

'A Thousand and One Photographs'

A Discussion of Abu Ghraib and the Orientalist Homoerotic

Melissa Murdock

Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat)...is not the province of my analysis here, alas, despite the frequency of its appearance.

-Edward Said

So we had sex, or at least I lay and allow him to fuck me, and thought as his prick shot in and he kissed my neck, back, and shoulders, that it was a most unappetizing position for a world-famous artist to be in.

-Joe Orton, in Tangier

The last decade has seen the emergence of a lively historiography of categorical (re)formulations of masculinity and nation and their roles in the modern era. Cultural histories have set out to define nations and the complex construction of 'manliness' in different historical settings. Such scholarship has indeed opened up discussion and understanding of the varied processes, relationships, and institutions that establish and maintain the arrangement of particular categories associated with both 'manhood' and 'nationhood.' Through engagement with these texts, it becomes clear that much of what we thought was 'natural' even 'cultural' is revealed as construction based on preconceived

Melissa Murdock received her Honours degree in Political Science from the University of Victoria in April 2005. She is a current Masters candidate at UVic and looks forward to her concentration in Cultural, Social, and Political Thought. Her academic studies are moderated by a passion for surfing and road-trips. Melissa would like to thank Will Colish and the editorial team at On Politics for their comments and Dr. Geoffrey Whitehall for his support on this and other projects.

notions of identity and difference. To be sure, the concept of *sexuality*, has become an 'identity category.' Based on such revelations, as revealed within the deconstruction of the Classical taxonomic ordering of bodies and beings, are the exclusionary dimensions set within a space of an overt, yet sometimes repressed, concentric circle. Within such a circle, whereby all three points—masculinity, nation, and sexuality—are intricately connected, 'heterosexuality,' *is* the defining focus of modern civilization, strength, power, and normativity. As modernity, identity, subjectivity, and sexuality all fold into and stem from such a circle, 'homosexuality' will always be associated with all things opposite: barbarism, weakness, vulnerability, and deviance. With this in mind, the 'sexual torture' that took place at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq becomes a concrete example whereby the centrality of these defining referents are not only revealed but also employed as tools. Thus as *strength, power, manhood, and heterosexuality* become the great defining moments of America—its people and its territory—the homoerotic flesh of the Orientalist object is reduced to a function of play and humiliation. In this light, it is clear that we have entered an era whereby, "screens rather than lenses now mediate the pursuit of bodily truths."¹

This essay sets out to traverse and unsettle a number of imposed boundaries. As 'homosexuality' (and therefore heterosexuality) is revealed as a Western identity category, a sexual practice, and a site of theoretical speculation, it becomes clear that when brought into contact with the sexual epistemologies of non-Western cultures, particularly between encounters of 'East' and 'West,' what comes to light are calamities of colonialism, race, sexuality, and nation.² As the normative nature of heterosexuality has been defended through theories that saw homosexuality as a form of heredity degeneration and a social contagion of modern culture,³ we must begin to understand how and why the prisoners at Abu Ghraib were dehumanized and objectified within a preconceived space of barbarism and sexual deviance. To link the sexual construction of space and time to the events in Iraq, it should be further noted that scholarship, in and through its deconstruction of the homoerotic strands of Orientalist narrative, reveals a series of interrelated sociopolitical, psychosexual and aesthetic issues. Clearly, each of the 1800 photographs bears witness to the practice and economics of empire, conceptions of race, the collusion of phallocratic and colonial interests, constructions of sexual 'deviance', questions of authority, and a crisis of representation.⁴

As powerful as the influence of American normativity goes without saying, the leaders of the United States recently proclaimed that heterosexuality comes naturally to the American people. President

George Bush suggests that the events that took place at Abu Ghraib are an exception and denies that the psychic and fantasy life of Americans is depraved, sick, or polluted.⁵ Instead, Bush reaffirms that Americans are *naturally* free from such perversions – that Americans could never enjoy inflicting such abuse, and would “never even have the mindset or capacity to think of such acts.”⁶ It should be noted that although many of the photos were originally cropped for damage-controlled consumption, the same photos now reveal multiple spectators, bystanders, and participants – many of whom appear to be erotically riled in the photos.⁷

The pictures of violence that mimic sexual acts closely associated with homosexuality such as anal and oral sex, as well as sado-masochist practices of bondage, leashing, and hooding led to public rage and media frenzy all over the world. Why the Western public and government reacted with such vehement rage towards the sexual torture and *not* the slow starvation of thousands due to American sanctions that targeted Iraq, the combined death of thousands of Iraqi civilians since the latest U.S. invasion, or even the plundering carnage in Falluja, is a very good question indeed.⁸ However, much of the rage on behalf of the public focused on the underlying elements of homophobia in the American military – representative of its “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy.⁹ But to foreground homophobia over other vectors of shame is to miss a crucial point. The photographs, the overt representations of sexual terror, dehumanization, and humiliation, are “not only homophobic, but racist, misogynist, and imperialist.”¹⁰ Even as Bush re-instates a discourse typical of a liberal bourgeois regime of ‘multicultural heteronormativity’ intrinsic to American patriotism, he remains adamant that the events at Abu Ghraib are the workings of a “few bad apples.”¹¹

The interpretation of sexual norms in the Middle East – “repressed, but with a perversity bubbling just beneath the surface” – is part of a centuries long Orientalist tradition – an Orientalist phantasmic that clearly informed the violent photographs at Abu Ghraib.¹² Moreover, at the heart of Islamist notions of sexuality lay the paradoxical view that the Orient is both the space of “illicit and dangerous sex” and the site of carefully suppressed “animalistic sexual instincts.”¹³ Evidentially, the Orientalist discourse has resurfaced in relation to the violence at Abu Ghraib, as both conservatives and progressives claim that the illegal status of homosexual acts in Islamic law demarcates sexual torture as especially humiliating and therefore a very effective form of military security perspective. Clearly the apparent taboo of homosexuality within Islamic culture figures heavily in the explanations as

to why the torture has been so devastating for its victims.

Madhi Bray, executive director of the Muslim American society says that Islam “calls for modesty in dress” – “being seen naked is a tremendous taboo and a tremendous humiliation in Muslim culture” – and homosexuality, considered a sin, “only becomes a problem when it is flaunted, affecting the entire society.”¹⁴ Former prisoner at Abu Ghraib, Dhia al-Shweiri says: “We are men. It’s OK if they beat me. Beatings don’t hurt us; it’s just a blow. But no one would want their manhood to be shattered. 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”¹⁵ Clearly Iraq, much like many other nations, places great importance on notions of masculinity.

In his article on ethnic cleansing and heterosexuality in Bosnia, John Borneman suggests that the Bosnian soldiers describe a warring culture troped by “vast amounts of drinking, indiscriminate murdering, fetishization of weapons, pornographic magazines, rape, and prostitution.”¹⁶ Borneman also cites a Bosnian signboard “Man Makes the Homeland and the Homeland Makes the Man.”¹⁷ The point to be made is that sexuality has long become an essential political technology that serves the (re)creation of the Other. As strength, masculinity, and manhood become referent points that entangle the dominant discourses representative of modernity, it ought not be surprising that when attempting to reduce the enemy to nothingness, it is not uncommon for the ultimate symbol of manhood to be attacked; namely, the phallus. As a case in point, United Nations psychologists report that in Bosnia the Serbian forces would force Croatians to bite off the genitals of their friends, and were also known to attempt to castrate males in prison camps with bayonets.¹⁸ On a similar note, it is suggested that the 9/11 attacks on American soil were a direct assault on the ultimate phallic symbol of American masculinity: the World Trade Towers.

The prior intention of sexual humiliation on behalf of the American military must not be denied. It is known that pro-War Washington conservatives had been discussing how Arabs were exceptionally vulnerable to sexual humiliation months before the April 2003 invasion of Iraq. One book that was frequently cited within the neo-con circles was *The Arab Mind*, a study of Arab culture and psychology, first published in 1973, by the cultural anthropologist Raphael Patai.¹⁹ Seymour Hersh suggests that the twenty page chapter on “The Realm of Sex,” complete with subheadings that include ‘Sexual Honour’ and ‘Sexual Repression,’ was particularly informative for American military interrogation strategies.²⁰ Jasbir Puar suggests that although in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* the Occident is charged with seeking out the illicit

sex found in the Orient in order to liberate itself from its own performance of the repressive hypothesis, in the case of Abu Ghraib, it is the repression of the Iraqi prisoners that is highlighted in order to efface the rampant hypersexual excess of the American prison guards.²¹

It is important to note how constructions of 'race' and 'nature' often work together to inform the dominant discourses so closely associated with imperialism. In fact, the recombinant mutations of race and nature clearly haunt the cultural politics of identity and difference. Arrays of scholars conceive of race and racism as "formative features of modernity, as deeply embedded in bourgeois liberalism, not as aberrant offshoots of them."²² Evidentially, as identity and difference became representations of the modern thought and practice, empirical knowledge could only be discovered by "the continuous, ordered, and universal tabulation of all possible differences."²³ To be sure, in and through the space of modernity, it is in language whereby "what we imagine becomes what we know, and...what we know becomes what we represent to ourselves everyday."²⁴ In this way, a racialized category becomes representational of a 'scientifically' ordered schematic of human beings. Though all human beings are reduced to the same confines of finitude, the *function* of such categorical demarcations is invaluable to various justifications for imperial exploitation and political subjugation.

'Race' is in fact an eighteenth century product of Western science.²⁵ Although the explicit nature of reason for differences in skin color was in fact debated for centuries in Europe, early scientific discourse suggested that since the skin color of specific races did not change when they moved to a new location, skin color was a biological and natural difference.²⁶ In this way, race became the defining axiom of biological hierarchy. It is, however, unfortunate that modern science has not shed any of its earlier suppositions about inferior races. For Paul Gilroy, we have seen that continuing difficulties in modernity are often marked in the face of racism whereby we are presented with a discrepancy between 'where we are' and the 'tools' that are available to us. Moreover, "at worst, we drift back into the scholastic eighteenth-century concepts and outmoded nineteenth century biological imaginings to make sense of a political and moral topography around "race" that is completely different from the Darwinian landscape in which the natural imperatives of culture, nation, and empire were first braided into the political ontologies of European dominant and colonial rule."²⁷ Nevertheless, by operating on the prior moves of pre-established grids of demarcation, the modern nomenclature of racialized objects becomes classified not only by the color of skin, but also of civilization

and cultural attributes. According to Ania Loomba, colored skin, small brains, lack of reason, and savagery are all linked to 'nature'.²⁸ Based on the homoerotic narrative that will be discussed below, surely 'homosexuality' can be added to this list.

In and through the process of scratching the surface of Orientalism, Orientalist scholarship is revealed as the politics of desire: it codifies Western ideas into academic discipline and then projects these desires onto its study of the Orient.²⁹ The same scholarship, founded by exclusion and maintained by violence, claimed Islamic, Chinese, and Indian sciences were *not* science; rather, such scholarship perpetuated the fiction that 'true science' belonged to the West. Similarly, Islamic law could not be classified as law in any concrete sense; Chinese medicine was not worthy of being referred to as medicine; and, further still, Indian civilization was denied any form of legitimate rationality—genuine reason was the sole privilege of Western civilization.³⁰ In the evolution of time, therefore, the Orient would always lag behind the West. Scholarly Orientalism thus became a highly fortified institution with its own apparatus that became a self-perpetuating, closed tradition that aggressively resisted all internal and external criticism—an authoritarian system that is flourishing today as much as it did in colonial times.³¹

As the world in which we live, carved and reduced into territorial demarcations, is complete with notions of universal signifiers denoting to each a region, race, and relevance, it becomes clear that the play of signs defines the anchorages of great power and discourse. It should also come as no surprise that the attacks of September 11 resurrected a discourse of 'Orientalism' that, while never entirely dormant, lay ready for new application. The simplicity of stark oppositions—good versus evil, freedom versus totalitarianism, civilization versus barbarism, and to return to Abu Ghraib: homosexuality versus heterosexuality, each tell a story of how modern political cultures link the body, the state, and violence to a space that encompasses distinctive imperial and colonial dynamics.

For Ziauddin Sardar, the pathology of the Orientalist vision is based on two simultaneous desires: 1) the personal quest of the Western male for Oriental mystery and sexuality and 2) the collective goal to educate and control the Orient in political and economic terms.³² In writing on the phenomenon of *Orientalism* itself, Sardar suggests Orientalist literature was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted binary opposition between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the stranger (the Orient, the East, "them").³³ More specifically, within the East/West colonial context: if colonized people

are irrational, Westerners are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, the West represents civilization itself—complete with its sexual appetites understood and its dominant ethic of hard work maintained; if the Orient is static, the West is developing and always in motion; in order for the West to be masculine, *the Orient must be feminine*.³⁴

It might be interesting to note that not even the West was always 'the West'. Although the notion of 'the West' as a political identity dates back to the sixteenth century, *Christendom* was the naming of that territory at that time. According to Sardar, also during the sixteenth century was the encounter between Christendom and Islam; in fact, the origins of Orientalism and its history can be traced to this time.³⁵ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'the West' was a largely geographical designation and was synonymous with 'Europe' and the 'Occident.' Ultimately, however, Western civilization became a yardstick, as Christendom had been earlier. Oriental cultures and civilizations would inevitably be measured against a Western 'righteous' formation. But to keep with religion, its boundaries and its limits, sexual pleasure within the Western psyche has always been associated with the notion of original sin. Within the Catholic conscience, such pleasure retains the implication that the only perfect life is the celibate life; hence, sex is complete with historical overtones of sin and temptation. For this reason, it ought not to be surprising that sex participates in the religious underpinnings of Orientalism. In the same light of which the Western gaze grants itself the space to reduce objects to be studied and establish subjects that know, 'the Orient' becomes classified as a static entity—a region that "offers exotic, sinful, sexual delights all wrapped in an ancient, mystical and mysterious tradition."³⁶ Orientalism, to be sure, is composed of what the West wishes to know, not of what can be known.

Sardar suggests the original site of Western desire was in fact Islam. It was in its encounter with Islam that the West first developed its vision of the Orient as "an unfathomable, exotic and erotic place where mysteries dwell and cruel barbaric scenes are staged."³⁷ Both Sardar and Joseph Boone suggest the representation of Muslims as evil, depraved, licentious and barbaric, ignorant and stupid, fanatical and violent was initiated and perpetuated by the Crusades. In fact the voyages to the near East were well recorded or verbalized by Western men. "Since the time of the Prophet" one of these records suggests, "fabulous Araby has reeked of aphrodisiac excitement."³⁸ Boone suggests that through an array of sophistication, similar sentiments echoed throughout the writings of novelists, poets, journalists, travel writers,

sociologists, and ethnographers whose pursuit brought them “to the Orient on the flying carpet of Orientalism.”³⁹ Meanwhile, for such accounts the geopolitical realities of the Arabic Orient became a “psychic screen on which to project fantasies of illicit and unbridled excess.”⁴⁰ The idea of the screen warrants thought.

To return to the photographs, we must note the collapsing of production and consumption, image and viewer, object and subject. Puar suggests “[t]here is no inside or outside; there is rather movement, circulation, contingent temporalities, momentary associations and disassociations.”⁴¹ Puar continues: “Indeed one could argue what is exceptional [at Abu Ghraib] is not the violence itself but rather the capture of the acts on film, the photographic qualities of which are reminiscent of vacation snapshots, mementos of a good time, victory at last, or even a trophy won at summer camp.”⁴² Hence, for the American soldier, the very experience of partaking in the space of the ‘effeminate other’, at one and the same time, exposes him/herself not as separate and distinct from the sexual acts, but actually reduced into a different ‘type’ of sexuality. For Puar, this appropriation of the so-called East in order to project onto its otherness that mirrors Western psychosexual needs, confirms the phenomenon of Orientalism. In short, the Orient signifies all that the West is not, and, importantly, some of what the West actually desires.⁴³

For Boone, ‘the Orient’, whose ethnic and cultural diversities have for centuries been tenuously linked by common language and shared Islamic faith, corresponds to what Richard Burton called the ‘Sotadic Zone’ in his translation of *A Thousand and One Nights* in 1885.⁴⁴ Within this zone, more specifically, Burton argues in dubious detail how sodomy “is popular and endemic, held at worst to be a mere peccadillo, whilst the races to the North and South of these limits...as rule, are physically incapable of performing the operation and look upon with the liveliest disgust.”⁴⁵ By 1780 Jeremy Bentham dispassionately wrote: “Even now, wherever the Mahometan religion prevails, such practices seem to be attended with but little dispute.”⁴⁶ Loomba suggests the early travel writings and theatre productions continuously connected deviant sexuality with racial and cultural outsiders in ‘far away places.’⁴⁷ Within the same context, Anne McClintock suggests that such connections “had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination—a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears.”⁴⁸ Clearly there exists a history of non-Europeans repeatedly constructed as libidinally excessive, and sexually uncontrolled.

For Boone, Said's theorization of Orientalism has proved invaluable in drawing scholarly attention to the discursive paths whereby the Arabic Orient has come to represent "one [of the West's] deepest and most recurring images of the Other."⁴⁹ The threatening excess of this otherness, Said argues, "has most often been gendered as feminine and hence sexually available so that it can be penetrated, catalogued and thus contained by the superior rationality of the Western mind."⁵⁰ Similarly, Sardar suggests that the supposed knowledge derived from the Orientalist vision is not based on accuracy and utility but by the degree to which it enhances the self-esteem of the Westerner. For Sardar, [the Orientalist vision] achieves this by making fiction more real, more aesthetically pleasing than truth. Orientalism is thus constructed ignorance, a deliberate self-deception, which is eventually projected on the Orient. In this light, Orientalist fiction plays a major role in the Western scholarly tradition. The representations of cultures and civilizations of the East of which Orientalism came to signify, were concocted and manufactured as instruments to contain and manage these cultures and civilizations.

The 'effeminate' underpinnings of the photographs taken at Abu Ghraib are essential to this analysis. Although Bush maintains that this form of sexual torture does not reflect the nature of the American people, the events that took place are far from 'exceptional.' While there are many routes by which this argument could be made, it is the Orientalist narrative that represents and arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard set of interpretations that are taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents.⁵¹ Through the exploration of the homoerotic Orientalist literature of earlier centuries, it becomes clear that the Islamic narrative cast through the Western gaze regards these textual elements, not in their historicity, but as fixed, identical, and self-sufficient origins of meaning.⁵² As the Islamic homoerotic narrative is cast as basic truth in terms of which other elements of text are seen as secondary, contingent, derivative, or marginal, the overt possibility that the Islamic sexual threat that pervades the thoughts and actions of American soldiers remains. Placed within the concentric space as outlined above, the US with its soldiers as its tools, set out to bring Iraq 'to its knees.' In so doing, however, did the American soldiers at Abu Ghraib simultaneously set out to reinforce the hypermasculine heteronormative 'nature' of America—its people and its nation? What might the relationship between sexuality and territoriality be? What is at stake for sexuality in the West within this regard, and how might this situation in particular affect the contemporary battle over same-sex marriage in the US?

Do the photographs, if not the acts of which the soldiers are *participants*, allude to, at one and the same time, something of a Western 'repressive hypothesis' whereby the sexual confines that pervade American morality are attenuated only by way of an Other culture? These are some of the questions that ought to stem from the violence at the Iraqi prison complex.

There is no doubt that the representations of sexual humiliation and submission at Abu Ghraib expose the tangled strands of racism, misogyny, homophobia, national arrogance, and the hypermasculinity of the US military. Militarized sexual domination is neither 'contrary to American values' nor simply the work of a 'few bad apples.' Fears of Iraq clearly combined Orientalism with homophobia. Even the jokes circulating after the Gulf One invasion held that Kuwait had been "Saddamized." At that same time, Bush Senior reinforced the message by frequently mispronouncing "Saddam" as "Sodom."⁵³ In this light we bear witness to how powerful normative discourses have naturalized particular formations of race and culture. Today violence continues to be waged against alterity and cultural differences that remain haunted by historical exclusions of specific identities, practices, and communities of people. Meanwhile, it must be noted that race and racism are overt depictions of formative features of this modern era—deeply embedded in bourgeois liberalism. Modern technologies of power have clearly targeted racialized bodies, populations, and territories in the name of 'improvement.'⁵⁴ Evidently such technologies are in full effect within the current "liberation" project taking place in Iraq—complete with the 'natural' character of the Iraqi male, written into discourse and expression, worked into flesh and landscape—all captured on camera.

Notes

¹ Donald Moore et al. "Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nature: Terrains of Power and Practice: in *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press: 2003) 26.

² Boone, Joseph. Boone, Joseph, "Vacation Cruises; Or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism" in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*. Eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. New York, NY: Routledge: 2003) 462.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Puar, Jasbir. "Abu Ghraib: Arguing Against Exceptionalism" in *Feminist Studies* 30, no.2 (Summer 2004).

- 6 George Bush, in Puar, p. 523.
- 7 "The Abu Ghraib Prison Photos" June 11, 2004<<http://www.antiwar.com/news/?articleid=2444>>September 01, 2005.
- 8 Bush, in Puar, 523.
- 9 "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" August 19, 2005 <<http://www.answers.com/topic/don-t-ask-don-t-tell>> September 01, 2005.
- 10 Puar, p. 29.
- 11 "Just a Few Bad Apples" in *Economist*; 1/22/2005, Vol.374 Issue 8410, p.29.
- 12 Paur, p. 526.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Madhi Bray, in Paur, p. 526.
- 15 al-Shweiri, in Paur, p. 530.
- 16 John Borneman, "Toward a Theory of Ethnic Cleansing: Territorial Sovereignty, Heterosexuality, and Europe" in *Subversions of International Order: Studies in the Political Anthropology of Culture* John Borneman ed. (New York: SUNY Press, 1998) 288-289.
- 17 Ibid, 289.
- 18 Ibid, 292.
- 19 Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, (New York: Charles and Sons [1973] 1983) 118-138.
- 20 Puar, 524.
- 21 Ibid, 527.
- 22 Moore, 17.
- 23 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* [Les mots et les choses, 1966] (New York: Routledge, 2004) 157.
- 24 Ibid, 97.
- 25 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 62.
- 26 Ibid., 62.
- 27 Paul Gilroy, "After the Great White Error" in *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference* Moore et al. ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) 73-91.
- 28 Loomba, 62.
- 29 Ziauddin Sardar, *Orientalism*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press; 1999)
- 30 Ibid., 5.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., 1-2.
- 33 Loomba, 62.
- 34 Edward Said, cited in Loomba, 47.
- 35 Sardar, 2.

36 Sardar, 6.

37 Ibid. 2.

38 Joseph Boone, "Vacation Cruises; Or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism" in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*. Eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. (New York, NY: Routledge: 2003) 460

39 Rana Kabbabi, in Boone, p. 460.

40 Boone, 460.

41 Puar, 531.

42 Ibid.

43 Sardar, 3.

44 Boone, 463.

45 Richard Burton, in Boone, 464.

46 Boone, 464.

47 Loomba, 154.

48 Anne McClintock, in Loomba, 154.

49 Boone, 464.

50 Ibid.

51 Richard Ashley, "Living on Border Lines: Man, Poststructuralism, and War" in *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics*. Eds James Der Derian, Michael J. Shapiro (Lexington, Mass. Lexington Books, 1989) 263.

52 Ibid.

53 Anne Norton, "Gender, Sexuality and the Iraq of Our Imagination" in *Middle East Report*: No. 173 Gender and Politics (Nov-Dec., 1991), 26-28.

54 Moore, 17.