Performance Complexes: Abu Ghraib and the Culture of Neoliberalism

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“When I first saw the notorious photograph of a prisoner wearing a black hood, electric wires attached to his limbs as he stood on a box in a ridiculous theatrical pose, my reaction was that this must be a piece of performance art. The positions and costumes of the prisoners suggest a theatrical staging, a tableau vivant, which cannot but call to mind the ‘theatre of cruelty,’ Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs, scenes from David Lynch movies.”
Slavoj Zizek

“You know, if you look at -- if you, really, if you look at these pictures, I mean, I don't know if it's just me, but it looks just like anything you'd see Madonna, or Britney Spears do on stage. Maybe I'm -- yeah. And get an NEA grant for something like this. I mean, this is something that you can see on stage at Lincoln Center from an NEA grant, maybe on Sex in the City -- the movie. I mean, I don't -- it's just me.”
Rush Limbaugh

“We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”
Senior Advisor to President Bush

To consider the staging of torture at Abu Ghraib is to consider the performance of torture, torture as performance, and the photographic representation of torture. In this essay, I am interested in how these dynamics serve those who adopt the role of “history’s actors” in an effort to construct the “new realities” that are both the spoils of war and the foundation of empire. These realities, I suggest are constitutive of what I call the “performance complexes” of neoliberal empire: the military-industrial and the prison industrial complexes. These

performance complexes are articulated with, and make visible in the photographs from Abu Ghraib, the violence of neoliberalism.

"To live is to be photographed," suggests Susan Sontag, "... but to live is also to pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images" (28). Sontag's comments here mark not only the reality of the postmodern spectacle, in which an act is only worth doing if it is being photographed or videoed, but also the way in which the MPs and military intelligence officers in the Abu Ghraib photographs occupy the dual position of performer and spectator. We see in the photos the sadistic glee of the torturer as family photo subject through the lens of the military camera. "The horror of what is shown in the photographs," Sontag argues, "cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken – with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives" (26-7).

There is nothing comparable to this, she suggests, but the lynching photographs and postcards that circulated the American South (and often sent to family in friends up North). These photos register the carnival atmosphere that accompanied the lynching of blacks in America as they reveal the jubilant families posing alongside mutilated corpses. What Sontag suggests here is that the banality of the act of photography,

and the casualness of the pose bespeak a violence that the photographs themselves enact, and do not merely represent.

For, these photographs are, ontologically, not the performance. They are, as Susan Willis describes them, "Performance turned into artifact" (135). The photographs attempt to document the undocumentable, and yet serve as an index of the "horror that the photographs were taken." The multiplied horrors of the photographs – the corporeal reality of torture as well as the violence of the act of photographing and the enactment of the pose are only indexed by the photograph. The imminence of these acts – torture, photography, and the pose – are aestheticized and artifactualized in the photograph itself. Peggy Phelan's oft-cited and oft-maligned claim that performance's "life only is in the present" in that it erupts in a frenzy of the visible in a "manically charged present" of liveness is *a propos* here in that it is the disappearing "excess" that constitutes an act in performance (146, 148). The unreproducability of this excess (radical in potential for Phelan, but violent and retrograde here) is part of how the photographs as artifact reproduce the violence of the performance of torture. That is to say, torture operates to reduce the torture victim an object – as Elaine Scarry puts it, to a "body in pain." The excessive violence of torture, as with performance's excess is incommunicable through the flattening

artifact of the photograph. It is this process of "performance turning into artifact," the evacuation and erasure of excess of violence (and of performance) that enables the deferral of that excess, which was manifested when the photographs were sent to MPs' family and friends as mementos, or even to the pleasure of indignation such representations evoke (or the pleasure evinced by Baudrillard in his claim that with these photographs, "America has electrocuted itself)" (209). But the performative excess that I want to mark here, and I want to mark it without indulging in the violence of the lingering gaze over these photos, the imaginative recreation of these photos as a reenactment of the violence, as well as without displacing the humanity of those tortured – is to highlight the excess that both causes these performances, and is masked by them – that is the excess of profit. What I wish to sketch out is the way in which the performance of torture at Abu Ghraib (and thus masked by the artifacts of performance (and the artifactualization of performance)) is the performance of neoliberalism.

I am drawing my argument in part from Oliver Cox, the radical black sociologist who argued that it was critical to see lynchings of African Americans not only for the theatrical spectacles of violence that they were, but also as expressions of political economy. The lynching, he contended, was not a production of a hysterical wildness or "strange madness," but

rather a concomitant violence of the operation of capitalism, which required a cowed and exploitable laboring class (579). What Kirk Fuoss has called “lynching performances” were, Cox explains, central to the logic of early 20th century capitalism. The success of lynching performances hinged on the production of blacks (those lynched and those not-yet-lynched) as objects; the excess of violence and the excess of performance served to evacuate the subjecthood of African Americans in the interest the excess of profit (surplus value). Cox explains that the lynch mob is not primarily a spontaneous ensemble of irrational violence but rather, “The mob is composed of people who have been carefully indoctrinated in the primary social institutions of the region to conceive of Negroes as extra-legal, extra-democratic objects, without rights which white men are bound to respect” (580). This compulsory performance of objecthood operates is a rationalizing force that both justifies and structures the racial economy of the South. “By lynching,” Cox argues, “Negroes are kept in their place, that is to say, kept as a great, easily-exploitable, common-labor reserve” (584). Lynching performances are, in Cox’s view, a “sub-legal contrivance” that operate as an expression of and in service to a racialized political economy.

The performances of torture at Abu Ghraib serve a similar function in their operation as a staging of neoliberal

globalization. Neoliberalism is the current reigning economic philosophy, which suggests the absolute centrality of the market, the privatization of social services, the end of the welfare state, and the commodification of all aspects of everyday life. Neoliberalism represents the triumph of the corporation over the state, where the state no longer serves a Keynesian function to ameliorate the inequalities produced by capitalism, but rather serves solely to protect the rights and interests of capital. Further, neoliberalism is dependent upon the maintenance and masking of a racialized economic order.

The emergence of the military industrial complex (MIC) in the mid-twentieth century can be seen as an early expression of the ascendancy of neoliberalism – as functions of the military were dispersed to a host of institutions outside of the state apparatus: namely, private corporations and universities. However, the diffusion of governmental authority to a loose network of non-governmental institutions, is often where accounts of the MIC stop – where the primary danger of such an apparatus is the ability of private institutions to circumvent the scrutiny of the public. Not only should we not romanticize the military as a paragon of transparency operating in the public interest, but we must also consider the way in which the privatization of the military has created an economy dependent on the development and support of war-making, the institution of

what Seymour Melman calls the “permanent war economy.” Moreover, the transnational corporation requires the military to secure profitability through force. As neoliberal apologist Thomas Friedman puts it, “McDonald’s cannot flourish without McDonnel Douglas .... And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley’s technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps” (quoted in RETORT 195). Thus, the condition of “perma-war” becomes an economic necessity to support the increasingly military-dependent corporations and an economy that depends on those corporations’ profitability.

Such a transformation can also be seen in the emergence of a prison industrial complex (PIC), the more recent privatization of prisons, in which prison building, prison operation, and prison servicing have become entrenched in national and local economies and supported by a justice system structured by race. The dependence of small communities especially on a prison economy is enacted by neoliberal economic programs, polices, and practices. For example, one of the direct consequences of the shift of manufacturing overseas has been the devastation of many factory towns throughout the US. As Angela Davis points out, this has resulted in many communities desperate for any large employer. Thus, the new privately owned prison becomes an

employer of last resort. Municipalities are transformed, Michelle Brown suggests, into a

> “new American city” ... whose self-sustaining abilities depend on the production of hard-line attitudes, more prisons, and, equally significant, more prison towns ... culminating in a reconfiguration of social and economic life in distinctly penal terms. (984)

The performances at Abu Ghraib represents an exporting of American penal culture – the normalization not merely of the disciplinary mechanisms of the penitentiary described by Michel Foucault, but the stubborn resilience of the staging of pain and terror onto the body of the condemned. As Dwight Conquergood writes in his brilliant analysis of the “lethal theatre” of American executions, American penal culture remains dependent upon the brutalizing of the bodies of the condemned. Such performances, he explains, “are awesome rituals of human sacrifice through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence” (342). These rituals are increasingly staged as sanitized acts, to at once mask the state’s act of murder, as well as to elide the overwhelming racial basis that underwrites the logic American executions. While the publicity of the performance of executions requires the staged sterility of murder, it operates also to conceal the “messier”

performances of violence that operate as a daily ritual in many American prisons. The experience of being inside a maximum security prison is one that is characteristic of what Michael Taussig calls “terror as usual,” which he describes as a “state of doubleness of being in which one moves between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation” (18). Indeed, this performance consciousness is engendered by the American prison through the persistent staging of violence by guards, including mock executions. Indeed, when I first saw the Abu Ghraib photos, I was struck first not by their abnormality, but rather by the way they evoked the “training” video produced by guards at the privately run Brazoria County Detention Center in Texas, where black inmates were chased and attacked by growling dogs. A number of the guards who performed in the Abu Ghraib photos were former prison guards, including Charles Graner, who had been “subject to numerous complaints of human rights violations and prisoner abuse” while working at a high-security prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania (Brown 982). The performances at Abu Ghraib can be seen to go beyond Zizek’s contention that they represent the “obscene underside of US popular culture” of the normalization of fraternity initiation rites and hazings. Rather, they represent the staging of America’s new penal culture on the world stage, which celebrates a racialized brutal

violence – a culture that is produced both by the economic structures and the cultural logic of neoliberalism.

As America's prisons operate increasingly as forced labor farms, where prisoners manufacture goods, and provide services to corporations such as Lockhead-Martin and Boeing, the American penitentiary can be seen not only as a condition for, and effect of (military) neoliberalism but as a site conjoining the "new American militarism" (Bacevich) and the "new American city" (Brown) of penitentiary dependence. As such a conjuncture, the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib can be seen as ones that capture the staging of violence that secures the prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex together in a "symbiotic" (Davis 86) relationship and as constitutive elements of neoliberalism.

The fact that the invasion and occupation of Iraq itself can be seen as a staging of neoliberalism as war extends this analysis. The invasion of Iraq, described by the *Wall Street Journal* as "one of the most audacious hostile takeovers ever" (RETORT 50) was, according to the authorial collective RETORT, "privatization by occupation" (47), a contention supported by the Bush-Cheney campaign manager's comment that the war was about "getting Iraq ready for Wal-Mart" (49) and Cheney's own revealing admission that the war was a remarkable "growth opportunity" (41). Thus, in Abu Ghraib, we see not only the

staging of what Shamir and Kumar call the “military backbone of globalization” but also the penitentiarial logic and practice that is instantiated in militarism and globalization.

Fight or Fuck

In his book *Prisons: Inside the New America*, David Matlin recounts a story told by an inmate who complained to prison officials about constancy of rape in the prison and the daily threat of rape he faced. The officials responded that he should learn to either “fight or fuck.” This logic, where the only choices are fighting or fucking, is also that of neoliberalism. And perhaps, within the auspices of neoliberalism, this is the same option – as competition of all against all is raised to a sacred position, neoliberalism demands all workers to be constantly fighting each other, and to be fucked by the state-backed corporate apparatus. Abu Ghraib is the staging of fighting or fucking as the realization of military neoliberalism. Jon McKenzie calls theatrical and organizational compulsion to “perform, or else,” in which the demand to compete is impelled by threat. I want to suggest that we consider the “fight or fuck” performance in Abu Ghraib, in which fucking itself was a central part of the theatrics, as a the coming together of the “perform, or else” performance of neoliberalism

with what José Muñoz calls “the burden of liveness,” the historically constituted condition where people of color are demanded to enact their “difference” for the purpose of disgust, exoticism, or sublimity. But, perhaps more than anything, it is the compulsion to be “live” for the spectator, even a live object that operates as this burden. I wish to close by considering how this racially constituted and compulsory liveness operates in these torture performances as a way to reckon with how Abu Ghraib connects these performance complexes: military industrial and prison industrial in service of neoliberalism.

This “burden of liveness” characterizes Coco Fusco’s “Other History of Intercultural Performance,” that recounts the legacy of staging racially constituted subjects as exotically figured objects – from slave auction blocks to the Hottentot Venus to Ringling Brothers circus exhibitions of pygmies as part of their animal parade. In the torture photos, exoticism is displaced by abjection, in which the staging of racial violence as banal and celebratory mark the banality of the racial violence of neoliberal globalization. If, as Baudrillard suggests, these photos are not representational because they are so embedded in the war itself, then what do they do? Baudrillard suggests that they are simply another expression of the “pornographic face of the war” (207-8). I contend that that there is something

audible in the frenzy of the visible that these photos cannot represent but instead makes resonate. For this staging of the banality of torture, the self-parody of power that does not know what do with itself, is part of a chain of performances that neoliberalism impels – one that links the MIC and the PIC in resuscitation of primitive accumulation (RETORT). The photographs visually elide, yet resonate the echo of the chain that includes the demonstrations of military force against sweatshop workers in Central America as demanded by US corporations who require wages kept low. The "new realities" that neoliberal empire enacts are theatres of violence – a militarily enforced private penitentiarism compelling performances of fighting and fucking – or else. The performances of torture at Abu Ghraib, in their banal and celebratory enactment of violence, are simply the spectacular realization of the ubiquitous violence that neoliberalism produces globally. Would that they would also be its undoing.

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