Perverted Conversions: 
Sovereignty, the Exception, and the 
Body at Abu Ghraib

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Abstract: This paper seeks to examine the images and discourses that have allowed for the declaration of the state of exception and the use of sovereign power. Examining the Abu Ghraib prison photographs as iconic emblems of the civilizational discourses that allow for exercises of sovereign power, I argue that these photographs articulate a dual interpellation of the Islamic Other as the terrorist/uncivilized Other and the viewer as a normative, national subject. I identify this moment as a perverted conversion in which the Islamic Other is hailed as one who necessitates an imperial crusade yet whose uncivilized state undermines the efficacy of that crusade.

These are two distinct forms of normative power: one operates through producing a symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman, foreclosing our apprehension of the human in the scene; the other works through radical effacement, so that there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore, ever taken place.

— Judith Butler, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence
In the almost four years that have passed since the publication of the Abu Ghraib prison photographs, the images and the methods of torture at Abu Ghraib have obtained an iconic status, serving alternately as the disavowed but persistent trademark of the Bush administration’s reign, a guidebook for the television show 24, and an appropriated sign that for many Iranians and Iraqis defines and indexes the “triumph” of Western democracy abroad. The images, so grossly staged and deliberately orchestrated, depict the reduction of bodies to texts that are made to signify a national narrative of the sovereign vs. the Islamic/terrorist Other. Yet, they also reveal and can be situated within a larger narrative of the Enlighten(ed)ment West’s construction of the pre-modern yet treacherously post-modern Islamic Other.

I. The Limitations of Secular Liberalism: Icons of Violence and Civilizational Speech Acts

This century has been inaugurated by a post-Enlightenment crisis that has exposed the limitations of a secular, Euro-American liberalism. This liberalism, as Wendy Brown observes, extends cultural tolerance (a term that maintains a colonial relationship between the Western subject who tolerates and the cultural Other who is tolerated) only to those who do not insist upon their difference from a secular liberalism. Under the auspices of a universal humanism, Western liberalism denies the civilizational discourses and their accompanying imperial politics that secure the positions of the tolerant Western subject and the irrational, cultural Other. Yet a cursory inventory of recent instances of Euro-American speech acts reveals how these positions are discursively produced and performed. Although more liberal journalists decry the fact that the terms “Islam” and “fundamentalism” and “terrorism” have been inextricably linked, many American and European journalists were perplexed by the riots that ensued after caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed were published in Dutch

1. Wendy Brown argues, in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), that the discourses of tolerance mask imperial politics by marking the Other as the subject with culture, while Western powers who tolerate are posited as neutral entities without culture.
newspapers. In an open letter to Iranians and “fundamentalists,” David Brooks of the *New York Times* declared, “Our mind-set is progressive and rational. Your mind-set is pre-Enlightenment and mythological,” but neglected to consider the political connotations of the Iranian protests. Similarly, President Jacques Chirac’s paternal assurances to French Muslims that “they were all children of France” were nullified by the postcolonial realities of socioeconomic disenfranchisement, police brutality, and the prohibition against students wearing the hijab in French schools. Meanwhile, Tony Blair declared that the wearing of a full hijab is a separatist gesture that upsets the balance between multiculturalism and assimilation that the people (read: white, middle-class British citizens) want. And more recently, Republican Virgil Goode of Virginia warned his fellow Congress members that if they did not vote for the escalation of the troops, American coins would soon read “In Mohammed We Trust.” Goode’s remarks were later, perniciously, echoed by Rudy Giuliani, who, in the Republican candidate debates, decried the democrats’ failure to mention “Islamic terrorism.”

While these notably post-Abu Ghraib speech acts possess and portend their own specific socio-historical valences that should not be neglected or consolidated, I constellate them here to show how they are indicative of a continuing discursive production of the “Islamic Other” or even simply “Islam,” signifiers that, as both Wendy Brown and Edward Said have argued, elide the distinctions between ethnicity, nationality, religion and culture, ultimately serving as a Western, and more specifically American, cultural shorthand for oil, terrorism and pre-modern religious difference. Thus, those whose bodies cannot be incorporated into the bourgeois, national body — the poor, disenfranchised Muslim immigrants in France or those who insist upon their religious difference, the young women who choose to wear the full hijab in Britain, or those who must be positioned as a threatening presence to the national body in order for the national body to exist — the prisoners of Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and the U.S.’s secret prisons — come to signify a monolithic Islamic Other. The Islamic Other is hailed through these national speech acts and imperial policies as the terrorist Other, the racial Other, and the religious Other. As Brown persuasively argues, within a discourse of secular liberalism, the Islamic Other is one who is a culture and whose actions are governed solely by cultural and religious

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mandates rather than political concerns. Discursively spectralized in the Abu Ghraib photographs, the Islamic Other is painfully staged as one whose shame is a contemptible sign of their uncivilized state, and as one who must be punished with the cultural edicts that they are presumed to be solely governed by.

I argue that images of Abu Ghraib are egregious and concentrated emblems of civilizational discourses already in circulation, particularly in the U.S. and to a lesser degree in the former colonial European nations. Indeed, Abu Ghraib is framed by a larger narrative of flawed, post-9/11 multicultural humanism, which as David Palumbo-Liu argues, is “a rearticulation of civilizational thinking along the axis of developed capitalist states.” We are all human; we are all different — some are just more different and less human than others.

The photographs of Abu Ghraib continue to haunt us, and should continue to haunt us, not because they show that this familiar refrain has suddenly been implemented as the U.S.’s foreign policy. Such an assertion would be both historically inaccurate and would suggest that the exercise of power precedes the ideology. Instead, the photographs expose how civilizational discourses allow for, and indeed help create, the legal and ethical vacuum in which sovereign power can be exerted against individuals whose bodies, racially, ethnically, and culturally, were never thought of as human to begin with. The effacement of the prisoners that occurs throughout the photographs, most pronouncedly with the figures of the hooded men, is preceded by a prior effacement. Judith Butler observes, “Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil, authorize us to become senseless before those whose lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed.” If the photographs are jarring it is because they disrupt that prolonged postponement and force the viewer to consider how this prior effacement (configuring all Arabs as cultural and religious Others, the failure to fully account for the deaths of Arabic citizens, Palestinians, Afghanistanis, Iraqis) produces the effacement and the simultaneous vulgar ventriloquization of “Islam” depicted in the photographs.

In what follows, I examine the grossly aestheticized conversion in which the humanity of the Iraqi prisoners is disavowed and their bodies are reduced to caricaturized figures of the Islamic Other who forever necessitates, yet denies the efficacy of, American imperialism. Reading this perverse conversion as an insidious culmination of medieval sovereign exercises of power over the body and what Foucault

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has identified as the modern turn towards the rehabilitation of the interior or the soul, I argue that the acts of torture at Abu Ghraib perform and are the products of a civilizational ideology that relies upon the impossibility of civilizing and rehabilitating the Islamic Other.

Participating in this discourse, the photographs, while signaling what Giorgio Agamben identifies as the state of exception, force us to consider how both the use of sovereign violence and the state of exception in which that violence erupts are normative and dependent upon the cultural norms engendered by the “West and Islam” binary. We must consider how the “culturally specific” methods of torture in the Abu Ghraib photographs relate to a growing tendency in the U.S. to think of all Arab peoples as Islamic Others who are ruled by their cultures. Departing from Susan Sontag’s declaration that “the photographs are us”9 (and more pointedly, the U.S.), I argue that while the photographs contain the signature of the sovereign, this signature is countersigned by civilizational discourses that, in designating the Islamic Other as one who is outside of an Enlightenment idea of the human, abandons the Islamic Other to a performative violence.

II. Sovereignty, the Exception, and Knowledge Production on the Imperial Mission

The imperial crusade that has become the Occupation of Iraq has been predicated on, as many scholars have remarked, a Schmittian algebra in which the state of exception enables the sovereign’s exercise of power. As Carl Schmitt famously declared in Political Theology, the state of exception and sovereignty are inextricably linked and define one another: “It is precisely the exception that makes relevant the subject of sovereignty, that is, the whole question of sovereignty. . . . [F]or it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety.”10 The exception, to rehearse Schmitt’s formulation, allows for or “makes relevant” the use of sovereign power, but the sovereign must first determine or create the state of emergency that requires the suspension of laws. As James Andreas Manos has persuasively argued, “this is a decision that places bodies outside of the political and at the same time secures the political, the national body, the national identity.”11 Using the figure of the Islamic Other to invoke the state of exception, the Bush administration has established a geopolitical map of exception, asserting that the

very location of the prison camps (outside the geographical body of the nation) and the extraordinary nature of the enemy combatants exceed the scope of the Geneva Conventions and allow for the suspension of habeas corpus.

Yet the state of exception and the sovereign are less dependent upon the suspension of law, and more dependent upon the norms which already place certain bodies “outside of the political,” and which, consequently, easily assume the force of law as the law is suspended. In Judith Butler’s discussion of the resurgence of sovereignty in contemporary American politics, she observes that the re-emergence of sovereignty and the accompanying state of exception occurs in tandem with what Foucault identified in his later writings as governmentality, a form of power that operates through discourses and institutions but is never formally legitimated through established channels of authority. As Butler notes:

The suspension of rule of law allows for the convergence of governmentality and sovereignty. . . . The state is neither identified with the acts of sovereignty nor with the field of governmentality, and yet both act in the name of the state. Law itself is either suspended, or regarded as an instrument . . . in constraining and monitoring a given population.12

Butler continues her discussion by noting that sovereign power is mainly exercised through “petty sovereigns” who, being affiliated with the bureaucracy rather than elected offices, wield their powers at their discretion. While Butler uncharacteristically makes only a passing reference to norms in her discussion of sovereign power and the suspension of law (she notes that the actions of petty sovereigns are obviously “conditioned”), her formulation invites an elaboration of how governmentality, which lends itself to sovereignty, both governs and is constituted by norms. For if governmentality is mainly characterized by its discursive and strategic (rules not laws) modalities of power, then that leads to the question: which discourses and norms allow for the suspension of law and subsequently come to rule in that lawless space?

Agamben’s interventionist reading of Schmitt also invites these questions. In State of Exception he notes, just as Butler does, that the state of exception is more normative than exceptional, in terms of both the regularity with which it occurs and the means by which it is declared. Repeatedly punctuating the histories of European and American democracies, the state of exception emerges again and again during times of war as an indeterminate space in which the extraordinary facts demand the suspension of the law and acquire the force of law. As the “facts on the ground” that constitute the state of exception usurps the law, they signal the merging of exceptional facts with law. Agamben writes, “If it has been effectively said that in the

state of exception fact is converted into law . . . the opposite is also true, that is, that an inverse movement also acts in the state of exception, by which law is suspended and obliterated in fact.”13 This, once again, leads to the question of which facts are privileged over the law? Whose facts assume the force of law? Agamben makes this movement as he points out that while, disturbingly, the necessity that demands the state of exception is posited by writers as an objective and factual instance, it is nevertheless highly subjective.

Highly subjective and subject to civilizational and nationalist discourses, the state of exception and the use of sovereign power are iterations of these discourses. The sovereign’s determination of the exception necessarily denotes a performative act; his decision produces a legal vacuum, but the creation of that legal vacuum depends upon the sovereign’s ability to conjure the figure of an Islamic Other which is already so readily available. As Said argues, since the 1974 American fuel crisis and the Iranian hostage episode, militarily inflected forms of American Orientalism have imagined Islam as one stagnant and anachronistic culture that demands the elimination of “space and time[,] . . . political complications like democracy, socialism, and secularism . . . and moral restraint.”14 “The conception of the Islamic Other as a temporal and cultural Other engenders the creation of the temporal, spatial, and ethical vacuums that are the prison camps. Falling outside of the realm of the human and the civilized, the Islamic Other thus demands extra-legal actions. As the “enemy combatant” whose actions are presumably determined solely by cultural and religious motives incomprehensible within a framework of secular liberalism, the Islamic Other exceeds the ideological horizon of the human and history as an Enlightenment narrative of the civilized progression from religion to secular reason. Governed only by culture, the Islamic Other must be punished with the cultural mandates by which he is ruled; the Islamic Other must be indefinitely detained as he is always already temporally separate.

This temporal separation is secured by the cultural industry of the “West vs. Islam.” Ironically, as Dora Apel reports, Said posthumously provides us with a glaring instance of how knowledge production works in tandem with sovereign acts of power.15 Cataloguing various anthropological and often times blatantly racist texts that have influenced the U.S.’s foreign policies, in Orientalism (1978) Said cites Raphael Patai among the anthropologists who depict the Arab mind as a unified, passive and largely empty receptacle eagerly awaiting the riches of Western democracy.

Almost thirty years later, in Seymour Hersh’s 2004 report on the Pentagon’s involvement in Abu Ghraib, Hersh notes that Patai’s *The Arab Mind* (1973) served as the anthropological compass for military officers in adopting “culturally specific” torture methods. Offering a gospel of force and sexual humiliation, with a chapter addressing shame and sexuality, *The Arab Mind*, Hersh speculates, heavily influenced the torture methods implemented at Abu Ghraib.

While Patai’s *The Arab Mind* may enjoy a privileged position within neocon political and military circles, it is merely indicative of ideas already in circulation, or what Wendy Brown regards as the enduring binary between “the cosmopolitan West and the . . . fundamentalist, the intolerant and the barbaric” cultural Other. The culturally charged forms of torture depicted in the photographs and the subsequent narrations of the photographs, many of which adopted the ventriloquizing gesture of explaining the photographs as horrific because they depict what “Islamic culture” finds shameful, reflect this paradigm of the civilized West vs. homophobic, misogynistic and uncivilized Islam. In her critique of such responses, Angela Y. Davis remarks,

> The apparent cultural explanation of these forms of torture reveals a very trivial notion of culture. Why is it assumed that a non-Muslim man approached by a female interrogator dressed as a dominatrix, attempting to smear menstrual blood on him, would react any differently from a Muslim man? These assumptions about culture are themselves racist.

Racist and emblematic of the civilizational discourse at work, these assumptions implicitly participate in the modes of knowledge production that authorize the acts of sovereign violence that they hope to condemn. They sustain the recurrent act of interpellation in which the Islamic Other is addressed as a cultural Other who, in his pre-Enlightenment and religious state, finds queer sexualities abhorrent and subjugates women (and here one should recall how the American invasion of Afghanistan was presented as liberating women from the Taliban). This act of interpellation correspondingly invokes and maintains the image of the U.S. as a liberal nation, immune to gender inequalities and accepting of all sexualities (I will return to the obvious and insidious ironies of this formulation later).

The photographs and videos that show Iraqi men who are forced to enact what are imagined to be their cultural taboos are imbricated in and preceded by a sustained chain of speech acts that addresses the Islamic Other as the uncivilized Other. Exceeding the horizon of the human and existing outside of an Enlightenment narrative of history, the Islamic Other demands the suspension of law and necessitates the use of sovereign force, which culminates in the act of torture.

III. “The loss of those defenses most recently acquired by civilized man”: Violent Conversions and Petty Sovereignties

In Mark Danner’s compilation of the documents of Abu Ghraib, he cites a 1963 CIA manual which asserts that “The result of external pressures of sufficient intensity is the loss of those defenses most recently acquired by civilized man.”20 The Darwinian phrase “acquired by civilized man” pointedly reveals the inherent imperial connotations of torture. Torture, by obliterating “those defenses most recently acquired by civilized man” constructs the uncivilized body. As Elaine Scarry observes, the act of torture is a ritual in which the other’s pain is translated into the power of the nation; the body of the nation is invented through the abjection of the Other.21 At Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, the power of the nation is the power to force the Iraqi prisoner to enact Islamic cultural taboos that are presumed to be antithetical to the U.S.’s multi-cultural humanism. The power of the nation is the power to address the Iraqi prisoner as the Islamic Other.

This address signals an epistemological triumph — the ability of the sovereign to produce knowledge about the Islamic Other — but its methodologies further reveal the imperial aspects of its enterprise. “Civilization” connotes the colonizer’s power to produce knowledge about the colonized and to rob the colonized of language. The confessional space of the interrogation is one in which the one who is tortured, unable to focus on anything aside from the immediate and excruciating pain, loses language. The interrogation is not conducted to obtain knowledge, but rather to produce it, to force the tortured body to affirm a national and civilizational narrative. Divested of language, the words of the sovereign are stuffed into the mouth of the Islamic Other; under the threat of total obliteration, they are forced to echo and mimic, in a voice distorted with pain, the voice of the sovereign.

The testimony of Ameen Sa’eed Al-Sheikh, who after being severely beaten was forced to drink liquor and eat pork, clearly demonstrates this: “They ordered me

to curse Islam and because they started to hit my broken leg, I cursed my religion. They ordered me to thank Jesus that I’m alive. And I did what they ordered me.” 22

Al-Sheikh is forced to mimic the words of the petty sovereign that mark him as a cultural and religious Other whose values are incompatible with the secular humanism espoused by America. In a grotesque mirroring of a religious confession in which one’s sins become one’s identity (“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned” is read as “I am a sinner, I submit myself to you”) and one’s sins can only be absolved when one assumes that identity, he is forced to answer, in the language of the petty sovereign, the interpellation of his constructed difference that is both his sin and his prescribed identity. Here, however, there is no absolution; the uncivilized, Islamic Other must be continually addressed as uncivilized in order to legitimate the sovereign’s exercise of power.

Astoundingly, as Al-Sheikh is addressed as the uncivilized and religious Other who cannot be converted to a secular humanism, the sovereign is aligned with and represents that secular humanism at the very moment when the universal humanism (“thank Jesus that I’m alive”) so clearly reveals that it can only accommodate a Judeo-Christian, Western body. Here, too, the confession and the conversion that are cited in the cursing of Al-Sheikh’s religion are not staged for the transformation of the soul, but rather for the denial of the soul. Culminating in what Foucault identifies as the medieval spectacle of sovereign power and the modern creation of docile bodies, torture creates the human and inhuman bodies by positing the Islamic body as that which is soulless and therefore incapable of being converted.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault notes that prior to the nineteenth century punishment assumed the form of public spectacles in which the body of the condemned was marked as “the place where the vengeance of the sovereign was applied, the anchoring point for a manifestation of power, an opportunity of affirming the dissymmetry of forces.” 23 In contrast, the modern age concealed crime and punishment from the public’s view and established a scopic monopoly of power; the public instead became the object of the state’s gaze. Rather than demonstrating the power of the sovereign through the spectacle of torture, the penal system sought to discipline the soul of the criminal.

Although Foucault’s analysis of Western forms of punishment concerns the state’s treatment of its citizens, it is useful to consider the acts of torture at Abu Ghraib within this framework. Overlaid with the religious connotations of modern forms of punishment and the symbolism and spectacle of medieval methods of punishment, these acts of torture are both private and public. The digital photographs,
originally intended for private circulation but obviously choreographed for a more public (and approving) audience, comprise a post-modern spectacle which is both an event and a commodity. Indeed, Angela Y. Davis has remarked, the very ability to disseminate and circulate the photographs, creating a media and mediated spectacle, points to an exercise of national power.24

Similar to the medieval spectacle of punishment which symbolically referenced the crimes committed by the condemned, in the Abu Ghraib photographs the Iraqi prisoners are punished for their crime of cultural difference as it is conceptualized within a civilizational discourse. The modern prison’s preoccupation with the soul is articulated here as a modern occupation of the prisoner’s identity; the Islamic Other is incorporated into a civilizational discourse by being hailed as culturally Other.

The violently hysterical tenor in which this address is articulated, however, both compromises the nation’s image of itself as the guardian of civilization and liberty and belies the vulnerability of that very construct. Just as during the eighteenth century the spectacle of the punished body produced ambivalence towards the exercises of such power, the Abu Ghraib scandal was a scandal, in part, because of the contagion of violence. Conflicting with a national self-image of the U.S. as tolerant and civilized, the photographs were predictably denounced as “appalling and disgusting” by the Administration, but they were also disavowed by journalists and military officers who repeatedly referenced that national self-image. Former Marine Colonel Bill Cowan told *Sixty Minutes II* that “We went into Iraq to stop things like this from happening, and indeed, here they are happening under our tutelage.”25 While Cowan’s admission is admirable in many regards, it maintains the civilized/uncivilized violence binary by implying that dehumanizing acts of violence are exceptional for Americans but the ruling norm (indeed, the norm that American soldiers hoped to overturn) for the Middle East.

This stance is predicated on a denial of America’s imperial history and recalls Foucault’s observations regarding the shame of the scaffold. In his discussion of the shift from the spectacle of punishment to its privatization, Foucault remarks that the shame of the public violence “enveloped both the executioner and condemned; and, although it was always ready to invert the shame inflicted on the victim into pity or glory, it often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame.”26 At Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, the extra-legal violence is not exacted by the executioner who acts for the sovereign but by those Butler refers to as “petty sovereigns” who

are “accountable to no law and without any legitimate authority,” yet who wield sovereign control over the prisoners. These “petty sovereigns” — the officers, private sector employees and managerial officials — perform and operate on cultural norms espoused by a civilizational discourse. As Butler asks, “And to what extent is there a racial and ethnic frame through which these imprisoned lives are viewed and judged such that they are deemed less than human, or as having departed from the recognizable human community?”

That this “recognizable human community” is maintained through such violent measures, demanding that certain bodies be expelled, detained and killed in order to posit an Enlightened community, demands that we — the tentative “we” who are the viewers — consider how a dual interpellation is at work in the photographs. For if an Islamic Other is being addressed, a normative American subject is also being created.

IV. “we have met the frankenstein monster and she is us”: Abjection and the Imperial Pageant

Just as torture results in the “loss of those defenses most recently acquired by civilized man,” the normalization of torture facilitated by these discourses results in what Slavoj Zizek recently identified as the gradual and collective loss of our moral sensitivity. Or, rather, it reveals, as Angela Y. Davis, Susan Sontag and James Andreas Manos have argued, that “our moral sensitivity” is only extended to those who can be incorporated into the nation and whose bodies qualify as human.

The photographs of Abu Ghraib, while staging the imagined cultural taboos of the Islamic Other, also reveal how certain bodies which fail or refuse to embody a heteronormative, white, middle-class national identity are coded as shameful. In Davis’s discussion of the Abu Ghraib photographs, she alludes to the fallibility of assuming that women’s sexuality and queer sexuality would not elicit shame and anger outside of Islamic cultures. As the photographs use shame as an instrument of torture, this point requires further enunciation: if one suggests that a certain act or position is capable of shaming an(other), then one must acknowledge that the act is shameful in order for the act of torture to be a felicitous or efficacious speech act. To assume that these photographs are shameful because queer sexuality is a religious taboo within Islam (a term that is reductive in itself, as few would refer to one

27. Butler, Precarious Life, p. 56.
Christianity or one Judaism) is to ignore how these spectralized methods of torture participate in an abjection of queer sexuality while addressing an idealized national subject who is emphatically heteronormative.

As Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai argue, in the aftermath of 9/11 the coding of the terrorists (Islamic fundamentalists) as sexual, cultural and racial Others was accompanied by the creation of “docile patriots.” While queer citizens were denied survivors’ disaster funds and gay men’s blood donations were refused, websites allowed visitors to torture Osama bin Laden by sodomizing him and a popular cartoon showed the Empire State Building anally penetrating him.31 That nationalist discourses of patriotism are heteronormative and racist is hardly surprising; the conflation of queer sexuality with the terrorist Other recalls the sexual and racial politics of the Cold War, during which the Red Scare was both a queer scare and a racial scare. Insidiously, though, the civilizational mantle under which these discursive productions fall inoculate them from proper scrutiny. Osama bin Laden is specifically punished with anal penetration because it is what Islamic culture finds shameful, whereas the U.S., despite its many discriminatory acts, does not find queer sexuality shameful. Correspondingly, the photographs of Iraqi prisoners simulating homosexual positions or reports of guards sodomizing prisoners with objects are very obviously framed by a heteronormative gaze that reads queer sexuality as a failure to perform a masculine, and most significantly, national identity. By positioning the Islamic Other as a queer other, the soldiers exhibit their heteronormative and national mastery in contrast to the Islamic Other who is emasculated and de-nationalized.

Yet in the same moment that this mastery is staged, its hegemonic status is denied, as these positions are culturally coded as being especially offensive (to Muslims) because homosexuality is a lingering taboo within Islam. What for the soldiers is merely a sadistic prank is, through the gaze of the soldiers acting as petty sovereigns, a religious violation for the Islamic Other and is thus a contemptible sign of their pre-modern identity. The bodies of the Iraqi prisoners become sites of inscription for cultural fantasies about a monolithic Islamic culture. Participating in, and indeed relying upon, a civilizational discourse by suggesting that the irrational, religious Islamic Other can be easily shamed with cultural taboos that, for multi-cultural America are no longer taboos, the petty sovereigns in the photographs enforce hegemonic gender and sexual norms that they project onto the Islamic Other. The interpellated viewer is at the same time addressed as the civilized, national subject who cannot be shamed by homosexuality, yet the viewer’s status as

a national subject is contingent upon that viewer identifying with the heteronormative, white, secular, national body.

The seemingly curious presence of the phallic women who posed with the Iraqi prisoners illustrates these modalities of interpellation. In one of the more iconic images, Pfc. Lynndie England stands before a row of men whose faces are hooded and whose bodies are exposed. Posed before the approving gaze of the camera, a phallic cigarette hangs from her lower lip, curved into a slight smirk, and her left hand gives the ubiquitous thumbs up sign as her right hand pantomimes a gun that is pointed at the men's flaccid genitals. Her presence in the photograph accentuates the men's impotence; her right index finger, making a phallic gesture, is engaged in a playful movement but also serves as a reminder that she does have recourse to the gun that she mimes. The men, with their hooded heads bent down, their hands before them trying to cover themselves, are positioned as being shamed by a woman who, assuming a masculine, nationalist role, views and mocks their failure to perform their presumably misogynistic, hypermasculine identities.

Yet the act of shaming occurs at the women’s expense as well as the prisoners. England and Spc. Sabrina Harmon are permitted to masquerade in the patriarchal clothes of imperial power, but in doing so they merely reify a discourse that positions a woman’s assumption of authority as an absurd abnormality that is presumed only to shame and humiliate the Islamic Other. Their authority is entirely contingent upon the subtext that there is something shameful and shaming about their assumption, however ephemeral, of authority. Further evidenced by the “invasion of space by a female method of torture,” the positions that England and Harmon assume as phallic women are imbricated in a masculinist discourse that views the female body as abject. By making prisoners wear women’s underwear on their heads and smearing their bodies with what was purported to be menstrual blood, the torturers acknowledge that there is something disgusting and repugnant about the female body, just as there is something sadistically comical about a woman assuming a position of authority before emasculated men.

In addition, their staged positions cite familiar racist tropes about Oriental masculinity. The male Islamic Other can be easily emasculated by a woman in power, but paradoxically, his animalistic sexuality must be controlled and contained. This assumption is painfully apparent in a photograph that features England standing next to a naked, chained Iraqi prisoner with the word “rapeist” written on his thigh in black ink. England smiles for the camera and points to the misspelled word, which

32. Kelly Oliver observes that, “It is the association of women, sex, and violence that make these images an uncanny reflection of our culture”; see her Women as Weapons of War: Iraq, Sex, and the Media (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) p. 15.
was reportedly written by Harmon, assuring the presumably American viewers that the U.S. is saving Muslim women from sexually rapacious Muslim men.

Photographs such as these recall and serve the same purpose as the iconographies of lynching, which as Apel notes, made “blackness an exotic spectacle . . . [relying] on the look of the crowd to reaffirm notions of superior white ‘manliness’ over the stereotype of the hypersexual black male.”33 Although the England photograph certainly rehearses racial stereotypes, it reaffirms notions of cultural and national supremacy, both of which are inherently and obviously racist, while denying its racial connotations. The national body, reflected and represented by the female soldier, is superior to the Islamic Other not because of its race but because, being a civilized and modern nation, it tolerates and promotes gender equality that the Islamic Other supposedly abhors. However hyperbolically staged and spectralized, the phallic national subject and the sexually contained Islamic Other assume citational postures that reference a civilizational discourse which authorizes the abuses that are captured in the released photographs as well as the acts of violence not pictured: those of Iraqi female prisoners being sexually assaulted by U.S. guards.

The configuration of the Islamic Other, both as a racial Other whose primitive and inherently misogynistic sexuality must be contained and as a cultural Other who is shamed by the contagion of the supposed Western imports of queer sexuality and phallic women, reduces the Islamic Other to being merely a body and merely of the body. Sara Ahmed observes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* that the inscription of shame and disgust on the body secures the hierarchical boundaries of power between bodies. By forcing bodies to simulate the shameful otherness of queerness, the petty sovereigns position the Iraqi prisoners as lower, which in turn is “associated with lower regions of the body . . . [working] to differentiate between higher and lower bodies, or more and less advanced bodies.”34 Yet the petty sovereigns merely reify a hierarchy that is already in place; the body of the Islamic Other is marked as lower and being of the lower body because he can be shamed by the contagions of queerness and femininity but also because his ability to be shamed by such contagions betrays a lack of interiority — as an Islamic Other, he is merely body.

In one of the less publicized and most scatological of the photographs, an Iraqi prisoner stands naked before his guard, his body covered in excrement. While *Salon.com* speculates that this prisoner was mentally deranged,35 the photograph itself is predicated on a pathologized understanding of the Islamic Other as irrational, uncivilized, and of the lower body. Islam is imagined as a pre-modern pathology that

demands the imperial cure of secular democracy that is always a failed performative act, as the Islamic Other, being a less advanced body, indeed being only a body, cannot be cured.

Notably, the American soldier who faces the effaced Islamic Other but whose gaze addresses the camera, holds his weapon with both hands as if to keep the Islamic Other’s contagion of filth at bay, despite the obvious vulnerability of the prisoner’s position. The posture of the American soldier concretizes a civilizational discourse that configures Islam as a pathology to be cured or a problem to be solved, at the same time that it posits its own use of force as offering a curative power. Wendy Brown’s discussion of the imperial cure that is civilization serves as an uncanny narration of this photograph: “What will hold barbarism at bay is precisely what recenters the West as the defining essence of civilization and what legitimizes its efforts at controlling the globe.”

The contrived positions of the two men, however, demonstrate that the barbarism of the pathologized Islamic Other must first be invented in order to necessitate a cure. The petty sovereign, guarding and defining civilization, stands armed against the contagion of Islam, yet the Iraqi prisoner, with his body erect and his arms fully extended in a gesture of supplication, possesses an arresting and improbable dignity. Unlike many of the other prisoners, he is allowed to stand fully upright, assuming a stance that is denied to the men in the pyramid photographs. While we do not see his face, his very posture seems to ask the question that we must, if we are ever to reclaim the category of the “human,” continue to ask ourselves as viewers: “how long must I play this part in your imperial pageant?”