

Volume 8

Issue 2 *Identity, Difference and New Feminisms:  
Winning and Short-listed entries for the 2005 Feminist  
and Women's Studies Association, U.K. Annual Essay  
Competition*

Article 3

---

Feb-2007

# The Missing Rhetoric of Gender in Responses to Abu Ghraib

Alexandra Murphy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Murphy, Alexandra (2007). The Missing Rhetoric of Gender in Responses to Abu Ghraib. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(2), 20-34.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol8/iss2/3>

## The Missing Rhetoric of Gender in Responses to Abu Ghraib

By Alexandra Murphy<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper explores Western responses to the torture inflicted upon Iraqi detainees by U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib facility near Baghdad. More specifically, however, this paper examines responses to photographic representations of this torture, which began to surface in the April of 2004. The analysis that follows engages closely with the status of the photographs as images, arguing that existing critical interpretations fail to account for the particular issues and problems that the visual image presents. Through detailed reference work by Judith Butler and Susan Sontag, this paper will also interrogate the limitations of recent theoretical approaches to the Abu Ghraib photographs, and consider the extent to which discussions of gender have been excluded from these discourses.

*Keywords:* war, photography, gender, sexuality

On the 28<sup>th</sup> April 2004 the American cable programme *60min II* (CBS) broadcast an exclusive report containing photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> These photographs were taken by members of the U.S. military, who had seized control of the facility after the displacement of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath government. Situated just outside of Baghdad, Abu Ghraib gained notoriety under Hussein's regime as the site at which thousands of political prisoners were tortured, experimented on, and executed.<sup>3</sup> By 2004, then, the name of the prison was already familiar to the American and British public. The images of Abu Ghraib that the Anglo-American public were used to seeing tended to illustrate the poignant accounts of Iraqi civilians whose loved ones had perished there prior to the deposition of Hussein's government (Fisher 2003a, 2003b). The photographs that emerged in 2004, however, did not cause scandal, outrage, and controversy because they provided fresh evidence of Abu Ghraib's history as 'the centrepiece of Saddam's empire of fear', but because they featured abuses perpetrated by occupying U.S. forces.<sup>4</sup> The CBS revelations were only the beginning of a far larger 'scandal', and on the 21<sup>st</sup> May 2004, images which featured similar instances of abuse and humiliation were published in the *Washington Post*.<sup>5</sup> As I write today, almost three

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Murphy is a doctoral candidate in the Centre for Gender and Women's Studies at Trinity College, Dublin, where she also lectures and tutors. This paper is developed from her dissertation, 'Gender and Teleology in Images from Abu Ghraib: an analysis of representation and identity in the scopic field', which was submitted in 2004 in partial fulfilment of her M.Phil.

<sup>2</sup>The images under discussion can be viewed on the CBS website, as part of Dan Rather's original report for *60 Minutes II*. See Rather 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of the prison and a history of its role within the Hussein presidency are provided at the *GlobalSecurity.org*. See 'Abu Ghayub Prison' [www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/iraq/abu-ghurayb-prison.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/iraq/abu-ghurayb-prison.htm).

<sup>4</sup> See 'Abuse Of Iraqi POWs By GIs Probed'.

<sup>5</sup> These images are available in the format of a photo essay on the *Washington Post* website. See 'Iraqi Prisoners Controversy'.

years after the initial publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs, allegations and evidence of Allied malpractice continue to come to light. To date, it is estimated that 1,800 photographs and videos from Abu Ghraib have been evaluated by the U.S. government: the Bush administration are currently involved in litigation procedures, through which they hope to prohibit media access to these stockpiled images of abuse.<sup>6</sup>

At the time the Abu Ghraib images were first published, I had grown disillusioned with the political spin that was shaping media coverage of the Iraq war. As a result, my own encounter with the Abu Ghraib images was both belated and anti-climactic. My reaction, therefore, was radically discontinuous with the intensity of the rhetoric that the images had, for the most part, inspired. When I finally saw the photographs, what I witnessed was Lynndie England grinning, smoking her cigarette, and gesturing towards the genitalia of naked Iraqi detainees. On this first viewing of the images I was, if I am honest, a little underwhelmed. Despite myself I could not help but respond to such atrocities with the retort 'Is that it?'. It was *my* reaction to the images, and not the images themselves, that generated my sense of confusion. While I felt that the images were *wrong* in a moral sense, they failed to provoke the degree of outrage I had anticipated. What I experienced was a disjunction between reason and emotion: in short, the images, and my response to them, caused me to reflect closely upon my own identity and personal belief systems. Despite initial impressions, then, the ready reconciliation of these images to my visual epistemology was not, and is not, dismissive of their content, but instead sets the conditions for a usefully flexible engagement with the Abu Ghraib photographs.

This paper considers the responses of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler to the images of Abu Ghraib, and exposes the limitations of the approaches they adopt. Furthermore, it examines the specific ways in which these critical discourses might work to deny our collective complicity in the production of those photographs, and thus inhibit the development of teleological or reparative dialogues. In essence, Butler and Sontag each consider the role that the cultural economy of Western society has in informing the production of these images (via social symbolism, values, morals and codes) but they do not consider the reverse flow of signification; namely, what these images say about the society from which they were produced, and how they might inform and shape our understanding of that society. As such, these analyses situate the images as the product of Western society rather than an integral part of it. If we are to learn from these images, then, they must first be situated within a cultural context that extends beyond the walls of Abu Ghraib. These images must also be explored *as* visual representations, rather than documents which reveal what Roland Barthes terms the *that-has-been* (2000: 76-88).

In order to assess the value of early critical approaches to the Abu Ghraib images—specifically those of Judith Butler and Susan Sontag—it will first be necessary to offer a brief overview of the ways in which the images have been received on a more general level by the public and the media. From here, I would like to situate the specific

---

<sup>6</sup> See Welch 2005. The latest development at the time of print is that the US Government have been ordered to release the images. For more details, see Gumbel, A. 'Judge Orders Pentagon to Release 100 New Photos of Abu Ghraib prison Abuse', *The Independent*. 5 June 2005. Despite this ruling, the full body of images and videos have not yet been allowed into the public domain, and the U.S Government continues to appeal against the court's decision.

responses of Butler and Sontag alongside their broader discursive engagements with the issues surrounding gender and photography respectively.

### **Images from Abu Ghraib: The Reception**

In the first instance, I would like to propose that reactions to the Abu Ghraib images can be plotted along a three-point scale. The first reaction is rooted in a utilitarian logic: in conflict scenarios, ends justify means. The second reaction is one in which the images are framed as the result of a 'few bad apples', and the third is one of simple outrage – outrage, that is, that 'we' could have been responsible for perpetrating such barbaric crimes.<sup>7</sup> Each of these positions is highly problematic when it comes to developing a working critique of the Abu Ghraib photographs.

The first reaction, that one must do whatever is necessary to attain the greatest good for the greatest number, hinges on the West's perceived occupation of the moral high ground. Needless to say, this position is highly subjective and asserts clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, us and them. More worryingly, however, by presuming the West's 'noble intent', proponents of this position try to justify the perpetration of acts that they condemn when they are committed by non-Western others. Within this response, then, the viewer may oppose the Abu Ghraib images, but it is the evidence of the action, and not the action itself, that is the primary source of offence.

While the first position presupposes the moral innocence of the perpetrators, the second response, in which the images are interpreted as the result of wrongdoing on the part of a few isolated individuals, testifies to the strength of the viewer's desire for their own innocence—both as an autonomous individual and as a citizen. In this logic, the acts are ascribed to individuals whose values and views are believed to be entirely unrepresentative of those held by society at large. As President Bush stated, just because these things were done by Americans doesn't mean that Americans do these kinds of things (Grossinger 2004). The 'few bad apples' response does not deny the authenticity of the events, but projects sole responsibility onto a minority of others. As the viewer does not identify with the perpetrators of the torture, they accept no responsibility for it. By refusing to implicate oneself in the wrongdoing, the individuals who adopt this position work to isolate and contain the influence of the Abu Ghraib images. This discourse, however, fails to take account of the fact that soldiers intended to show these images to others. Like the photographs of black lynchings in America, these photos were made to be shared and seen; they were not meant solely for private consumption.<sup>8</sup> In light of this, critical discourses not only need to engage with the images as representations, but also as objects of exchange.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> At this stage in the discussion I refer to the notion of a preformed, presupposed and unified 'we'. I use the term advisedly and I am aware that such a statement may be read as a homogeneous response. I do so as a descriptive device to represent the generalised reception of these images by select audiences within the American, and also British, public and media.

<sup>8</sup> A number of responses to Abu Ghraib have compared these two sets of images. For photographs of the lynchings mentioned here see Allen 2000.

<sup>9</sup> While we cannot assume that such images would have received a positive reception from the family, friends and colleagues who may have seen them, it is fair to note that this favourable reaction was probably expected. This anticipation in itself speaks to a broader cultural culpability than is generally acknowledged.

The third response is typically left-wing; the individual expresses shock and outrage at the Abu Ghraib images. Once again, the viewer's innocence is constructed through the binary rhetoric of 'us' and 'them': *I am outraged that we (I) did that because that is something that they (other) do and we (I) am not like them (other)*. Inadvertently, this response both endorses and claims to repudiate the notion of hierarchy: it is only by hierarchizing the concepts of 'us' and 'them' that the individual can refuse to identify with the actions of the other. Again, then, the innocence of the viewer is established through a gesture of denial. In this instance, however, the individual does not deny that society is collectively responsible for the behaviour of the U.S. soldiers, but instead denies that he or she participates in that society. In short, one thinks of oneself as the 'good apple' in the bad bunch: a clear distinction is drawn between the viewer and the perpetrator. The viewer is again protected by the assertion that they could not act in such a way and so could not be held accountable for the actions of the soldiers. By denouncing the aggressors—or those individuals who are portrayed as such—the viewer seeks to retain his or her personal integrity. As a result, the intensity of the spectator's condemnation is directly proportional to his or her sense of their own innocence.

Since the revelation of the photographs, the Bush administration has adopted each one of these positions; often doing so in terms that intersect in unlikely ways with liberalist rhetoric. Via different means and processes, each of these responses denies the viewer's personal complicity in the production and consumption of the Abu Ghraib photographs, and in the cultural economy out of which they arose.<sup>10</sup>

In the opening paragraphs of this article, I outlined my shock at my own understated response to the Abu Ghraib images. At this point, then, I should like to clarify that this response was not in any way dismissive of the crimes that the images depicted. On reflection, I believe that this reaction speaks to an honesty that has hitherto been absent from the discourses that have surrounded the images—the honesty, that is, of ownership. For me these images did not provoke outrage because they did not elicit surprise; they failed to elicit surprise because they made absolute sense to my visual epistemology. The images did not materialise from a realm beyond reality, and likewise they were not created by a few 'bad' individuals. Rather, they had a legitimate place within contemporary visual culture. In short these images were not unfamiliar: they had always been with me.

To summarise, some theorists have formulated the relationship between the West's visual economy and these images as one which is either correlative or unidirectional. In doing so, they situate these images outside of or parallel to culture, rather than within it. It is my view that this approach rejects an exploratory dialogue in favour of a moderated and linear monologue.

### **Judith Butler: 'The Power of Perspective'**

In an interview with Louise Gray in 2004, Judith Butler described the model she had developed to understand public and personal reactions to the images of the abuse at Abu Ghraib. In Butler's model, the Anglo-American reaction is understood via several

---

<sup>10</sup>I refer here to the economic and symbolic codes and practices that contribute to the construction of both individual and collective identities across all aspects of the viewer's social and cultural experience. The cultural economy to which I make reference includes work, recreation, ritual, and relationships, as well as regulating structures such as law, religion, and the media.

stages of recognition. 'First and foremost', argues Butler, 'there was revulsion, and a sense that this was not something a U.S. soldier should or would do' (51). In my opinion, this first stage falls into my own final category of response; it is an expression of disbelief that such acts could be perpetrated by representatives of one's own culture, supplemented by a refusal to accept one's own involvement with that culture. As I have already mentioned, such a response is not only problematic because it proclaims naivety by refusing to acknowledge the routine prevalence of such atrocities, but also because it reinforces the binary between 'us' and 'them'. This is demonstrated in Butler's reference to the actions of the 'U.S.' soldiers. Such a detail presumes that these actions would be expected, or even acceptable, had they been perpetrated by soldiers of another nationality: 'them'. I read Butler's assertion here as a direct contradiction of her criticism, in the same interview, of 'the media's predisposition for Manichaeic judgements' (51). I would also argue that this position removes the focus from the abused captives by illuminating and foregrounding the victimhood of the viewer. In my view, Butler's insistent emphasis of the spectator's shock and surprise is indicative of the underdeveloped character of her response to the atrocities. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag also contends that 'shock' at the evidence of abuse is indicative of an intellectual and emotional self-indulgence:

Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia (102).

Butler states that the viewer's initial shock and disbelief at the Abu Ghraib images is soon displaced by 'a slow recognition' that these acts were in fact perpetrated by American soldiers (51). This second phase of response again reinforces the plea to innocence through ignorance. By advancing this explanatory model to describe the general public's response to the photographs, and by situating herself within this same model, Butler identifies *her own* desire to dissociate herself from the actions they depict, as well as that of her assumed reader or viewer.

Butler proceeds to observe that '[t]here is no sense that there is a crime going on....There is a certain sense of pride: send these back home. Show the friends and family what a great job I've been doing' (52). This undermines Butler's previous position, which described public shock at the revelation of the images. This statement posits the desire to share the photographs, and therefore indicates an anticipated acceptance of the actions they depict. This expanded audience widens the scope of culpability and complicity, as it suggests that the legitimacy of the images extends beyond the specific, and limited, context in which they were produced. What one may have hoped to dismiss as a 'few bad apples' begins to look more like a bumper crop. The final stage of Butler's analysis expresses her view that the public has been 'reticent' in recognising 'the sexualisation of the punishment, the coercive sodomy for instance, or fellatio' (51). According to my own

research, however, the public, as they have been represented by the media, have certainly acknowledged this aspect of the images.<sup>11</sup>

In considering the reception of these images, Butler highlights the difference between regarding all forms of sexual coercion as 'disgusting', and positing the homosexual element of this coercion as the specific site of offence. While this analysis is valuable, Butler does fall back on this very distinction in order to frame her argument. Butler observes that the production of these images 'shows that the U.S. soldiers' and Islamic anti-homosexual attitudes are not that far apart' (51). In primarily focusing on the homosexual nature of the images, Butler ignores the construction of heterosexuality as it relates to the positioning of both American and Iraqi bodies, male and female. Furthermore, she neglects to incorporate any information regarding the treatment of the facility's female prisoners into her discussion. Nor does she allow space within this statement for the photos featuring Lynndie England, or other female soldiers, which, whilst representing domination and submission, might be considered to do so within a specifically heterosexual matrix. Butler also neglects to account for the construction of gender, as it interacts with sexuality, within her discourse on homosexuality.

Butler appears to contradict herself on two counts. Firstly, she claims that the sexual nature of such images is only hesitantly acknowledged by the viewer, but this claim is prefaced by the assertion that it is the *homosexual* nature of the images that functions as the catalyst for the viewer's outrage. Secondly, Butler refutes this focus on homosexuality only in order for it to remain the sole focus of her own analysis.

In my reading of her response, Butler offers an account of the Abu Ghraib images that is not faithful to the critiques she provides in earlier texts. In her previous writing, after all, Butler calls specifically for the distinction and separation of normatively assumed gender-sexuality dichotomies (1999: 3-45). Specifically Butler posits gender as a social construct that is not 'naturally' correlative to any binary model of biological sex. Within heteronormative culture the sex/gender relationship is integral to the construction of sexuality and sexual practices. Legitimate sexuality is, therefore, equated to an exchange between male/masculine/man and female/feminine/woman. In contrast to fixed, essentialist interpretations of the sex/gender/sexuality relationship, Butler argues that this relationship is both constructed and performative; in this way she allows for mutability, appropriation and dissonance within and between these categorisations. In her interview with Gray, however, this distinction is not accounted for within the terms of her critical practice, and she proceeds to neglect the complexity of the relationship between these categories. Here, I refer specifically to her attempt to unpack the homoerotic characteristics of the images without exploring the uses and implications of gender, which is often the means by which homosexuality is codified and constructed. In a number of images, the 'homosexual' dimensions of the acts depicted are implied through the process of feminised sexualisation, rather than through the specifically homosexual nature of the acts themselves. Butler's silence over the 'feminisation' of the Iraqi prisoners functions to affirm unsophisticated and homogenous approaches to gender, sexuality, and identity, while also neglecting the logic of the arguments she sets forth in her earlier work.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argued that the concept of gender can be usefully destabilised through parody: by appropriating normative and non-normative gender roles

---

<sup>11</sup> See Wiltz 2005; Schneider 2004; Krauthammer 2004.

simultaneously, the individual can disrupt categorical configurations of identity, and thus expose the constructed, mutable character of gender to scrutiny. It is through reference to the concept of parody that she proposes a non-linear relationship between the 'copy' and the 'original' that it imitates; a relationship that Butler frames as copy-copy relationship, whereby the secondary copy works to dispute the claims to originality made by the initial term (175).<sup>12</sup> This notion is central to my critique of Butler's response to the Abu Ghraib photographs. As I have mentioned already, Butler does not fail to acknowledge the sexual dimensions of the Abu Ghraib images, but neither does she locate them in relation to wider discourses about gender: she notes the impact of Western sexual practices and conceptualisations of sexuality upon the construction of the images, but she does not consider how these images increase and inform our knowledge and experience of sexuality within Western culture. By considering the photographs within the framework of *copy-copy*, however, these images might contribute to our understanding, recognition and interpretation of gender as both essential and 'originary'.<sup>13</sup>

In her references to 'dehumanisation', 'torture', and 'brutality', and also through her call to trace the individual victims of abuse in order to take account of their 'psychological or physical damage', Butler does not consider the roles of those who provided the original to the copy (Gray 2004). To clarify, she considers the parodic nature of these images and identifies the violence they depict but she does not allude to the cultural practices, experiences, and attitudes that inform the construction of these images. She fails, then, to acknowledge the impact that rhetoric such as hers, which focuses on the 'copy', has upon the reception and understanding of the 'original'. It goes without saying that Butler's omission of references to both gender and parody in her writing on Abu Ghraib poses a number of problems to the scholar. After all, when the behaviour in the Abu Ghraib photographs parodies the sexual humiliation traditionally inflicted upon female bodies; when there is no mention within Butler's critique of female prisoners or guards; when gender and sexuality are only discussed in relation to the dominating or violated heterosexual, male body, then it appears to me that the answer to the question that Butler poses—'what constitutes a human being?'—would be constructed in exclusively phallogocentric terms; omitting any reference to women—either as victims or perpetrators.<sup>14</sup>

As Butler's response to the content of these images is limited, so too is her analysis of the context, materiality, production, and reception of the photographs. An initial indication of this is demonstrated in the following statement:

[T]he first thing that strikes me is how far away these photos are from something like an interventionist photojournalism. These are not pictures that have been taken for the purpose of exposing a crime (52).

---

<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion of parody and the copy see Butler 1999: 175.

<sup>13</sup> Throughout this paper I use the term 'original' for clarity of intent, but do so advisedly. The use of this term does not oppose the copy-copy relationship outlined by Butler. It is, however, useful to consider the 'original' as the direct source of inspiration, and to do so within the terms of understanding demonstrated by the producers of the imagery in question.

<sup>14</sup> See Butler 1999; Butler 2004; Gray 2004.

In foregrounding the evidential, objective, and documentary status of the photograph, and in her reference to an 'interventionist photojournalism', Butler advances an argument that is rooted in naïve and idealistic assumptions about photography. As Sontag observes in *On Photography*, photojournalism is specifically constructed as documentation without intervention:

Photographing is essentially an act of non-intervention. Part of the horror of such memorable coups of photojournalism [...] comes from the awareness of how plausible it has become, in situations where the photographer has the choice between a photograph and a life to choose the photograph. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene. (11-12)

According to Sontag, while the photographer might intervene in order to enhance the visual scene, he or she does not intervene directly in the suffering itself. In this way the photojournalist asserts a moral position within the photograph, but remains amoral during the process of its production. That is not to say that within documentary genres the photographer is passive, at the very least the photographer's presence can be seen to indirectly influence the image through technical and creative decisions; to the other extreme events may be altered or engineered as a direct result of the photographer's presence. Thus, it is perhaps more accurate to consider that the Abu Ghraib photos are perhaps more and not less interventionist than some journalistic, documentary photography. In the Abu Ghraib images the act of photographing directly plays a part in the humiliation of the prisoners and it is this active role of the photographer and photographic process that reveals the true complexity of discourses surrounding the photographs. Hence, the images must be read in a schema whereby we acknowledge that the photographic object and its content are inseparable within analysis, but that neither the object nor the image is reducible to the other.

While Butler takes recourse to hierarchal and binary rhetoric when addressing the cultural legitimacy of the photographer and the photographic artefact, she does allow for the transgression of certain and specific borders in her consideration of the images' functional use. In moving the images between the genres of 'souvenir' and 'evidence', Butler acknowledges the mutability of sites and modalities. At the same time, however, in her exploration of this specific movement her discourse becomes problematic, and even endangering to an informed discussion of the Abu Ghraib images. As legal evidence, Butler makes assumptions regarding the accuracy and authority of the photographs from Abu Ghraib, but she does so without considering the involvement of those individuals who are not clearly represented within the frame. Such evidence omits the complicit and generative presence of those behind the camera, watching from the sidelines or choreographing the photographic scene: those who are cropped from the frame are simultaneously cropped from the event. To situate these images as evidence—as direct representations of reality—without engaging with the full extent of their implications, means that the events they depict can only ever be partially (re)constructed. The 'evidence', after all, only shows those who are present in front of the lens; those who are participating directly in the events that are being recorded. Individuals and authorities who remain unseen are excluded from recognition. Hence, the picture begins to shape rather than represent 'reality'. Instead of acknowledging the full level of collusion and

cooperation required to create these images, Butler indulges in master-narratives of authority and authenticity, which cause her response to resonate on an emotional, rather than an analytical, level.

In her considerations of the Abu Ghraib images, then, Butler neglects to consider photography as a sophisticated visual medium, and instead considers it solely in terms of its role as an objective recording process. Her failure here to engage with the relationship between the 'reality' of events and the representational 'copy' mirrors her omission of gender factors from her content analysis. By alluding to, and then failing to develop, many of these issues, Butler ignores some of the specific challenges the Abu Ghraib images present, and does so in favour of straightforward condemnation. The fear that any engagement with the images may be misconstrued as an endorsement of the behaviours they depict thus looms large over Butler's discourse.

### **Susan Sontag: The Hidden Hierarchies of Cultural Analysis**

Susan Sontag's article, 'Regarding the Torture of Others', was published in the *New York Times* in May 2004 and offers a more comprehensive approach to the Abu Ghraib images. Like Butler, Sontag acknowledges the sexual nature of the pictures, and she also observes that the pictures do not register, in any visible way, the perpetrators' awareness of any moral or legal wrongdoing. She proceeds, however, to identify the ways in which the production and function of these images might work to distinguish them from traditional photojournalism. In short, then, Sontag's account offers extensive coverage of factors that are not recognised or examined in Butler's critique.

In her response to the images from Abu Ghraib, Sontag situates her discourse within a defined cultural context: she reconsiders the photographs alongside Western recreational practices, attitudes, and values. Furthermore, she attempts to locate the images' historical precedents. In her opening paragraph, Sontag makes the important observation that '[t]he Western memory museum is now mostly a visual one' (2004a: 1). This focus on visual memory is sustained throughout the article, and provides an excellent insight into the cultural value of these images—particularly in terms of their reception as visual, rather than descriptive or textual, accounts. Sontag also identifies productive tensions between words, text, and images; stressing the capacity of visual representation to transcend, at least potentially, the limitations of textual representation:

[T]he pictures will not go away [...] Indeed, it seems that they were necessary to get our leaders to acknowledge they had a problem on their hands [...] up until then, there had been only words, which are easier to cover up [...] and so much easier to forget (4).

Despite her repeated assertions that images define and shape historical memory, Sontag's discussion of their reception is rooted largely in the textual field. While she repeatedly foregrounds the visual impact of the Abu Ghraib images, it is the verbal response to them that Sontag appears to find most lacking: 'The administration's initial response was to say that the president was shocked and disgusted by the photographs – as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict' (4). In response to this, one might choose to question whether it is ever really possible to construct a satisfactory response to the photographs within the limited and limiting structure of language. While linguistic-

textual modes of expression might facilitate the critical-political location of the images, they are nonetheless inadequate if we wish to account fully for how the images function and what they do.

Sontag's general analysis of language does, however, bring some significant possibilities to the fore. In my interpretation, the distinction that Sontag draws between 'torture', 'abuse', and 'humiliation' offers an immediate but abstract discourse: the reader is encouraged to apply these concepts to the images, but must do so at a remove from the context in which the images were generated – the context, that is, of Abu Ghraib, as well as that of Western culture more generally (1). The limitations of categorisation as a model of analysis have already been explored in relation to Butler's critique. In consideration of the conceived primacy of the visual, within contemporary Western society and in her own discourse, Sontag's attempt to define and distinguish between these discrete terms, if only considered in direct relation to the images, is largely redundant as such rhetoric seems likely to be outstripped by the longevity of the images themselves.<sup>15</sup> Therefore such a limited analysis contributes little to a working critique of the photographs. Labelling these representations as torture may challenge the wider political community to admit the truth of recent events, but it is doubtful that it will alter the course of these events.<sup>16</sup>

Although Sontag provides a thorough critique of textual analysis, this analysis does not acknowledge the extent of its own scope: she connects the content of the images to a historicised discourse considering American culture, but she does not look to expand this discourse to identify the regulating normative values within that history. This is seen in the following quotation, in which Sontag both admits and limits culpability for the content of the photographs:

Rape and pain inflicted on the genitals are among the most common forms of torture. Not just in Nazi concentration camps and in Abu Ghraib when it was run by Saddam Hussein. Americans, too, have done and do [these things] when they are told, or made to feel, that those over whom they have absolute power deserve to be humiliated, tormented. They do them when they are led to believe that the people they are torturing belong to an inferior race or religion. For the meaning of these pictures is not just that these acts were performed, but their perpetrators apparently had no sense that there was anything wrong in what the pictures show (4).

While Sontag identifies the capacity of the U.S. to commit such actions, she implies that they constitute the outcomes of extreme or specific circumstances. Like Butler, moreover, Sontag fails to telegraph gender as a category of subordination in which individuals are vulnerable to control through rape, coercion, humiliation, and discrimination. While many of these behaviours are illegal and socially unacceptable (if perceived, to some extent, as inevitable), others are thoroughly sanctioned through the media, arts,

---

<sup>15</sup> Sontag raises this issue herself when she situates the roles of remembering and forgetting within a historical context. See Sontag 2004a: 102-103.

<sup>16</sup> The U.S. publicly flouts human rights conventions both in Iraq and in Guantanamo Bay. In response to these transgressions, the international community has offered guarded criticism but largely appears apathetic and reticent to move from speech to action. See Sontag 2004b: 2.

capitalism, culture, entertainment, and the legal superstructure. In fact, the increasing dismay that Sontag expresses at the entertainment value of the Abu Ghraib images is couched in ironic rhetoric that is often used to defend certain types of gender inequality within Western societies: '[S]ince the pictures were meant to be circulated and seen by many people: it was all fun' (3). This idea is reiterated when Sontag assesses the impact of video games, competitive sports, cinema, and high school and college culture in the U.S. upon the production of the Abu Ghraib images. Interestingly, the activities that Sontag telegraphs in relation to the images of Abu Ghraib are those in which gender roles are still clearly and heavily inscribed. In short, Sontag argues, 'America has become a country in which fantasies and the practice of violence are seen as good entertainment, fun' (3). For Sontag, it is the spread, rather than the content, of such behaviour that is a source of concern: if it could be isolated it would be tolerable, though never, of course, desirable.

Sontag's recognition of the role played by Western culture in the production of the Abu Ghraib photographs makes her lack of reference to gender all the more glaring. After all, if we acknowledge that sexual humiliation is torture (as is demonstrated within these photographs), then we must also acknowledge this torture is not confined to Abu Ghraib, but occurs—in variously legitimate forms—way beyond its perimeter. Social complicity in such a practice is further extended and legitimised than simply when represented at Abu Ghraib. To allow that these images are torture, but that the daily sexualisation of women in pornography and other media is not, is to exclude women from the category of 'human'. I believe that these images invite us to draw a line between 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' forms of torture, abuse, and humiliation. Put simply, these images force us to recognise that all bodies and identities are not made equal – each is ascribed a different political value in accordance with certain socially significant characteristics, such as sex, gender, and race.

In her article, Sontag attempts to move beyond Butler's limited theorisation of the image-as-object by first acknowledging that the Abu Ghraib images are specific to the digital age (as is evident from the way in which they were produced and disseminated), and then by recognising that the constructed and limited nature of the images means they cannot function effectively as authoritative evidence of real events. As Sontag explains it:

[A]n uncropped version of one photo showing a stack of naked men in a hallway -- a version that revealed how many other soldiers were at the scene, some not even paying attention -- contradicted the pentagon's assertion that only rogue soldiers were involved (4).

In this way, Sontag acknowledges what lies beyond the frame. In contrast to Butler, Sontag is keen to acknowledge that 'the distinction between photograph and reality—as between spin and policy – can easily evaporate' (4).

Sontag further illuminates the relationship between images and reality through reference to a specific cultural practice: the consumption of pornography (2). In the first instance, Sontag gestures towards the ways in which the pornographic image that imitates human sexuality becomes, in turn, the referent of that same sexuality: 'An erotic life is, for more and more people, that which can be captured in digital photographs and on video' (2). Sontag thus signposts the dynamic relationship between cultural practice and

representation, and through this manoeuvre she works to identify the influence of that same culture upon the production of the Abu Ghraib images. While Sontag offers many valuable insights regarding the images and their relationship to American culture, her overall thesis remains fractured and does not fully connect these individual observations.

Although much of this article has focused on the problems and inconsistencies that Sontag's text presents, many of the concerns that I raise in relation to Butler's article are satisfied within Sontag's account; mainly because Sontag considers the acts that the Abu Ghraib images depict on a socio-cultural, as well as an individual, level. For her, 'The issue is not whether the torture was done by individuals (i.e., "not by everybody")—but whether it was systematic. Authorised. Condoned. All acts are done by individuals' (2). While Sontag does not seek to apportion blame to the individual or the government, she does take the unique step, at least within this level of her discussion, of announcing that 'the photographs are us' (2). In this way, then, Sontag contends that the photograph-as-object cannot be separated from the photograph-as-content, or the photograph-as-representation.

Sontag's analysis thus admits a collective cultural liability for the events at Abu Ghraib, but continues to frame these events within the contained and restricted geography of Abu Ghraib. It is my understanding, therefore, that Sontag's rhetoric still expresses a reluctance to 'own', or to implicate oneself in, the events that the photographs portray. This may be something *we* do to *them*, but we do it over *there*. Sontag thus locates the abuse within a limited temporal and geographical context, even if it is still recognised as immoral within that context. Her discourse, however, provides a strong account of the image as object, and of its reception within the cultural field. Thus, for me, when considered within an expanded framework, Sontag's insistence in labelling these images as 'torture' does not simply offer the potential to transform the way in which we understand these images, but also the means by which we understand the category of torture itself.

### **Towards A Productive Methodology**

Because Butler and Sontag respond to the Abu Ghraib images in discourses that are moralistic and descriptive, their accounts can only tell us what the images *say* and express a sense of outrage either that it was said at all, or that we were subjected to hearing it. Such analyses prohibit the full generation of discourses that take account of the functional value of the images' content and medium. Furthermore, analyses of the images that do not look beyond the frame work to contain these images in a way that facilitates the negation of gender as an analytical category: the subjugation of male prisoners, which imitates the subjugation of women in Western societies, is thus separated from the culture by which it was inspired. Hence, the images are seen to result from the processes by which identities and subjectivities are constructed within a culture, without being *part* of these processes.

At a visual level, the Abu Ghraib photographs 'gender' subjects through recourse to a system of physical markers and compositional devices that suggest particular identities and/or subject positions. As in Butler's concept of 'parody', the dissonance that ensues unsettles the stability of conventional gender dichotomies, and thus undermines essentialist and fixed approaches to the concept of gender. What we find in the photographs of Abu Ghraib, then, is a depiction of 'male-femininities' and 'female-

masculinities', as well as other cultural and ethnic identity variants that problematise traditional systems of binary classification (Halberstam 1998).<sup>17</sup> Such identities are not, however, homogeneous in their representation. If we consider the implied 'masculinity' of Lynndie England, for example, we can see that within the visual frame, and within broader discourses, hers is an agentic and subjective mode of representation. That is to say, she is free to style herself in relation to others in the image, the photographer, and, by proxy, the viewer. In contrast, if we consider discourses concerning the male prisoners, we witness a visually inscribed process of feminisation. This is demonstrated in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, the following: the 'to-be-looked-at-ness', or objectification, of the prisoners; the homogenisation of individual identities within the collective; the enactment of sexual domination and submission; and (through the process of hooding) the prohibition of the gaze, which itself forecloses one's ability to participate in the process of one's own representation (Mulvey 1975: 25). In addition, censorship and the media's editorial procedures have had the combined effect of depersonalising the male bodies even further: the pixilation of the prisoners' masculine genitalia (in certain reproductions the photographs) works to infer the femininity of these prisoners through a Lacanian conception of 'lack'. The issues that the photographs raise, then, are broadly convergent with those that underpin feminist theorisations of contemporary representational politics. Many of the images—especially those of a sexual nature—do not portray coercion in any overt way, and thus imply a collusive relationship between the prisoners and soldiers. I am aware that such a statement presents a number of problems, and that it will (and should) be exposed as narrow and selective in its frame of reference. If, however, we are to understand these photographs as parodic imitations of pornographic images, then factors of collusion and consent are necessarily more complicated than they might appear within the frame. Like much pornography, many of these images do not represent coercion directly (be it physical, psychological, social or economic), but implies degradation and subjugation through what *appears* to be cooperation. While it might be the case that the pornographic characteristics of the Abu Ghraib images are open to contestation, the photographs do seem to operate in accordance with a 'pornographic-mechanism', which determines the 'pornographic' contours of the depicted humiliations. The presence of this mechanism thus extends the debate about the photographs beyond the context of Abu Ghraib, and into the space of related debates about pornography, coercion, and consent.

When attempting to situate the Abu Ghraib images in relation to a larger frame of reference, simply acknowledging the ways in which these images recall or are inspired by pornographic imagery does not fully engage with the cultural construct of 'woman' that is projected and reified within the photographs. Nor does such a limited discourse take account of expansive, cross-cultural investments in the systems of gender inequality that inspire the denigration that the images depict. As the photographs illustrate the shared homophobia of the U.S. soldiers and the Iraqi prisoners, so they also reveal a shared belief in the second-class status of women. The 'feminised' treatment of the prisoners

---

<sup>17</sup> J. Halberstam identifies *female-masculinities* as the legitimate incorporation of masculinity as a gender identity by an individual who is biologically female. This discourse specifically opposes the assumption that any such incorporation is reducible to a mimetic imitation of male-masculinity. Rather, this gender identity disrupts normative values while remaining, simultaneously outside of that same value system. See Halberstam 1998.

does not merely contribute to the codification of homosexuality but is also its own denigrative categorisation: ““They wanted us to feel as though we were women, the way women feel and this is the worst insult, to feel like a woman”” (al-Shweiri, ‘Abu Ghraib’).<sup>18</sup> If sexual humiliation is normalised as a standard for the treatment of ‘women’, then it is to the gendered nature of the acts, and not the acts themselves, that the subjugation is principally ascribed. It is the treatment of the prisoner ‘like a woman’ which acts as the primary factor of abuse.<sup>19</sup> While the prisoners’ racial and religious identities may mark them out as ‘other’ to the ethnic ‘same’ of the American soldier – thus situating them as bodies to be subjugated – these identities do not play *the* major role in the process of acting-out the subjugation; there is no shared belief in the negative implications of these identities. Rather, ‘woman’ is the mark of otherness that is contained within these representations. The treatment of the prisoners ‘like’ women tells us as much about social attitudes to gender as it does about attitudes to certain racial and religious groups.

### **The Challenge of Spectatorship**

The challenge that is inherent to any critical examination of the Abu Ghraib images is that of acknowledging the full complexity of the relationship between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ models of subordination and representation, and taking into account the ways in which this relationship governs the dynamics of the photographs and our responses to them. In order to address the functional and representational issues that the images present, they must be regarded, first and foremost, as visual artefacts. This approach, then, aims to investigate the cultural practices that inspired the acts of torture the photographs depict, in addition to recognising and analysing the acts themselves. The challenge for theorists—and specifically those involved in the feminist project – is to resist the urge to shirk engagement with an image simply on account of its negativity. While one’s initial response may be one of moral condemnation, it is important to realise that the image exists beyond the site of production and must, therefore, be engaged with across its generative sites. This engages *both* social and ocularcentric modes of analysis, allowing the viewer to dissect the codified construction and inscription of identities. Through this methodology, we might come to recognise the normative processes that are at work in images, and in analysing these processes we might in turn move beyond dichotomised configurations of legitimacy. Such a practice allows the images to be understood in relation to the ‘real’ from which they are constructed, and the ‘symbolic’, in which they, in turn, invest. By embracing methodological practices from art-historical and visual studies, we may begin to understand the image outside of a descriptive account of what it *says*, and begin to understand what it *does*.

---

<sup>18</sup> Dhia al-Shweiri, former Abu Ghraib prisoner, quoted in ‘Abu Ghraib’. *Wikipedia*. 30 January 2007. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature\\_of\\_Abu\\_Ghraib\\_abuse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_of_Abu_Ghraib_abuse).

<sup>19</sup> Howard Schneider considers this gender element within the subjugating act. However his account acknowledges this feature without offering an account of the construction of gender or the implication of the statements made about women through the treatment of male bodies when they are treated ‘as woman’. See Schneider 2004.

## Bibliography

- 'Abu Ghraib'. *Wikipedia*. 30 January 2007.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature\\_of\\_Abu\\_Ghraib\\_abuse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_of_Abu_Ghraib_abuse).
- 'Abu Ghraib Prison'. *GlobalSecurity.org*. 30 January 2007.  
[www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/iraq/abu-ghurayb-prison.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/iraq/abu-ghurayb-prison.htm).
- 'Abuse Of Iraqi POWs by GIs Probed'. *CBS News*. 28 April 2004. Transcript. 30 January 2007.  
[www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/printable614063.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/printable614063.shtml).
- Allen, J. et al eds. *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Twin Palms, 2000.
- Al-Shweiri, Dhia, qtd. in 'Abu Ghraib'. *Wikipedia*. 30 January 2007.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature\\_of\\_Abu\\_Ghraib\\_abuse](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nature_of_Abu_Ghraib_abuse).
- Barthes, R. *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage, 2000.
- Butler, J. *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York: Verso, 2004.
- Fisher, I. 'Aftereffects: Prison Graveyard'. *The New York Times* 25 April 2003(a).
- Fisher, I. 'Aftereffects: the Graves'. *The New York Times* 28 April 2003(b).
- Gumbel, A. 'Judge Orders Pentagon to Release 100 New Photos of Abu Ghraib Prison Abuse'. *The Independent* 5 June 2005.
- Gray, L. 'The Power of Perspective'. *Art Review* 40. November 2004: 51-52.
- Grossinger, R. 'A Howl'. *Abu Ghraib: The Politics of Torture*. California: North Atlantic Books.
- Halberstam, J. *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.
- 'Iraqi Prisoners Controversy'. *Washington Post*. 30 January 2007.  
[www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/flash/photo/world/2004-05-03\\_prisonabuse/movie.htm?startat=1&indexFile=world\\_2004-05-20\\_photos/movie.htm](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/flash/photo/world/2004-05-03_prisonabuse/movie.htm?startat=1&indexFile=world_2004-05-20_photos/movie.htm).
- Krauthammer, C. 'Abu Ghraib as Symbol'. *Washington Post* 7 May 2004, late ed: A.33
- Mulvey, L. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Press, 1989.
- Rather, Dan. 'Army Probes POW Abuse'. *60 Minutes II* (CBS News) 28 April 2004. 30 January 2007.  
[www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/main614063.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/main614063.shtml).
- Schneider, H. 'In Breaking Taboos, Photos Add Insult to Injury'. *Washington Post* 7 May 2004, late ed.: A.24. 6 June 2005.  
<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/629798911.html>.
- Sontag, S. *On Photography*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 'Regarding the Torture of Others'. *New York Times* 23 May 2004a. 29 April 2005.  
<http://nytimes.com>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin, 2004b.
- Welch, M. 'The Pentagon's Secret Stash'. *Reason Magazine*. April 2005. 6 June 2005.  
[www.truthout.org/docs\\_2005/040105Z.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/040105Z.shtml).
- Wiltz, T. 'Torture's Tortured Cultural Roots'. *Washington Post* 3 May 2005. 6 June 2005. [www.truthout.org/docs\\_2005/printer\\_051405D.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/printer_051405D.shtml).