

## SEXING THE TERRORIST: TRACING THE NATIONAL BODY AT ABU GHRAIB

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*This essay is outré, madness, a tragic, cruel fantasy, an eruption of inner rage, on how the oppressed desperately dream of being the oppressor. We shall sodomize your sons, emblems of your feeble masculinity, of your shallow dreams and vulgar lies....All laws banning homosexuality shall be revoked. Instead, legislation shall be passed which engenders love between men....We will raise vast, private armies, as Mishima did, to defeat you....*

*Tremble, hetero swine, when we appear before you without our masks.<sup>1</sup>*

*...only a permanently terroristic state can stop terrorism.<sup>2</sup>*

When the pictures of Iraqi prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison entered circulation in the national public media, Americans squirmed. There was something in the corn-fed, grinning faces of the United States soldiers, something in the way they flashed knowing looks, gestured at the display of humiliation they had orchestrated, and gave the camera thumbs-up signs, that implicated American domestic viewers and invited us to become willing participants in the scenes of torture. In their staging and execution, the photos communicated the sense that these acts had been performed in our name, for the greater good—a visual articulation of George W. Bush's claim: "mission accomplished." The brazenness with which the soldiers photographed these abuses was puzzling. Why ensure the possibility of such acts becoming public knowledge? Why risk the possible punishment of military discharge? Clearly, for the soldiers documenting such acts, military service to the nation was conceived as coterminous, or at least congruent, with the committed acts of torture. In addition, the value of these abuses appears to have been in large part symbolic: their usefulness rested in the imagined circulation of the photographic images to those who were not present.

The American discomfort with the Abu Ghraib photos was characterized as "shock" prompted by the overtly homosexual nature of the images, which made public sexual acts that have only recently been decriminalized in the United States. But this simplistic reaction of "shock" does little to explain the reasons why such abuses happened at all, why the sexual torture of prisoners appears to have been sutured to the military operation to conquer Iraq, and why the scandal passed so quickly and failed to produce a serious critique of military and civilian attitudes about the current administration's war. Indeed, the popular explanation of the Abu Ghraib photos as irrational pornography produced by a specifically militarized masculinity would have benefited immensely from an understanding of how sexual scandal has historically functioned in the United States. As Ed Ingebreetsen has argued, throughout American history, public scandal over sexual acts has actually worked to subdue the antagonisms of a deeply conflicted society.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Homoerotic Order," *Gay Community News* cited in Cindy Patton, "Tremble, Hetero Swine!" in Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 143.

<sup>2</sup> John Milbank, "Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror," in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11<sup>th</sup>* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 79.

In instances of sexual scandal, the transgressive scene is wielded “in order to define, and stabilize, the community’s sense of itself.”<sup>3</sup> This essay argues that the Abu Ghraib abuses can be interpreted as signifying the fantasies of homophobic power produced by a neoconservative culture confronted with the ever-growing presence of social dissonances, including those manifested by queer bodies. It thus rejects the explanations of the government and military for Abu Ghraib as an isolated incident that cannot be traced up the chain of command, as the work of a few rogue soldiers, or as the prankish behavior of a military initiatory ritual gone awry, in favor of a reading that places Abu Ghraib and its atrocities at the center of the struggle for control of American public life. The scandal of Abu Ghraib, while indeed shocking, also performs the necessary task of defining who Americans are, who Americans are not, and what Americans will tolerate for the sake of national coherence and a sense of heightened security. Viewed from this perspective, the prison photos—with their displays of homophobic, racist, and masculinist power—depict actions committed in the name of the average American citizen.

Understanding the Abu Ghraib abuses and their documentation as imbricated in the overlapping discourses surrounding sex, race, nationalism, and the uses of terror provides the framework for a much more detailed and useful analysis of how the photos could be read. Crucial to this analysis is the point that hegemonic aesthetics of normalized national life and American citizenship have historically been responsible for the reactionary construction of “others” whose difference is frequently defined as sexual.<sup>4</sup> Historically, American culture has created “others,” often characterized by monstrous sexual desires, in its attempt to draw a definitive boundary around the national community and to ensure social cohesion. These other bodies, whether black, brown, female, queer, poor, or heathen, operate as floating signifiers<sup>5</sup> through which the nation envisions and then expurgates its own internal anxieties. Today, American society is witnessing a new era in the invention of such “others.” The figure of the terrorist that now haunts every facet of American life is a perfected tool for social control, what might be referred to as a *blank body* through which the current crisis in national representation is now managed. The blankness of the terrorist body, which is by definition unlocatable, guarantees its ability to signify any number of social problems within or outside the nation, and facilitates its capability to cross over and blur the national border. The “terrorist” therefore continually reconstructs the crisis in national security that is also its point of origin.

Given the manner in which the figure of the terrorist has been written over multiple social groupings, including the Iraqis imprisoned at Abu Ghraib, we might begin to inquire more deeply after the meanings clustered behind the concept of this particular figure. What about the “terrorist” can we infer from the spectacle of Abu Ghraib? What is the collectively imagined desire projected upon the terrorist’s invisible body? Furthermore, what does the specter of the racialized and homophobic violence at Abu Ghraib,

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<sup>3</sup> Ed Ingebretsen, “Wigglesworth, Mather, Starr: Witch-Hunts and General Wickedness in Public,” in Tracy Fessenden, Nicholas F. Radel, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska, eds., *The Puritan Origins of American Sex* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Carl F. Stychin, *A Nation By Rights: National Cultures, Sexual Identity Politics, and the Discourse of Rights* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>5</sup> I am using the term “floating signifier” here in direct reference to Patricia J. Williams’ *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), in which she discusses “floating signifiers” in her own language as attempts to “fill the gaps in the discourse of commercial exchange” by forcing a “mirroring of meaning-invention” that enables her to connect legal theory to personal narrative (7-8). My argument is that such detached signifiers, while often useful in permitting one to think across conflicting discursive spaces, also allow for the reductive collapse of social differences into abjected “other” bodies. Thus, the use of floating signifiers may be either imaginatively radical or disappointingly conservative, given the context in which they are utilized.

ritually inflicted upon the imaginary flesh of the terrorist, imply about the desire for a stabilized and pure national body? What is the cultural project behind the effort to create and constantly summon the terrorist as a sort of absent presence capable of penetrating every act of our social lives? Ultimately, what do our particular uses and manipulations of the terrorist body, specifically at Abu Ghraib, signify?

With this set of questions in mind, this essay will work to examine the symbolic effect of the abuses inflicted at Abu Ghraib in the context of the national crisis surrounding September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the cultural productions emerging from that perceived crisis. Primary among these productions is the creation and implementation of terrorist figure as a signifier for national incoherence and as a tool for the symbolic control and oppression of other socially marginal groups, particularly queer people. Integral to the endeavor of this discussion is the argument that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, so often characterized as a “founding moment” in which the American cultural slate was wiped clean and American life was altered forever, did not so much generate a crisis in American cultural representation as they present a window through which the antagonisms of an already existing crisis could be expressed and, perhaps for some, resolved. In the context of this exploration into the meaning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the torture at Abu Ghraib must be viewed as the result of a process of externalization, in which the domestic concerns of the United States were projected outward, through the figure of the terrorist, onto the abjected bodies of Iraqi military prisoners. At Abu Ghraib, the figure of the “terrorist” operated as a nexus of collapsed identifications, allowing for queerness to be grafted onto and enacted upon the prisoners’ bodies through the ritual abuses of “homosexual humiliation,” which included simulated anal and oral sex, anal rape with objects such as broom handles, and accusations of being homosexual.<sup>6</sup> Far from a shocking anomaly, Abu Ghraib appears to be the physical manifestation of American culture’s own monstrous desires to commit such tortuous acts.

In order to argue that Abu Ghraib was an expression of anxiety over the stability of the national body, the nation must be defined as an act of communal imagination— an invention through which its members envision their own experience of belonging to a collective body with discrete borders. Benedict Anderson defines such national bodies as “imagined communities” that are governed by the fiction of shared cultural priorities and collective will. These bodies are by necessity fictive because no member of any national population will ever come close to knowing each of her fellow citizens, yet the image of a communally shared and consensually reached experience is inherent in the concept of the “nation.” Anderson writes that nations are thus “invented where they do not exist.”<sup>7</sup> Nations, therefore, are theoretically poor constructs that are continually threatened with explosion by their own internalized differences, and that require a constant defensive vigilance for their very existence. For example, the fervent patriotism of the past three years in America may be viewed as a response to the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, but on a deeper level it has also expressed a much more profound unease about the validity of what “America” has been imagined to mean, as well as a wish to reinstate a fictional unity that has never really existed. Indeed, the new patriotism has been an instrument of official nationalism, an “anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, as the meaning of “Americanness” shifts to include previously excluded groups

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Moore, “Weapons of Mass Homophobia,” *The Advocate*, June 8, 2004, 3, 11/22/04 <www.advocate.com>.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991; revised edition, New York: Verso, 2003), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson, 101.

(such as homosexuals and other queers, who often imagine community and the “good life” differently than the heterosexual majority), a conservative official nationalism is expressed by those in danger of losing power. Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia have all been employed as tools in the process of instating what Lauren Berlant has called “hygienic governmentality,” in which the ruling bloc attempts to maintain its dominance by asserting that an abject population threatens the common good and must be rigorously policed. The ruling bloc solicits mass sympathy for this cause

...by using abjected populations as exemplary of all obstacles to national life; by wielding images and narratives of a putative “good life” that “we” all have known; by promising relief from the struggles of the present through a felicitous image of a national future; and by claiming that, because the stability of the core image is the foundation of the narratives that characterize an intimate and secure national society, the nation *must at all costs protect this image as a way of life, even against the happiness of some of its own citizens.*<sup>9</sup>

Racial minorities, women, queer people, and the poor have all played the role of the abjected population in the American form of this reactionary governmentality. What is interesting about the current administration’s attempt to add “terrorist” to this list is that terrorists do not make up a definable domestic population, or even possess bodies that can be identified by their essential “difference” from American bodies. Instead of operating to categorize and methodologically assign abjected identities to bodies, the term “terrorist” has become a vestibular tool<sup>10</sup> that is occupied by or stretched over multiple “otherings” in order to ensure the relative security of the white, heterosexual, middle-class.

The point that the “terrorist” functions as a vestibular tool for social control of undesirables is strengthened by an understanding of how “multiple communities were interpellated as responsible for the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>11</sup> However, this interpellation was not determined solely by the effects of orientalist racializations, as many have claimed. The “terrorist” is not an exclusively racial otherness, but rather an otherness that is also imagined to disturb the compulsory heterosexuality, dichotomized gender roles, and reproductive family life that were reasserted by post-September 11<sup>th</sup> discourses of official nationalism.<sup>12</sup> It is the terrorist’s ability to interfere with the heteronormative processes of conservative ideology

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<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 175; emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Hortense Spillers uses the term “vestibularity” to describe the African slave body as bearing in person the “marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside” through the tortures of the slave master and overseer. She writes that the physical entity of “ethnicity” becomes perceivable through the wounding of the African flesh, and that this entity then serves as a “vestibule” for the “pre-view of a colonized North America.” For Spillers, then, the “vestibularity” of the slave body rests in its ability to signify the priorities of the national project through the very process of mortification. In the sense I am using the term here, the terrorist body also operates as a “vestibule” in which multiple otherings can be concentrated and then manipulated to serve the interests of nationalistic hegemonies, which the terrorist comes to negatively symbolize as the antithesis of the national body (the national body turned “inside out”). The Abu Ghraib photos are an excellent example of how queerness can be violently inscribed upon bodies through the vestibular terrorist signifier. For Spillers’ discussion, see “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms* (1987; revised edition, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 387.

<sup>11</sup> Leti Volp, “The Citizen and The Terrorist,” in Mary L. Dudziak, ed. *September 11<sup>th</sup> in History: A Watershed Moment?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>12</sup> Volp, 154.

that is seen as the greatest danger to the American “way of life.” This ability is multiplied by the terrorist’s perceived racial and religious differences, but these are only layers stratifying a larger fear of the terrorist’s perverse and sexualized desires to annihilate the reproductive American family and emasculate American manhood. “Love of nation,” understood as a commitment to the conservative “family values” agenda, thus operates as an excuse for the unlawful detention of suspected terrorists as well as the abuses at Abu Ghraib. Through its convenient unreadability, the figure of the terrorist comes to be understood as essentially alien at the same time that it proliferates.

Anderson also writes that the concatenation of the fictive national body involves the creation of “languages of power,” which are elevated to the status of official speech and crowd out other forms of communication.<sup>13</sup> When adopted by the ruling government, these languages of power are relied upon to present the picture of a seamless, uncontested national body. Changes in this language can thus be read as strategic attempts to consolidate power by covering over challenges to the authority of the ruling body, by misdirecting confrontations from subcultural groups onto other targets, as well as by masking breakdowns in the collectively assumed national vocabulary. For example, Amy Kaplan has pointed out that the new use of the term “homeland” by governmental discourses of protection is an attempt to secure the national body that also produces a concomitant sense of radical insecurity, by “proliferating threats of the foreign lurking within and without national borders.” These opposing senses of security and insecurity can then be played against each other in an escalating spiral of anxiety over the absent presence of the “terrorist.” She proceeds to discuss how this process legitimates American expansion into foreign countries even as it draws sharper lines between the imaginary “homeland” and the terrorist organization. As she writes, “You are either a member of the homeland or with the terrorists.”<sup>14</sup> Because the body of the nation is only capable of absorbing certain differences and is therefore, by definition, exclusionary, it is inevitable that some social groups will fall into the “terrorist” camp. Queer people, who have never enjoyed an untroubled relation to the status of citizenship in the United States, are one such group.<sup>15</sup> The assumption that terrorists are never citizens thus permits the secondary, illogical assumption that terrorists are like queers: they share the same monstrous desires to “undo” the heteronormative American way of life. In response to the pressures presented by these fantasized queer and terroristic desires, the word “homeland” draws on the image of a comforting national past to vindicate the injustices of modern imperial power.<sup>16</sup>

In attempting to understand the meaning of the homosexual humiliation at Abu Ghraib, as well as the function of the “terrorist” in the American sexual economy, we must come to grips with the manner in which states are implicated in the maintenance of heteronormative and heterosexist systems of power. These systems naturalize heterosexuality and support institutions which endorse it as the primary and

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<sup>13</sup> Anderson, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Amy Kaplan, “Homeland Insecurities: Transformations of Language and Space,” in Mary L. Dudziak, ed., *September 11<sup>th</sup> in History: A Watershed Moment?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 61-64.

<sup>15</sup> Exploring how the social and legal constructs of representative democratic citizenship exclude queer bodies and their practices has been one of the major theoretical strains of queer theory. See Shane Phelan’s *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians, and the Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), in which she recently reasserts that “lesbians and gay men are not currently citizens in the full political sense, and that this exclusion is at the core of contemporary understandings and organizations of common life” (5). For a broader history of the political and social struggle for gay and lesbian inclusion, see John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, 64.

normal manner through which people organize their social interactions, producing a sense of heterosexuality's "rightness" that permeates the entire culture. This process, both symbolic and material, is further explained by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner:

This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; education; plus the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture.<sup>17</sup>

Given the definition of heteronormativity as "embedded" in culture, it makes sense that a cultural construction such as the "terrorist" would be utilized in at least several heteronormative functions serving the interests of the state. In these functions, the terrorist operates as floating signifier, empty and yet crowded with significations, hyper-visible and hyperbolic even as it remains indefinable and transparent. The signifier "floats," that is, it links with any number of existing signifieds in systems of discursive power, producing both radical and predictable bridges in meaning. In one of its more conservative forms, this floating elasticity of the category "terrorist" can be used to police populations at home as well as abroad: prisoners as well as queers can be located and abusively managed by the state interests, who use the specter of the supposed terrorist as an excuse for their intrusions. Indeed, the difficulty of capturing and indicting "terrorists" has functioned as an effective legitimation for the invasion of Iraq and the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein,<sup>18</sup> as well as a vindication of interrogation techniques that might otherwise be considered "torture."

It is the very utility of the terrorist as a signifier for the breakdown of a heteronormative, white supremacist society that has led to a "continuous war against 'terrorists' everywhere,"<sup>19</sup> a war that even George W. Bush has suggested cannot be won (one might ask whether this is precisely the point of such a war). But the impulse to wage a war against the indefinable emotion of "terror," which has been directed as much against dissenting Americans as it has against actual terrorists, should not be reductively explained as a merely masculinist response to the symbolic castration of the fallen WTC towers. Such a reading prevents a closer consideration of how terrorism has been wielded by the state against segments of its own internal population, many of whom have actually been blamed for inviting the tragedy to occur.<sup>20</sup> The need to wreak revenge upon invisible "evildoers" has completely smothered the visible signs of an escalat-

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<sup>17</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," in Michael Warner, ed., *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 194.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Lentricchia, "Introductory Notes from the Editors," in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11th* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>19</sup> John Milbank, "Sovereignty, Empire, Capital, and Terror," in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11th* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 64.

<sup>20</sup> Here I am specifically referencing Rev. Jerry Falwell's infamous statement, made while appearing with Pat Robertson on *The 700 Club*: "God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve....I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians (who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle), the ACLU, People for the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face, and say, 'You helped this happen.'" 12/09/04 cited on <[www.eatthestate.org](http://www.eatthestate.org)>.

ing confrontation between America and the Middle East before September 11<sup>th</sup> occurred. Additionally, the violence of September 11<sup>th</sup> has come to function as a retroactive legitimization of the necessary aggression against Iraq, as well as against all forms of resistance to neoconservative rule. It is insufficient to explain the paranoiac, internally focused response to September 11<sup>th</sup> as the distress of a sovereignty threatened solely from the outside. The crusade to “smoke out” the responsible terrorists in a military campaign has not only been an expression of patriotic necessity or international competition for dominance; It has also functioned as a vocalization of the anxiety and anger felt over the increasing visibility and continued resistance of certain social groups in the domestic population, notably queer people. If the excessive “family values” and “defense of marriage” dogmas promulgated by the federal government after September 11<sup>th</sup> reveal anything, it is that the fear of terrorists has been employed to enlarge and capitalize upon the popular American fear of queer people and their sexual practices. In a particularly American political maneuver, the wish to expel queer people and other undesirables from American society has been articulated through the metaphors of national externality and the reassertion of a compromised phallic economy. The nation manufactures an external and unverifiable threat—the terrorist—that can be used to manage resistant internal groups and reinscribe the national boundary while also justifying an invasive reach over the borders of other, less powerful countries. Those who assume that the nation was jolted out of a naïve separatist ideology by the catastrophe of September 11<sup>th</sup> overlook the fact that “isolation and hysterical expansion are two halves of the American Republican dialectic.”<sup>21</sup>

Ironically, the national obsession with the “terrorist” has actually operated to produce and promote terror rather than to define, locate, and contain the emotion. It appears that in the national debate, “terror” has gone relatively unexamined even as it has grown to dominate and define American culture. In the midst of all this, one might ask, “Terror of what?” The stock answers to this question have focused on the end of American security at home, the possibility of intruders committing violence against families, and the end of a particularly privileged American “way of life” that guaranteed a general ignorance about the rest of the world. Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe have argued that, beneath all of these stereotypically conservative reactions, the terror Americans experienced on and subsequent to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> has actually been a “terror of the new.”<sup>22</sup> It is this terror—the terror of sweeping and indifferent change, of losing power and control, of becoming alienated from one’s comfortable surroundings—that also characterizes the American homophobic response, as made evident in the use of the “gay panic” defense in the trials of Matthew Shepard’s murderers.<sup>23</sup> In a statement that echoes the suppressed desire for the queer body in such narratives of heterosexual “panic,” Slavoj Žižek has claimed that the “unthinkability” of September 11<sup>th</sup> was also an object of fantasy: in some way, “America got what it fantasized

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<sup>21</sup> Milbank, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe, “Groundzeroland,” in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11<sup>th</sup>* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 96.

<sup>23</sup> As employed in the defense trials of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, the “gay panic” defense characterizes the queer-bashers as *defending themselves* from the person they beat, harass, or kill. The logic here is that the proximity of the queer person, and the possibility that (s)he might make a sexual pass at the heterosexual bashers, is so inherently threatening to the heterosexuals’ subjectivities that they are forced to physically “defend” themselves. Both Henderson and McKinney pled guilty to murdering Matthew Shepard in order to avoid the death penalty if convicted. At both trials, the “gay panic” defense was used as an attempt to gain lighter sentences by winning the homophobic sympathies of the jurists, who were asked to place themselves in the abject position of being assumed to be queer and “cruised” by a gay male. The assumption of this defense was that Shepard’s supposed sexual come-ons to Henderson and McKinney were so dangerous that they could be reasonably punished by death.

about, and this was its greatest surprise.” This national fantasy of the utterly new or uncanny is also the unconscious desire for something utterly queer—the end of American society as it has been known. Zizek goes on to assert that, in the “purely evil Outside” represented by the terrorist, we should always “recognize the distilled version of our own essence.”<sup>24</sup> That is, the terrorist signifies nothing but what we wish to deny in ourselves: the fear of our own subjective excesses finally spilling over; the fear of our own very queer desires for something entirely new. This, of course, is not unlike the manner in which homophobic terror operates to shore up and defend heterosexual identity from its own queer sympathies.

Given the complicated manner in which queerness and terror reference each other, as well as the inherent role the military plays in defending hegemonic definitions of national life, the current explanations for the abuses at Abu Ghraib are patently insufficient to any sort of public accountability. These have portrayed the torture of Iraqi prisoners as an isolated incident committed by a “handful” of sadistic soldiers and unrelated to any general “pattern of torture,” even though the ACLU has claimed otherwise.<sup>25</sup> Current studies that paint abusive military organizations as “specific cultures, and very nearly cults”<sup>26</sup> do little to unravel the ways in which militarized action reflects or is employed to resolve cultural anxieties over difference by reconsolidating hegemonic arrangements of power. Perhaps the best example of this is the American military’s continuing ban on what it has termed “homosexual conduct” in its ranks. Regarding homosexual persons, the military holds the following views:

Homosexuality is incompatible with military service. The presence in the military environment of persons who engage in homosexual conduct or who, by their statements, demonstrate a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct, seriously impairs the accomplishment of military mission. The presence of such members adversely affects the ability of the Military Services to maintain discipline, good order, and morale; to foster mutual trust and confidence among servicemembers, to ensure the integrity of the system of rank and command; to facilitate assignment and worldwide deployment of servicemembers who frequently live and work under close conditions affording minimal privacy; to recruit and retain members of the Military Services; *to maintain the public acceptability of military service*; and to prevent breaches of security.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, such views uphold the stereotypical images of queer people that are necessary to the continuing existence of heteronormativity, both within the military itself as well as within the military’s representational relationship to the national body. This ban on “homosexual conduct” is counterintuitive because homosexual humiliation is often used to break in new recruits during hazing rituals.<sup>28</sup> However,

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<sup>24</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Welcome to the Desert of the Real,” in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11<sup>th</sup>* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 132-133.

<sup>25</sup> “Iraqi Prisoner Charges that U.S. Soldiers Forced Him into Gay Sex Acts,” *The Advocate*, May 8, 2004, 2, 11/22/04 <[www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com)>.

<sup>26</sup> Suzy Hansen, “The Military’s Hazing Hell,” June 6, 2004, 4, 11/22/04 <[www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com)>.

<sup>27</sup> Department of Justice, “Reply Memorandum in Support of Defendant’s Motion for Judgment on the Pleadings or, in the Alternative, for Summary Judgment and in Opposition to Plaintiff’s Cross-motion for Summary Judgment” in Marc Wolinsky and Kenneth Sherrill, eds., *Gays and the Military: Joseph Steffan Versus the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 153.; emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Carol Burke, *Camp All-American, Hanoi Jane, and the High-and-Tight: Gender, Folklore, and Changing Military Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 68.

in theorizing the military as an independent culture or hermetically sealed male cult, studies of homophobic military hazing often miss the important ways in which such hazing is deeply linked to the defense of the official, national culture. Rather than solely operating to “break down” new recruits and build them up into appropriately obedient soldiers, homosexual humiliation may also be employed against military prisoners as a method of torture. The lesson that Abu Ghraib taught Americans is that the apparently “innocent” homosexual humiliation practiced to safeguard homosocial relations in the military is also effective as a method to abject and annihilate the subjectivity of the supposed enemy. Interpretations of the torture at Abu Ghraib as emasculating and perpetrated in direct response to the symbolic castration of American power on September 11<sup>th</sup> perform the error of collapsing sexuality into sexual difference, limiting a more accurate assessment of what this form of torture indicates about the technical development of American hegemony, both at home and abroad. Despite the comment made by one prisoner that the American soldiers “wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel, and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman,”<sup>29</sup> the photos of the Abu Ghraib abuses betray a second, deeper desire to write a perceivable *queerness*, not femaleness, onto the “terrorist” bodies of the prisoners. The conflation of male queerness with femaleness in the common analysis of Abu Ghraib prevents a more nuanced comprehension of the abuses as specifically cultivating queerness as an ultimate abjection. In the heteronormative logic, to be a faggot is indeed worse than to be a woman, since a man who actively abandons the phallic economy of impenetrability is far more dangerous and loathed than a woman, who by definition as “lack” can patently never inhabit this economy. To read Abu Ghraib as ultimately misogynist is to elide its forced queerness, which in the crippled heteronormative logic that all penetrable bodies are female allows the association with femaleness to be made.

As was stated in the opening paragraph of this essay, the photos taken by the soldiers at Abu Ghraib staged a scene that invited the viewer to willingly participate in the spectacle of homosexual humiliation and torture. Already discussed is the manner in which the terror inflicted upon the imprisoned Iraqi bodies operates as a reflection of the terror encouraged by a national discourse of revenge and punishment; We may now recognize that the photos do not merely invite us to participate as much as they reveal our own already existing participation. Perhaps, then, the most unsettling trait of the photos is their ability to provoke simultaneous feelings of shame (this was done in defense of Americans) and collective reassurance (the terrorists have been punished). What the photos communicate through their script of ritualized homophobic and racist violence is each American’s complicity in the blind and politically unethical fear of anything labeled “terrorist.” The photos use a forced queerness to signify that we have learned the depraved truth about these bodies, and that in knowing this truth we will never become like them. This use of homosexual humiliation at Abu Ghraib signals a new level of innovation in the use of homophobic terror as a technology of nationalistic militarization. As Patrick Moore maintains, “Homophobia in the military is nothing new, but the abuse of homosexual sex as a military tactic achieves a new level of perverse ingenuity.”<sup>30</sup> Queer people should be at the forefront of those groups protesting the priorities of the current administration as well as the abuses at Abu Ghraib precisely because the use of homosexual humiliation implicates us as both *torturers* and *tortured*: our sexual expressions have been used to abuse others physically even as they have been used to abuse us symbolically. Far from protecting the security of

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<sup>29</sup> “Iraqi Prisoner Charges that U.S. Soldiers Forced Him into Gay Sex Acts.”

<sup>30</sup> Moore, 1.

threatened populations such as prisoners and queer people, the “family values” and right-wing Christian doctrines of the neoconservative regime have actually permitted and even endorsed acts of sexual violence aimed at those it deems socially undesirable. As Moore claims, we need to begin asking ourselves whether the increasingly tyrannical character of American culture “actually encourages uses of sexuality that we can all agree are disgusting.”<sup>31</sup>

It has been the objective of this essay to argue that the current interpretations of Abu Ghraib disclose American society’s profound inability (or unwillingness) to recognize and defuse its own heterosexist practices. These interpretations are therefore as complicit in the abuses as they are politically irresponsible. Gayle Rubin has written that “disputes over sexual behavior often become the vehicles for displacing social anxieties, and discharging their attendant emotional intensity. Consequently, sex should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress.”<sup>32</sup> The ongoing failure of American culture to “respect” sex in general as well as the specific sexualities of non-heterosexual citizens has historically resulted in a great many abuses, Abu Ghraib being only one. What must be understood about incidents of homophobic sexual violence such as Abu Ghraib is that, rather than merely happening in the absence of preventative law, these acts are actively produced by a culturally permitted injunction to punish social “others.” To be understood as a cultural production, rather than an aberration or accident, Abu Ghraib must be recognized as the expression of a national culture directed by a right-wing ideology that situates itself as “able and required to reinstruct a morally lobotomized society that has forgotten the danger of the homosexual.”<sup>33</sup> Despite enjoying great political power, this ideology continues to depict homosexuals as directing the dominant culture, and itself as a minority voice deserving “rights” of protection for its “way of life” (which queers are actively destroying). Within such “logic” the terms of political power are radically inverted: homophobia and heteronormativity become entirely unreadable, and incidents such as Abu Ghraib become gestures of defense rather than acts of bigoted torture. This apocalyptic right-wing ideology sets queers up as an always-immanent threat to both the natural and the national order, thereby justifying its vilification and political oppression of sexual minorities. Why has it been so difficult to articulate how the idea of the “terrorist” might be employed as a technology to improve the efficiency of this purpose? Why has it proved so difficult to demand public accountability from the political figures who are supposed to prevent abuses such as homophobic discrimination, homosexual humiliation, and prison torture? Perhaps it is because many Americans have been seduced by a national rhetoric that does not actually have our interests at heart, and does not permit us a fully engaged democratic process. Given the reality of our disappearing ability to demand reliable information and a sound political process, the most frightening lesson of Abu Ghraib lies in our cultural incapacity to develop a critical understanding of the tortures themselves: why they happened at all; why there has been no call for public accountability; and why they seem so perverse and yet so appropriate to this era of American nationalism. It appears that the very conditions of possibility for such an understanding have been eroded by our own collective investment in the myth of a national innocence and infallibility.

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<sup>31</sup> Moore, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 267.

<sup>33</sup> Patton, 145.

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