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Sexual Humiliation, Gender Confusion and the Horrors at Abu Ghraib

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This piece is part of Zillah's Eisenstein's forthcoming book, **"Against Empire, Feminisms, Racism, and the West"** which will be available in August 2004 through Zed press in London, Palgrave in the US and Kali in India.

The New York Times reports that there have been new releases of prisoners formerly held at Abu Ghraib. The photo shows a young man, age 17, being embraced by his mother and sisters. His body completely slumps into their protective arms. He is two years younger than my daughter. I am heartsick wondering if he will ever recover from his horror.

Muslim men are described as sexually humiliated at Abu Ghraib. And white women of the working class are used to "pussy whip" Muslim men. I keep wondering about the significance of this dyad. I am struck by the use of the phrase of "humiliated" rather than "tortured" or "raped". The women I met with during the Bosnian war whom had been forced into the rape camps there were not described as humiliated, but rather, as raped. The choice of words is revealing. Men who are raped and sexually degraded are "humiliated" because they are treated like women; they are forced to be women--sexually dominated and degraded. Men who are naked and exposed remind us of the vulnerability usually associated with being a woman. The brown men at Abu Ghraib are then constructed as effeminate and narrate a sub-text of homosexuality.

When I first saw the pictures of the torture at Abu Ghraib I felt destroyed. Simply heart-broken. I thought "we" are the fanatics, the extremists; not them. By the next day as I continued to think about Abu Ghraib I wondered how there could be so many women involved in the atrocities? Three of the torturers--Megan Ambuhl, Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman--so key to the pictorial narrative--are white women. The Brig.General in charge of the prisons in Iraq, Janis Karpinski is also a white woman. So is Maj. General Barbara Fast, the top U.S. Intelligence Officer who reviewed the status of detainees.

Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor to the President, complexifies the picture as a Black woman. In contrast, the pictures of torture were of brown Muslim men. The reported but "unsubstantiated" abuse and rape of Muslim women prisoners by U.S. soldiers has remained largely silenced in the depictions of the torture at Abu Ghraib. Keep track of these points as I flesh out the rest of my argument. I hope to use both the racialized silences and the gender confusions in the Abu Ghraib narrative to better see this militarized moment as both unique and common. Abu Ghraib is a horrific exposure of what war is and does always; and what the "war

of/on terror" at this particular juncture of unilateral militarized globalization looks like. I have more questions than I have answers just now. Why have women ended up in these specific locations of power while masculinism is at its height in this militarized and military moment. I am thinking that it is because these locations may be anachronistic sites of power as the military has become more and more privatized and corporatized. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has downsized and restructured the military and maybe women have been allowed in just as these seats of institutionalized power are being denuded. It may be why it is so easy to locate the blame at these very sites. These women should be held responsible and accountable; but they also are gender decoys. As decoys they create confusion by participating in the very sexual humiliation that their gender is usually victim to.

This gender swapping and switching leaves masculinist/racialized gender in place. Just the sex has changed; the uniform remains the same. Male or female can be a masculinized commander or imperial collaborator while white women look like masculinist empire builders and brown men look like women and homos. Whenever power and domination are exposed in their ugly form like at Abu Ghraib the embedded sexual and racialized meanings of power are revealed. Racism and sexism are always in play together because they each construct the other. When one is revealed the other is laying in wait. Salient examples of the hybrid relation between race, sex, and gender are the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings, the beatings of Rodney King and Abner Louima and their aftermaths. One was never sure if the issues were racialized sex or sexualized racism or whether they are ever truly separable.

In the case of Abu Ghraib, racial codings are used to deeply seed gender meanings and their confusion to build empire. A man who is treated like a woman becomes less than human--not a white man--like the black slave woman, and not white women. Muslim men, along with Jews and Semitic men of all religions are then viewed as not virile like white men. This is somewhat like the Black slave man who was forced to watch the rape of his lover or child by the master; except the Black man is made different' than the white man, in his hyper rather than homosexuality. So the Black man is also lynched and mutilated/castrated. Masculinist depravity, as a political discourse, can be adopted by males and/or females. It is all the more despicable that the Bush administration used the language of women's rights to justify the bombs in the Afghan war against Taliban practices towards women; and then again against the horrific torture and rape chambers under Saddam Hussein. And it should be no surprise that Bush's women--Laura, Mary Matalin, and Karen Hughes--who regularly bad-mouth feminism of any sort were responsible for articulating this imperial women's rights justification for war.

Imperial(ist) feminism obfuscates the use of gender decoys: women are both victims and perpetrators; constrained and yet free; neither exactly commander nor decoy. What if rape and "sexual humiliation" are understood not as aberrations in war but as simply "a form of war by other means"? There is then a different context for seeing the disorder and chaos in Iraq that leaves many women barricaded in their homes fearing rape and capture if they venture onto the streets. It also puts a different lens on the recent charges of sexual assault and rape by dozens of U.S. servicewomen in the Persian Gulf area against their fellow soldiers. At least 112 reports of sexual misconduct have been filed by U.S. women soldiers in the past two years, 2002-2004, in Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. Exactly whose war is this? Why do the narratives of war take on the trajectories that they do? Why in the Balkan wars was the raping of women a central narrative demonizing Serb nationalism while the rape and sexual humiliation of Muslim male prisoners largely silenced? And, why, today is the central narrative Muslim men's humiliation while the violation of their women counterparts has been largely muted?

Because today's militarist masculinism operates out of the enforced differentiation of woman from man through gender swapping; the "othering" and differentiating of each through a hetero viewing of the self using white female decoys. However, I also think that these silences enforce a disconnection and "differentiation" between men and women that do not and cannot exist given the centrality of racialized/sexualized violence in war. This shared dehumanization also bespeaks it's very opposite: men and women's shared humanity. Sex and race combine and reformulate here. Bodies are disconnected from their gendered meaning. Brown men become like women of all colors, yet it is white women who supposedly dominate and hold the leashes--the white

women who are also raped by their comrades in arms. Gender swapping and gender confusion becomes a decoy in these militarist moments so that real people cannot be seen for their humanity. As such, the structures of power and domination defining the contours of their lives are put out of view.

Barbara Ehrenreich has argued that Abu Ghraib makes clear that feminism--the idea that women need to be free to have the same rights as men--is an insufficient strategy. Fair enough; but this in part misreads Abu Ghraib. She writes that Abu Ghraib is a moment of imperial arrogance, sexual depravity and gender equality". But there is no gender equality to be seen here, just gender depravity, or at best a reformed equality that no one wishes for, and at this point, not even the women said to be equal.

Most feminisms around the globe, and many at home, know that mimicking men is not equality or freedom. Parallel issues are presented when Colin Powell and Condi Rice become the symbols for this war. One should not presume that their presence means that racial and/or gender equality exists today for most Black men and women. In reality, disproportionate numbers of Blacks--men and women--are housed in U.S. prisons; the same prisons that strip them naked and abuse them.

What is really scary is that Abu Ghraib can be made to look like feminism, but not any that I recognize. Abu Ghraib is hyper-imperialist/masculinity run amok. Females are present to cover over the misogyny of building empire. So I think that there is little if anything to consider feminist here. Most women are in the military because of globalization, the restructuring of the labor force in the U.S., and their desire to get an education, and/or a job. Jessica Lynch had applied for a job at Wal-Mart and when she did not get it, she decided to enlist. Lori Piestewa and Shoshanna Johnson both who fought with Lynch were single mothers looking to get an education. The three women charged in the crimes at Abu Ghraib are all working class. I see necessity, not equality here. I want to be careful to not to oversimplify the variety and differences that exist among soldiers in this war--especially in this case, women. Johnson, a Black woman soldier-cook was shot and taken as a P.O.W. and then was rescued to return home to her young daughter.

She says when she is asked about Lynndie England on the Larry King Show: there is no way I would ever wrap a rope around someone's neck and drag them around naked. They could court-martial me, or do anything else they wanted to punish me. I wouldn't do it. She also said that no soldier should ever follow an inhumane order. She also says that once captured she feared for her safety and the possibility of rape, but that she was always treated with respect after a beating on the battlefield. According to Jessica Lynch she also was treated with care and concern as a prisoner, although as implied in I Am a Soldier Too it seems that she was initially beaten and sexually abused. Despite her wrecked body, she refuses to demonize Iraq or become a voice for this war. Women are used in the Abu Ghraib pictorial narrative to protect heterosexist normativity. We see women abusing men which protects sexual hierarchy and opposition but in reverse; don't ask don't tell is the rule of law here. These low ranking women are clearly not in control of much of anything; they are a type of pawn supporting disgusting practices that they should have refused to perform.

But their actions do not bespeak their own power or privilege yet they display the imperial power of white women over Muslim men. They are acting in a heterosexist hierarchical and punishing system of power. This same system of power now offers them up as cannon fodder. The complex web of sex, race, gender and class is woven deceptively and yet with consequence at Abu Ghraib. It is truly significant that Fast and Karpinski are white and that we do not see Black women in these positions of command or implicated in sexual crimes like England. Because of the twisted effects of racialized sexuality Johnson has never been put in the position of gender decoy. It is not insignificant that people in the U.S.--men and women alike-- were horrified to see women degrading prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Some of us even hoped that women were above this kind of action. Obviously, simple essentialism--that women are more mothering or caring or peaceful--is not simply true. Neither is it simply true that given many women's lives and their parental responsibilities that they are as prone to war as most men. Women and men respond to

the forces upon them and are constructed from them.

Neither gender essentialism nor constructionism clarifies war. So, yes, Abu Ghraib bespeaks a larger problem than a few loose cannons deciding to abuse and torture prisoners. The obscene practices of human degradation were already in place in Afghanistan, and in our prisons at home. It has now been revealed that former prison guards with records of abuse, interrogators of detainees at Guantanamo, and officials from the Afghan war instructed the military personnel at Abu Ghraib. It is not just about the role that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice, Undersecretary of Defense and Intelligence Stephen Cambone and Commander of the detention center at Guantanamo Geoffrey Miller played.

It is also about the larger system of racialized masculinity that is put in high gear at this moment of unilateral militarization. This structural system of hierarchical privilege and power "others" anyone who is not in the business of empire building. There are few if any civilians left in these moments.

Gendered/racialized individuals are never what they simply seem. But gender is complicated. It makes it a perfect foil for obfuscation. When Kofi Annan says invest in the women in Africa and they will help solve the AIDS problem; when people depend on women in the U.S. to mobilize in terms of their disproportionate peace-making commitments; when women in Afghanistan and Iraq provide significant leadership for real democratic struggle AND when women are mobilized out of economic necessity to fight this "war of/on terror" there is no easy clarification. Real commitments to gender equality will be used and abused by those in power.

Gender differentiation will be mobilized for war AND peace. This is the ugly side of the rewired patriarchy of war-capitalism. Bush's "war of/on terror" masks its realpolitik--that of a racist capitalist misogyny operating in drag for unilateral empire building. Abu Ghraib showed us that humanity and inhumanity comes in all colors and genders. War readies you to kill, to always be on guard, to trust no one who is the enemy. War, then, almost always destroys the very sense of humanity that allows you to see yourself in another, to see your connection with another instead of their difference from you. Brutality reflects this process of seeing and then not seeing another's humanity. Looking at the emasculated Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib--from a distance--forced people in the U.S. to see war upfront. Most of us saw more than we wanted to: the U.S. "war of/on terror" is ugly and debased; the war in Iraq is failing; we are no different than Saddam Hussein.

Gender construction is always changing. And with it war itself changes. Masculinity and femininity and their specific racialized meanings are then always in flux. Linda Burnham calls attention to the "sexualization of national conquest" at Abu Ghraib and sees sexual domination as part of a "militarist hyper-sexuality". This hyper-sexual moment is revealed because sexualized racism is always brought to the fore when systems of power are in crisis and too much of the truth of war is uncovered. Unilateral power is blinded by a complete and total arrogance. The Bush administration thinks it is above the law, out of reach of any kind of accountability. Torture is O.K. No one is innocent. There are no civilians. The U.S. military will police itself. It is its own court of last resort. There are no protections for prisoners.

The "war of/on terror" is a terrorizing war for all who come in contact with it. The lines between combatant and civilian, rights and degradation, and white, black and brown men and women are realigned and remade. But this gender flux takes place within the structural constraints of racialized patriarchy, and masculinized gender. The naked bodies of tortured Muslim men alongside white women with cigarettes and leashes, and the absence and silencing of Muslim women at Abu Ghraib is a heart-rending reminder that war is obscene. It would be a double heart-break to think that people in this country abide any part of the violations at Abu Ghraib, especially in the name of feminism. I am hoping that the horrific pictorial exposure of torture at Abu Ghraib will recommit us all to struggle on behalf of an anti-racist feminist humanity inclusive of each and every one's liberation across the globe.

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Eric Schmitt, "Military Women Reporting Rapes By U.S. Soldiers", *New York Times*, February 26, 2004, p. A1. Barbara Ehrenreich, "What Abu Ghraib Taught Me", [www.Alternet.org/story](http://www.alternet.org/story). May 20, 2004. Rick Bragg, *I Am A Soldier Too* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003)

I am particularly indebted to comments from Rosalind Petchesky for clarification of this discussion. Linda Burnham, "Sexual Domination in Uniform: An American Value" *War Times*, www.war-times.org, May 19, 2004.

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