrationality and terrorism:

Sexual abuse of Iraqi men by American women communicates (whether it was intended to or not) a disdain for Iraqi masculinities so strong that subordinated American femininities are the appropriate tool for their humiliation. Sexual torture is certainly about power, but were it only about power, there are plenty of non-sexual ways to express power over people. Sexual torture is about comparative *sexual power*; here, the sexual power of American masculinities and militarized/masculinized femininities over their understanding of Iraqi masculinities. (95)

In this hierarchy of sexual power in which American femininities are below American masculinities but above Iraqi masculinities, American women cannot be grouped together with their Arab victims, despite what Howard and Prividera claim. Under the aegis of the empire, they enjoy what Sjoberg theorizes as a "relational autonomy" over brown bodies that they torture.

Extending Sjoberg's argument, I contend that sexualized torture of Iraqi men was more than an orientalist project of American men and women feminizing Iraqi masculinities by drawing on a hierarchy of sexual power. In the next section I develop my argument that militarized American femininity had its own stakes in such a spectacle. I argue that the tortured body of the male detainee became the very territory on which militarized femininity negotiated with militarized masculinity for the recognition of military women as soldiers and not women soldiers.

VIII. Gender-Crossing Fantasies: Mistresses and Cameras

The central role of visual media is key to an understanding of the formation of the public debate around Abu Ghraib in the US. The visibility that photography generated provided a furious momentum to the debate as the images fast became icons of American neo-colonialism. At the precise moments that each photograph froze the torture into a tableau of imperial-military-techno domination, a discourse was generated in the realm of visual representation. In this regime militarized American women

became symbolic not only of the superiority of white over brown, but also of white women over brown men. At Abu Ghraib the camera itself became an instrument of torture, informing the tortured prisoner that this spectacle of humiliation and pain could be reproduced, amplified, and circulated indefinitely through circuits of consumption over which the detainee would have no control. In the frozen moments on camera soldiers basked in the glory of imperialist triumph which they shared with friends and family back home in the United States to highlight the *progress* made by American women in shared governance with their men in projects of imperialism. No longer were white women the nursemaids of the empire, appendages traveling as wives, daughters, and prostitutes in the holds of ships to service the men of the empire. They were not the “helpless victims” of 1935 like Marion Jones, frightened and screaming at the sight of a black man like Rubin Stacey. Neither did they need to be taken care of by their men, like those who lynched poor black migrant farmers to preempt dishonor to white womanhood. Nor were they passive onlookers smirking with admiration at the handiwork of their fellow men who strung mutilated and agonized black men on trees for a theatrical display of white supremacist torture. In the Abu Ghraib torture photography militarized American women were imperialists in their own right, governing through a superefficient dispensation of violence. American women were soldiers competing with fellow American men to carve out their own niches in the visual archive of imperial governance of populations of color whom they conquered and subjugated together with their men.

In Joseph Pugliese’s discussion of Abu Ghraib we encounter the image of another woman soldier, Sabrina Harman, as “a smirking young female soldier holding the ‘thumbs up’ sign” as she poses with the ice-packed “visibly bruised” corpse of the Iraqi prisoner, Mandel al-Jamadi, who was tortured to death during interrogation at Abu Ghraib. In an incisive observation about cross-gender celluloid fantasies played out at Abu Ghraib, Pugliese asserts: “This image evokes the shadow archive of Hollywood war films, in which the hero bomber turns to the camera, smiles and gives a ‘thumbs up’ after scoring a successful hit on the enemy target” (271). Lynndie England, the soldier who drags an agonized naked prisoner by a leash around his neck, as Specialist Megan Ambuhl looks on casually, is also symbolic of imperial women’s fantasies of gender-crossing. She “exemplifies a type of ‘genderfuck’ that crosses phallogcentrically coded ‘male’ and ‘female’ categories only in order to consolidate white supremacist, heteronormative and homophobic relations of power” (270). The comparison with the history of lynching of black men here is unavoidable. The Arab detainees are like the Rubin Staceys of yesteryears, and the Lynndie Englands of contemporary America, unlike the Marion Joneses of 1935, are not mere spectators of tortured brown bodies, but direct participants in grisly torture. These mistresses—the dominatrices of the archive of imperial photography—strip their slaves naked to brutalize their bodies and psyches as they render them into beasts by dragging them with leashes like dogs. Pugliese contends that the

intertwining of “violence and sexuality with Orientalist spectacle” in the Abu Ghraib photographs “reproduce[s] the colonial tableaux of nineteenth-century imperial photography, in which the colonised natives, naked and shackled, are choreographed in terms of mute trophies of imperial conquest” (254). Drawing on Malek Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem*, Pugliese argues that the photographs transgendered Arab male prisoners into “passive and available feminized bodies” in an Orientalist representation of promiscuity (254):

the pyramid of nude male Arab bodies, lasciviously intertwined, reproduces the Abu Ghraib equivalent of Orientalist visions of the harem, with their excesses of naked and pornographically arranged Arab women’s bodies. [. . .] Abu Ghraib embodies what Alloula calls [. . .] the very space of the orgy: the one that the soldier and colonizer obsessively dream of establishing on the territory of the colony, transformed for the occasion into a bordello.(255)

To enter into this elite realm of soldier-colonizers, military women are required to demonstrate their *virility* and *prowess* in running a successful orgy in the occupied territories--now the brothels of America. The rape of women by invading men and its metonymic association with the penetration of the landscape in the colonial imaginary is re-trope in the Abu Ghraib photographic regime as violence against Iraqi men, not only by imperial men, but also by the empire’s women.

IX. Terrorist Masculinities

In the Orientalist phantasmagoria, torture and the elimination of the Arab male—and by extension Arab women who affiliate with “him”—becomes integral to the project of post 9/11 American nationalism. The Orientalist feminization of the Arab male is intended to construe him as non-normative—someone whose abnormality is intricately intertwined with his race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and culture. Such monstrous corporealities can only be that of terrorists, and monstrous corporealities need to be tamed with monstrosities, such as torture. Terrorist bodies are odd, they are *queer*; their deviant sexuality is interconnected with the strange ethnicity of the Arab. In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* Jasbir Puar explains:

The depictions of masculinity most rapidly disseminated and globalized at this historical juncture are terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction, and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body—homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness, and disease. (xxiii)

In this order Arab masculinities signify terrorist masculinities which are synonymous with Muslim masculinities. Inherent contradictions in such constitutions destine them to death anyway according to the evolutionary ethos of the survival of the fittest. These masculinities are

pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic, virile yet emasculated, monstrous yet flaccid. This discourse serves to rearticulate the devitalization of one population sequestered for dying—Iraqi detainees accused of terrorist affiliations—into the securitization and revitalization of another population, the American citizenry. (Puar xxv)

Thus, the profiling of Arab masculinity as transgressive establishes a frame of radical cultural otherness in which Arab lives become dispensable in a global order policed by US “heteronormative nationalism” (Puar 148). These populations of color are outside the limits of law, and hence invasion and military occupation of their national territories appear as legitimate pursuits of a white empire in quest of its own national security.

X. Where Have All the Women Gone?

How the Arab woman figures in these rituals and practices of the empire remains largely invisible in this transnational feminist analysis of the misogynistic feminization and the homophobic queering of the Arab male. This is because though violence against Iraqi women prisoners at Abu Ghraib has been documented and photographed, the Arab woman has remained conspicuous by her absence in the widely circulated torture images. The Association of Humanitarian Lawyers has briefed the United Nations about a note smuggled out in 2003 by Noor, a female prisoner at Abu Ghraib. It stated that women prisoners, many of whom were pregnant, were being forced to strip naked and were being raped by US guards. Major General Antonio Taguba, who headed the US military’s inquiry commission, confirmed the note. The report to the UN states:

Among the 1,800 digital photographs taken by US guards inside Abu Ghraib there were, according to the Taguba report, images of naked male and female detainees; a male Military Police guard “having sex” with a female detainee; detainees (of unspecified gender) forcibly arranged in various sexually explicit positions for photographing; and naked female detainees. The Bush administration has refused to release photographs of Iraqi women prisoners at Abu Ghraib, including those of women forced at gunpoint to bare their breasts (although these have been shown to Congress). (1)

The report states that many of these images can now be found on porn sites. It also talks about a seventy-year-old woman harnessed and ridden like a donkey, and another forced to stir urine and feces in a metal container.

The empire has indeed benefitted from covering up the torture of Iraqi women, while holding torturers of Arab men accountable. If tortured women’s images were released, the empire would have lost the very foundation on which imperialism has justified its presence in the Middle East for years—saving Muslim women from Muslim men. However, if the empire holds torturers of men accountable, the empire segregates the “few

bad apples” in the imperial machinery to underscore that the empire is pristine again. This serves to validate the empire as a site of justice, holding its own responsible for infractions in a *just war* against international terrorism—even the empire’s women who have violated the American ideal of gender justice by torturing enemy men. Foregrounding images of tortured men also reassures family and friends back home that Iraqi resistance to US military occupation will soon end since the population resistant to it is now under control. In this Orientalist imaginary Iraqi women are nonthreatening objects who do not have any political will—any opinion about foreign occupation of their country. This divide-and-conquer strategy of segregating native women from native men was a key practice in earlier European colonialism.

However, a transnational feminist analysis of imperial women who torture native men remains incomplete without tracing its implications for native women. Here I make a claim that in the Orientalist imagination the images of American women torturing Arab men establish a hierarchy of sexual power among women too. Laura Sjoberg is right in arguing that sexual torture is about comparative sexual power among American and Iraqi masculinities as well as American femininity. But sexual torture of Arab men by white women is also about the comparative sexual power of American women and Iraqi women, the latter being objects of control in an oppressive patriarchy from which American women are about to liberate them so that they can at least glimpse the joys of American womanhood.

XI. Conclusion

My transnational feminist analysis of torture photography in imperial governance thus foregrounds the relational autonomy of women torturers of male bodies that are differently raced, cultured, and nationed. It refuses to align itself with US-centric feminisms which argue that US women soldiers at Abu Ghraib were merely puppets of a patriarchal military establishment. Instead, this transnational feminist critique highlights how torture of Arab men became a site of individual and collective bargaining for imperial women, and the hierarchy of sexual power that was embodied in such gendered torture.

This tension between a transnational feminist perspective on detainee torture by women in the Iraq war and US-centric feminist perceptions of women soldiers continues in the academy. At the 2011 Modern Language Association of America Conference, where I presented a version of this paper, an instructor from a military institution asked me to consider including a discussion of sexual violence against women soldiers within the US military in my paper to intensify my transnational feminist analysis. In response, I argued that my paper was written from the perspective of women from the “elsewhere”—the “other” of the American

nationalist imaginary. This exchange between a woman from a US military institution and myself, a transplant from the “elsewhere,” points to the failures of feminism in the transnational realm in the face of continuing imperialism. The instructor was indeed pleading for an ethics based on self-reflexivity at the limits of human imagination from me—something that I had clamored for earlier in the paper! But then with whom lies the burden of initiating an *ethics based on self-reflexivity*? Does it lie with an imperial military supported by an imperialist feminism which only thinks of the gains and entitlements of its “own women” though others are being devastated while they “gain”? Or, does it lie with the millions of women of the “elsewhere”—women who live beyond the pale of the United States, particularly in regions of the world marked by US military presence? The US military has granted itself the right to dismantle the lives of these women at any moment with invasion, conquest, occupation, and torture. An imperialist feminism staunchly supports such military enterprises abroad as long as US women soldiers gain a share in such missions. In such a situation a self-reflexive feminist understanding is yet to come. It lies with the women of the future!

Notes

1. For more on US prison-industrial complexes, see Anne McClintock, Julia Sudbury, and Andrew Coyle *et al.*
2. For a discussion of this logic, see Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

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