Chapter 10
Rumsfeld!: Consensual BDSM and “Sadomasochistic” Torture at Abu Ghraib

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Lynndie England... [is] not just the face of Torturegate, she's the dominatrix of the American dream. (Goddstein 2004)

My copy of the monthly newsletter of a San Francisco-based SM organization included a scene report, a written description of a consensual BDSM play scene. The scene took place at a San Francisco dungeon in late March 2004. It was an interrogation scene, involving a Colonel, a Captain, a General, and a spy. The spy was hooded, duct-taped to a chair, and slapped in the face. As she resisted, the spy was threatened with physical and sexual violence, stripped naked, cut with glass shards, vaginally penetrated with a condom-sheathed hammer handle, force-fed water, shocked with a cattle prod, and anally penetrated with a flashlight. The scene ended when the spy screamed out her safeword, the word that ends the scene: "F*cking Rumsfeld!"

This scene took place two months before Sixty Minutes II broadcast the photographs of torture at the Abu Ghraib prison, and Seymour Hersh broke the story of military abuse in the May 10, 2004 New Yorker (2004a). Nonetheless, the parallels between consensual kink practices and the torture of detained Iraqis are striking. The photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison seem - to many media commentators - to mimic sadomasochistic sex and porn conventions, just as the "Rumsfeld" interrogation scene mimics military interrogation techniques to stage "authentic" or "realistic" torture scenes.

This essay explores the uncomfortable similarities between these two performative events. Guided by Jon McKenzie's (2001) theorization of "performative efficacy," I juxtapose SM sexual practices within the USA with photographs from Abu Ghraib in order to shed light on the ways that play at torture draws on the reality of military interrogation, while the photographs, as the performative real of torture, draw on a fantasy of sexual play. This offers a way to explore the relationships between humanitarian sexual practices, sexualized power and imperial "perversion" without collapsing the connection between these scenes to original and copy. My reading of these scenes both enters into and attempts to reconfigure an evaluative bifurcation of performative power, where some performances transgress or subvert and others consolidate or reproduce social norms. Instead, placing these two scenes and their sociopolitical contexts side-by-side, I argue that both the SM interrogation scene and the Abu Ghraib photographs rely on feedback loops between the "real" (the social) and the "scene" (the performance). However, SM practice aspires to more than just play; effective SM saturates performance to the social in ways that feel deeply real for practitioners. The photographic representation in Abu Ghraib, on the other hand, effectively transforms a political real - torture - into a safe, sexual fantasy. In this way, rather than a "disturbing parallel," the relationship between these two performative events is more properly chiasmic: SM can push through "just play"/fantasy to make an intervention into the social world, while the Abu Ghraib photographs close off a social or political response to torture by instead adhering attention to a surface spectacle of individual pathology.

"Sadomasochistic" Torture

In the last weeks of May and early June of 2004, SM practitioners on the e-mail list SM-ACT, a national list for BDSM activists and community leaders, engaged in an ongoing discussion about the Abu Ghraib photographs and "sadomasochistic torture." They were both offended and anxious about the way mainstream and alternative media continuously linked SM to the Iraq torture practices and photos. For example, the San Francisco Bay View billed Lynndie England the "cigarette smoking, dominatrix prison guard and poster child for everything gone wrong for U.S. Armed Forces during the occupation of Iraq" (Danu 2004b). After members of Congress viewed an additional 1,800 photographs unreleased to the public, the Los Angeles Times reported Representative Barney Frank's conclusion: "It had nothing to do with trying to break them... it was sadomasochistic sexual degradation" (Serrano and McDonnell 2004). In an essay in the Guardian UK, Joanna Bourke wrote "the pictures of American soldiers humiliating Iraqi detainees are reminiscent of sadomasochistic porn" (2004). And even more explicitly, the front page of the May 23, 2004 issue of the New York Daily News featured a story on consensual BDSM, called "Sexual Side of G.I. Abuse." The story began "some of the acts shown in the now-infamous prison videos are activities that real women and men can engage in voluntarily, and for pleasure," and continued by exploring some of the myths, practices and histories of consensual BDSM communities (Kuriangy 2004).

The Concerned Women of America, Family Research Council, Jerry Falwell and the Heritage Foundation all linked America's "obsession" with porn (especially gay porn) with the torture photographs. As Robert Knight, the director of the conservative Culture and Family Institute, wrote:
Where did those soldiers get the idea to engage in sadomasochistic activity and to videotape it in voyeuristic fashions? Easy. It's found on thousands of Internet porn sites and in the pages of "gay" publications, where S&M events are advertised alongside ads for Subarus, liquor and drugs to treat HIV and hepatitis. (2004; see also Rich, 2004)

Advancing the anti-pornography feminist version of this argument, Susan Brison, in the Chronicle of Higher Education, wrote:

The similarities between American-style torture and hard core porn are difficult not to notice ... why should it be cause for international alarm when sexually degrading, dehumanizing things are done to Iraqi prisoners (and photographed) when doing the same things to women around the world (and photographing them) for a multibillion-dollar pornography industry is considered entertaining — the sort of all-American fun enjoyed by U.S. troops and available to anyone with access to the Internet? (2004)

This slippage from human rights violations to hard core pornography, from torture to sadomasochism and from prisoner abuse to gay SM events, prompted the majority of participants on SM-Act to argue that there is something called SM or BDSM which is fundamentally different from torture.

And of course, BDSM is not the same thing as torture. Contrary to public fantasies and made-for-TV movies, BDSM is not a dark underground luring in unsuspecting victims, but rather a subculture with its own rules of participation. Contemporary SM follows the motto "Safe, Sane and Consensual," and most practitioners attempt to embody this motto in their play, their community, and their relationships. (The people I worked with in the San Francisco Bay Area had made substantial efforts to find this community. They attended classes and workshops, joined organizations and devoted a large portion of their leisure time and disposable income to SM. Further, most of the time, SM scenes feature rules for play, safewords to halt the action, and even "dungeon monitors," trained practitioners who monitor safety and make sure that players follow house rules (including safety rules) at semipublic play spaces. Instead, the description of that "Rumsfeld" scene emphasized that it had been supervised by dungeon monitors, preceded by five hours of detailed negotiation and discussion and that the scene itself was considered edge play, a level of intensity reserved for experienced players.)

Torture, on the other hand, following Elaine Scarry's classic definition, has a tripartite structure: 1) the infliction of intense pain, 2) the objectification of that pain, and 3) the translation of that objectification into power (1985:51). Scarry differentiates torture from other forms of pain, such as therapeutic pain, based on duration (torture lasts longer), control (the person being tortured cannot choose to enter or exit the pain) and purpose (torture is "brutal senselessness," whereas other forms of pain can be reparative, or otherwise productive) (34–35). Unlike torture, consensual BDSM is of limited duration, bracketed, controlled, chosen and consensual.

Further, while in torture, pain is radically anti-social, pain in the context of the BDSM scene is relational; pain marks a social exchange between practitioners. For example, Lady Hilary, a lesbian, tissue top in a Master/slave relationship, told me:

One of the things that’s most important for me in a bottom is they have to want it. I have to know beyond a shadow of a doubt you want to go there, that you want to be in your pain. I have to know that emotionally and intellectually. I have to know it in all parts of who I am if you want to travel that road with me.

This is in part because SM is an exchange rather than a unidirectional application of pain. As Hallstrom, a heterosexual top, explained:

When I hit somebody I feel it ... if I'm feeling their pain, if I'm up there with them, then I can do a better job at what I'm doing. I don't believe in standing back and relaxing on somebody. I'm always up there, and I'm always teaching. I'm always comforting them, just reassuring them [so that] they know I'm there, that I'm not abandoning them and that I'm going through this with them.

Similarly, Francesca, a bisexual bottom, told me "when I am asking for pain ... I'm working with my partner." "It's not a matter of him asking me to do it for him ... it's like wanting to plow through something ... together." Pain here is a mechanism of trust, sociality and relationality within the context of the BDSM scene. In this exchange, pain can be transformed to power, to pleasure or to other socially productive relations, unlike torture, which, as Scarry theorizes, is destructive of the social world.

Still, what do we make of the uncomfortable similarities between BDSM play and prison torture? The easy slippage from guard to dominatrix, from torture and interrogation to sadomasochistic sex play? These crossings point to an uncanny resemblance between the photographs and SM scenes: similar body technologies (flogging, bondage, sexual humiliation, emotional manipulation) and similarly careful staging (the arranged bodies, the props, the audience). There is also a historical convergence; as Anne McClintock notes, the first BDSM subcultures emerged in Europe at the end of the 18th century, at precisely the same time as what she terms "modern, industrial imperialism" (1995:142).

It is politically appealing, although ultimately dishonest, to argue that these scenes are unrelated, that they exist outside or can be fully bracketed from real torture, military interrogation, or imperialism. BDSM is erotic because it moves between a practitioner's interior, relational and social experience of power, playing on "threaded" roles or settings to craft "hot" (in the sense of erotically powerful) scenes. In this way, just as Master/slave play or a fund-raising "slave auction" are not the same as American slavery, neither are they unrelated to this context. These forms of power exchange derive their intensity and erotic charge from replaying real, socio-historical structures of exploitation and power inequality.
Many SM play scenes rely on the social imaginary and iconography of torture, the "dungeon" space, the toys and tools, military costumes, imperial fantasies. Indeed, practices focused on the breasts and genitals (e.g., binding, stretching, cutting, piercing, compressing) are called both "play and torture": tit torture, nipple play, genital torture, CBT (cock and ball torture), genital play. Play themes like interrogation, military, torture, terror/fear, rape, or abduction are common topics in SM classes and workshops. These scenes are a form of mimetic resignification (Butler 1993); they draw on, in order to reconfigure, forms of state power available as historical or cultural signage. These signs are flexible, mediated, both public and personal; antique torture devices on display at the museum, war movies, personal, or familial military experiences and photojournalist war coverage are all potential resources for creating an "interrogation scene." Working with cultural archetypes (e.g., draping military men), real-life events (e.g., war) and personal/familial relations (e.g., authority or discipline), these scenes stage military, imperial, or colonial relations of power in performative ways. At the same time, by dramatizing, exaggerating, and re-animating the sexual within these contexts, the scenes do it differently. It is to one such staging, a "family resemblance," that I turn next.

**BDSM: The Interrogation Scene**

The "Runstfeld" scene I read about in that newsletter was the "demo" portion of a class on "Interrogation Scenes" taught by Domina, a bisexual dominant. In the Bay Area, SM organizations, groups and stores offer myriad classes and workshops on SM techniques, skills, roles, and relationships; practitioners can choose from, on average, five to eight classes each week. Most classes follow a basic structure: safety and introductory material, more detailed information, a demo, and audience Q&A. They are held after work during the week or on weekends at local dungeons, stores, and spaces rented by organizations. The classes cost up to $25 a person, and typically run about two hours. At most of the classes I attended, there were between eight and twenty-five people present, most often in work or casual clothes.

In September 2002, I attended a similar class on interrogation play at QSM, a dungeon space and mail order business in San Francisco. The description of the class, circulated via e-mail, began with this teaser: "Do you enjoy having your bottom 'fight back' during play? Do interrogation scenes in war movies turn you on? Ever want to do it instead of just view it?" It continued:

Domina will explain what to do and what to avoid. Learn how to safely use a knife in a resistance scene. Find out how to signal a need without breaking role. See the ways you can make a scene like this believable. At the end of the class, Domina will do a short interrogation session with a favorite bottom to demonstrate how to incorporate all the elements into one scene.

In attendance were four women and four men, all white and all (except one) between 45 and 55 years old. The men wore jeans and T-shirts, and three had long ponytails; the women wore jeans, sweaters, and polar fleece vests.

The class began when QSM’s owner rang a small metal bell, calling us to attention. She announced that we should browse the books, films, and magazines for sale during the break, especially those related to the evening’s topic: interrogation scenes. Many of the books were small, vanity press pamphlets, printed on cheap paper. To everyone’s laughter, she also advertised a porn video called “Osama Ass-a-Holz,” a film made by two New York professional dominants who “torture” what appeared to be a white guy with a strapped-on fake beard.

As is typical in BDSM classes and workshops in the Bay Area, the class began with a lecture. Domina, wearing a California Department of Corrections shirt and jeans, began by talking about “consensual non-consent” play: play with forcing themes. Domina suggested prisoner of war, alien abduction, rape, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Salem witch trials as potential themes for such play, urging us to use a real-life context or historical event to create more exciting and believable scenes. She explained that both setting and.costuming choices are critical to the scene, remarking that Nazi uniforms, for example, are “not P&C, but they are powerful.”

For interrogation, she told us, one can find a lot of very useful material on the internet: Amnesty International’s documents, an Israeli interrogation site, and what she said was the treasure-trove of technique: the declassified 1963 CIA manual known as KUBARK. Domina waved a print-out of KUBARK at us while giving advice from its pages: the best way to stage an arrest, detain your victim, different kinds of sensory stimulation deprivation, how to make realistic threats, and how to create conditions of heightened suggestibility. “If you are going to abduct somebody, take them in the middle of the night so that they are totally disoriented,” she told us, abbreviating a KUBARK technique.

It was 2002 and I had not yet heard of the manual. I was skeptical about this whole scene, that the document was real, that it was not just SM fantasy. Now, of course, I know much more about KUBARK; that many believe it is the basis for the psychological "no-touch" torture techniques (stress positions, sexual humiliation, hooding, sleep deprivation, fear) disseminated throughout Latin America, and in use at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib (see Blanton and Kornbluh 2004; Cohn, Thompson, and Matthews 1997; McLeod 2004). And today, one can download not only KUBARK, but also the witness testimony from prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the Taguba and Fay Reports, Red Cross, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International reports, and much more.

As Domina talked, Larry and Denise jumped up from the first row of folding audience chairs and ran onto the stage where Domina stood; it was a surprise demo. Larry and Domina subdued Denise and tied her to the floor, cutting off her clothes. Naked, Denise struggled as Domina held a knife at her throat, and then, a gun. Domina told Larry to watch Denise, but not to touch her. For the rest of the class, Larry, transformed into a slow, Southern "bubba," sat by Denise, keening with
slack jaw, wet lips, and droopy eyes. Periodically he reached over, grabbing Denise's nipples as she tried to kick him away.

With this scenario playing out behind her, Domina continued the class, turning between intervals to tell Larry to "stop fucking with her." Domina began to describe various torture techniques: water torture, breath play, electricity, making someone stand still without moving. "Threatening rape or body cavity searches is good," she said, as if anything that dehumanizes the bottom: give them a number (instead of a name), deny them bathroom privileges or toilet paper, deprive them of sleep, keep the room cold, don't feed them or feed them tasteless or disgusting food, like boiled white bread.

Domina also gave us a few tips on how to maintain the fantasy of interrogation while "checking it" on the bottom. Staying in character as mean cop, for example, Domina might hold Denise's feet apart, a humiliating display for Denise, but one that would also allow Domina to check the temperature of Denise's feet to make sure the rope around her ankles was not cutting off her circulation. She also told us she should have a visual signal with someone who plays Taylor's character. Before she put a real knife up to Denise's throat, for example, Domina grabbed her neck, their signal that the knife blade was sharp and that Denise should not move too much or struggle too hard.

In addition to tips and techniques, Domina stressed the psychological safety concerns this type of play involves, including the need for detailed negotiation. Almost all BDSM scenes involve negotiation of some sort, either highly formalized checklist negotiation or more informal verbal negotiation. In negotiation, each partner indicates (in highly specific detail) acts, emotional needs, physical limitations, and any other circumstances, context or background potentially useful (e.g., "I don't like carpal tunnel syndrome," "I need lengthy post-scene aftercare," "I have a bad knee"). During negotiation, a player should divulge any emotional, physical, or sexual information that may be important, such as how one's carpal tunnel might impact bondage, or how the word "slut" is hot, but "whore" is not. Players should also explain the kinds of SM play they particularly like. Finally, each practitioner should describe their limits; the most common limit is "dead people, kids and shit," although there are many other personal limits. Interrogation scenes, because of consensual non-consent, require more prolonged, careful, and detailed negotiations. But for all scenes, negotiation insures informed consent throughout the play; it also makes sure that each player's desires and fantasies will be responded to in the course of the scene.

These tactics allow for the management of real risk within the scene without breaking the fantasy. Using realism — real contexts, histories, emotions, and relationships — the scene becomes believable for both participants and audience. Insofar as the scene is believable, it works. For me, the demo was effective: I played on and with my Deliverance-style fears of southern men and drawing authority. It made me angry; I wanted to stand up and yell at Larry to get off Denise, to stop touching her, to leave her alone. I believed that Larry was this kind of dangerous man, and I should note that I had not lain before this scene, as he is (in her non-scene, vanilla life) Domina's husband. Yet the playing effectively conditioned real, although sometimes contradictory, bodily, emotional, and relational responses: fear, hatred, rage, arousal, trust, and betrayal. In this scene, the elaborately taken to assuring consent makes the scene work, putting into place complex loops between the real and fantasy, social reality and performance, and making the performance more "realistic" and thus effective — satisfying and involving for players and their various audiences.

When they are effective, these performances re-animate sexuality in the service of new social relations. Through such mechanisms as discomfort, restraint, and dramatization, these scenes can make a performative intervention into the social world. This is why SM is a cultural performance. Anthropologist Milton Singer used the phrase "cultural performance" in the 1950s to describe a performance (a drama, ritual, or dance) that is marked off from the social field and that communicates and builds social meanings with the audience (cited in Turner 1986:22–23). As it has been developed by Victor Turner and others, "cultural performance" has expanded to include a broad range of events from more formal dramas to everyday gestures that are "set-apart" in imaginative and spatial, not only temporal, terms. In his recent analysis of performance in contemporary Venezuela, David Guss argues that cultural performances have four key elements: 1) they are framed and set off from everyday life, 2) they are reflective, 3) they are discursive, dialogical or polyphonic, full of competing claims and debates, and 4) they produce new meanings and relations; they are culturally productive, a site of cultural action (2000:8–12).

Like all cultural performances, then, SM is an engagement with social norms that, when effective, can communicate and consolidate those cultural norms (as in a classic rite of passage) and serve as critique, evaluation or rejection of the ways that social power and categories work in the everyday. But always, cultural performances are, as Turner argues, active agents of change, not simple reflections of existing cultural meanings. In this way, SM practices are not an imitation of reality, nor do social structures completely constrain the effects of a performance. Rather, it is through cultural performance that subjects become aware of, grapple with, and potentially transform the social world (1986; see also Guss 2000:9). Performances like the interrogation scene can pressure, reorganize, or disrupt the ways that practitioners and audiences understand the world and the ways that they situate themselves in it, in physical, relational, and political ways. Thus, the performative efficacy of SM scenes does not lie in a guarantee of transgression. Rather, the effectiveness of a scene lies in allowing practitioners to work these complex relations between reality and performance. In an effective scene, this work also enables practitioners to produce, not merely mimic, social relations, and to reconstruct the bracketed, limited space of "the scene" with the social.

How, then, do we read the political potential, the effects, of interrogation or torture play? By re-staging military techniques, or performing violent intimacies between guard and prisoner, cop and victim, these scenes might be pornic; they might undermine the remote power of authority through creative re-enactment. They might be a re-deployment, so that our everyday lack of power over the war,
over state power, over intimate violence like rape, incest or racism might be re-imagined on our own terms. They might make a mockery of imperial power, re-costuming, or dragging it; they might give the lie to such power (and here I am thinking of "Osama a-a-Hola" and the humor-as-politics of a scene in which "Rumsfeld" means stop). They might reproduce a structure of feeling, an attachment to authority, that can be harnessed by the state to ensure our compliance. I do not want to close down the complexity of such scenes, and I am not suggesting that SM play is always, or necessarily, politically interventionist. However, SM play, by dramatizing power in often spectacular ways, provides one access point into the production of social relations for participants and audience alike. The power dynamics of SM play can disrupt what Bryant Alexander calls the "protective veneer of the performative" by dramatizing the social and historical conditions of power (Alexander 2004; see also Butler 2004; MacKendrick 1999). In this way, SM play is effectively real-ized through this loop — threading the scene back and through the social — in a way that moves players and audiences into but also beyond mere fantasy.

Abu Ghrabi: Torture and Imperial Perversion

Both BDSM play and the photographs of torture in Abu Ghrabi spectacularize power inequality; they both render relations of domination in dramatic, staged, and framed ways. Yet, just as "performance" has both normative and counter-normative effects, spectacle too contains multiple potentials. If, in BDSM, an effective performance focuses attention in a way that forces interpersonal involvement, spectacle can also conceal relations of power, especially in an image-centered commodity culture (for the paradigmatic argument on spectacle as commodity fetish, see Dehord 1995, also Baubreillard 1994). In contrast to the BDSM scene, the effectiveness of the images from Abu Ghrabi rely on this sort of spectacularization, obscuring the geo-political reality of US military-imperialism by adhering audience attention to the surface scene of the photographs.

What is interesting here is that this effect relies on the pathologization of sadomasochism. And, while many media commentators have noted the sadomasochistic content of these practices and their representation, little scholarly attention has focused on this dynamic. This dual situation can be seen clearly in the case of Lynndie England. The now notorious photograph of England holding a leash attached to a naked Iraqi detainee reminded many of a "dominatrix" pose. In the Sunday Telegraph, Diane Williamson called England a "deranged dominatrix" (2004); the Toronto Star used "dominative dominatrix" ("Sex, Sexism Drive Prison Coverage") 2004). Though dominative, England is no dominatrix; describing her in this way facilitates a disavowal of institutionalized torture by framing the abuse as England's personal psychological predilection, even as England (and thus this slippery mechanism) became the circulated and reiterated image of the scandal in Abu Ghrabi. This commentary borrows from the icon of The Dominatrix (a figure usually encased in skin-tight black leather or latex, not military fatigues) to pathologize this small-town girl, offering us the story of a sick, sadistic woman and obscuring a larger, institutional context of power.

Susan Sontag, in her New York Times Magazine article on the photographs, writes "the pictures seem part of a larger confluence of torture and pornography: a young woman leading a naked man around on a leash is classic dominatrix imagery" (2004:27). Echoing anti-porn commentary, she continues "and you wonder how much of the sexual tortures inflicted on the inmates of Abu Ghrabi was inspired by the vast repertory of pornographic imagery available on the internet" (2004:27). Perhaps, as SM has become more mainstream, and pornography more visible, these images (if not the practices or the community of practitioners) are available for recirculation in the world inside the prison. But what bears reminding here, as many others have pointed out, is that the torture techniques depicted in the photographs ("water boarding," "stress positions," sensory and sleep deprivations, even sexual humiliation) have been a part of the repertoire of torture and terror for a very long time (see Scarry 1985), and in use by the US for at least the last 50 years (in Vietnam and in homeland prisons, taught by the School of the Americas, and in CIA training manuals like KUBARK).

So why do these commentators slide from torture to sadism, to porn, to dominatrix? In part, it is because of muddled clinical, psychological and popular understandings of sadomasochism. "Sadism" and "masochism" were coined in 1886; "sadomasochism" described a sexual perversion where one receives sexual pleasure through the infliction or reception of pain or cruelty. But for contemporary theorists, "sadomasochism" is not always about the unification of sexual pleasure and pain, but rather about broad social relations of power (e.g., Chancer 1992). Yet, even as "sadomasochism" has broadened, at least in non-sexological or psychoanalytic fields, it has dragged along with it a trace of its history. Sadism and masochism, after all, describe sexual perversions. In the most recent DSM-IV-TR (the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), "Sexual Sadism" and "Sexual Masochism remain perversions (American Psychiatric Association 2000)."14

Understanding sadomasochism as perversion, pathology or damage bleeds into popular understandings of BDSM practices and communities, even as the terms "SM" and "BDSM" are understood by practitioners to distance consensual SM from pathological sadism or masochism. For example, in interviews I conducted with twelve non-practitioners, most agreed that the basic definition of BDSM was some variant on "pleasure in pain." Inza described SM as "sexual pleasure from inflicting pain or receiving pain from each other . . . people getting off by doing weird stuff to each other . . . rough, rough sex." Dan told me SM is "weird sexual acts . . . pretty extreme and weird. People hurting each other, more physical acts, painful acts." And so even as theorists use these terms to describe non-sexual or non-perversion, even hegemonic, relationships, "sadomasochism" continues to connote something weird, dangerous and at least semi-pathological.
The slippage between dominatrix and military guard, and the way that both figures can stand for the abstract term "sadomasochism," shows us that "sadomasochism" is generalized to a wide range of dynamics and relationships about power, violence and sexuality. Because of this, calling the practices depicted in these photographs "sadism" instead of "torture" does something political: it draws attention to the shocking mix of violence and sex in these pictures, rather than the shocking abuse of power and dehumanization. This shift delegitimizes the imperial violence depicted in the photographs by transferring our discomfort or disgust with torture onto the "sadomasochistic" practices of US soldiers. And so, even as England became the poster girl for the "prisoner sexual abuse scandal" in Abu Ghraib, the interpretive frame in place focused our gaze on individual pathology, not on US military-imperial techniques.

A similar mechanism is at work in General Schlesinger's report. The report, widely understood to provide support for the investigation of higher-ups in the scandal, is haunted by the framing of the torture as personal pathology. The opening sentence of the report reads: "The events of the year (through December 2003) on the night shift of Tier 1 at Abu Ghraib prison were acts of brutality and purposeless sadism... The pictures abuses... represent deviant behavior and a failure of military leadership and discipline" (2004:5; see also 45). Even as Schlesinger places responsibility on the chain of command, the environment and the reclassification of interrogation techniques, he also writes:

The abhorrent behavior on the night shift in Cell Block 1 at Abu Ghraib... have a unique nature fostered by the predilections of the commissioned officers in charge. Had there noncommissioned officers behaved more like those on the day shift, those acts... would have taken place. (Schlesinger et al. 2004:13; see also 29)

"Deviant" "predilections" and "purposeless sadism." These repetitions throughout the document refugue "torture" as sadistic, personal pathology, decontextualized and atomized: some individuals seized the opportunity provided by this environment to give vent to latent sadistic urges" (2004:29).

These dynamics of pathologization and spectacularization have effects both inside and outside the prison. The torture itself, whose function was surely not "information," was a crucial component of what Jairb Puar calls the "profiteratizing modalities of force" in the Iraq campaign (2005:13). And, as Scarry points out, torture has long had a sexual component; the goal is to turn the prisoner's body against itself, transforming basic bodily needs (like food or sleep) and "special wants like sexuality" into "ongoing sources of outrage and repulsion" (1985:48). This general objective was combined with the no-touch shaming, humiliation, shock, fear, and dehumanizing tactics advocated in the KUBAR manual. The "script" at Abu Ghraib, then, brought together widely used stressful conditions (noise, food and sleep deprivation, and stress positions) with sexual humiliation, rape, and violation (forced masturbation, nudity, homosexual acts, human pyramids).

In this sense, the scenes from Abu Ghraib are part of a long and storied history of sexualizing imperialism. Empires have long made use of sexuality—its control and its production—to impose order and knowledge on colonized subjects, bodies and lands (see McClintock 1995; Stoler 1995, 2002). The production of the Spanish, British, Portuguese, French, Dutch, German, Japanese, and American empires, as Cynthia Enloe notes, depended on "yoking racism to feminization... holding up their own women as models of civilization and purity, while at the same time denoting the men of the conquered territories as either hyper-sexualized savages or feminized Others" (2007:37). In this reading, the torture in Abu Ghraib is, as she puts it, "a not-so-updated version of earlier imperial practices" (37; c.f. Morris 2007).

Thus, inside the Abu Ghraib prison, by all accounts a place of fear and anxiety, the escalating sexualized violence can be read as a means of imperial control: the spectacularization of US power. The scene at Abu Ghraib is part of what Allen Feldman terms an emerging "visual accurocratic" form of warfare, staged "political theater" (2004:344). Inside the intimate space of the prison, a scene itself bracketed from the everyday world, the guards' life back home, the space of the nation and, indeed, international pacts and agreements, the photographs are, as Hazel Carby argues, "materiel evidence of power," the "performance of conquest" (Carby 2004). The photographs reveal an allegorical sense of mastery and control over the individual bodies of naked Iraqis. But more than this, the photographs "were made to show destroyed bodies, desexualized, de-Islamized, and de-masculinized... now ruined bodies converted, owned, penetrated and occupied by American captors and cameras" (Feldman 2004:345). Communicating power and warning against its transgression, the photographs are direct communication with the US military-imperial structure, a feedback mechanism within the prison. The "pyramid photograph," as General Fay's report tells us, was a screen saver in the military intelligence office of the prison. The very publicness of the torture and abuse, that it was staged in front of guards, other prisoners and captured in photographs and video, was a crucial part of its efficacy (Danzer 2004). Read in this way, the photographs' performative efficacy inside the prison—"the torture and its representation is organizational: the terrifyingly creative labor of the US war machine. It is outside the prison that the photographs show us the effects of the pathologization of sadomasochism. For surely, even as the visibility fades with time, the photographs' circulation and reproduction was creating the images elicited shock, outrage. For some, this galvanized demand for intervention in the war became a "line was crossed." This argument had political effects, yet perversely, the "line crossed," as Puar notes, is one of deviant sexuality, not death or violence, or, for my purposes here, torture (2005:13). And, while Puar and others are surely right to draw our attention to the ways gender/feminization and sex/homosexualization work together to secure empires on the backs of racialized Others, I want to focus here on the ways seeing sadomasochism in the photographs delegitimizes the imperial violence depicted, and transfers disgust onto the "sadomasochistic" practices of individual US soldiers."
In a context where viewers have very little information about Iraq, the war or international politics, these photographs carry extraordinary weight. Henry Giroux begins his essay on pedagogy and Abu Ghraib by listing three images from this most recent war: toppling of Saddam Hussein, Bush landing on the air force carrier and the infamous England shot. He makes the point that "the media has consistently refused, for example, to comment critically on the ways in which the USA, in its flaunting of the Geneva Accords regarding torture, was breaking international law" as it has "put into place forms of jingoism, patriotic correctness, narrow-minded chauvinism and a celebration of militarization that renders dissent as treason, and places the tortures at Abu Ghraib outside of the discourses of ethics, compassion, human rights and social justice" (2004:15). Although there have been a few who have attempted to refocus attention on torture, like Jesse Jackson, who pointed out that "England didn't bring a lead to Iraq" (2004), the spectacularization of these images had diversionary effects.

It is the photographs' reception as sadomasochistic perversion that simultaneously produces patriotic Americans and screens off torture as a technique of imperial power. As Mark Danner writes, in a New York Review of Books essay, the "aberrant, outlandish character of what the photographs show -- the nudity, the sodomy, the pornographic imagery -- seems to support" Bush's statement that the behaviors do not represent America (2004). On May 24, 2004, on a visit to the Army War College, President Bush dismissed the prison scandal as "disgraceful conduct by a few American troops who dishonored our country and disregarded our values" (2004). The argument that the photographs are the rogue, late-night actions of a few "bad apples" is more than the disavowal of the president and his staff; it is also a way of pressing the pathologization of sadomasochism into imperial service, and using this taint to shield the workings of power. As Danner argues:

"Behind the exquisite brutality so painstakingly recorded in Abu Ghraib ... lies a simple truth, well known but not yet publicly admitted in Washington: that since the attacks of September 11, 2001, officials of the United States, at various locations around the world ... have been torturing prisoners ... the bizarre epic of abuse carried out at Abu Ghraib begin to come into focus, slowly resolving from what seems a senseless litany of sadism and brutality to a series of actions that, however abhorrent, conceal within them a certain recognizability. (2004)"

Rather than the sadistic actions of a few bad apples, the torture was part of a much larger course of action carried out around the world as part of a US military and political strategy. Yet, focusing attention on the particular bodies of the perverse guards instead of a larger US military and political strategy was effective on multiple levels. Indeed, in the aftermath of the scandal, while none of the reservists who served at Abu Ghraib were convicted at court-martial or pleaded guilty to abuse charges (eight have been sentenced to jail time), only one officer, Janis Karpinski, has been punished (she was demoted from Brigadier General to Colonels). The chain of command -- then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, former CIA Director George Tenet, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez (the top US commander in Iraq) and Major General Geoffrey Miller (commander at Guantanamo Bay) -- were not investigated. Further, mobilizing this perverse nationalistic "sadomasochism" performatively produces an American public that is unified and good and decent, as Alphonso Lingis puts it, against the "visual barbarism" or "vulgar lust" aroused by the photographs (2006:83). This is fascination in Bandura's sense: a state of "narcticated" spectatorship, where being numbed by the visible surface dissolves meaning into sheer spectacle (1994). Through this mechanism, torture, dehumanization, and imperialism are transmuted into the "sadomasochistic" practices of US soldiers, closing down a social or political response. This mechanism allows the spectator to remain insulated from these photographs, safely distant through our disembodied viewing, denying an access point, a means of intervention. And, although this is the risk of all photographic representations, the photographs from Abu Ghraib dehumanize; they make a performance (already mediated by photographic representation) fantastical, moving torture from a space of the real (or the prison) to the space of fantasy (or sadism). The US audience of these photographs from Abu Ghraib is enabled, through these pathways, to think about the scandal (and its larger geopolitical context) in terms of a particular, pathological relationship between sex and violence called "sadomasochism" and not "torture." The "sex" blurs out anuses, nailed bodies, thumbs-up signs -- an overwhelming, sensationalistic and outrageous surface -- leaves only the echo or shadow of what it displaced.

"It's not a pretty picture," then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld commented in his remarks to a Senate committee shortly after the photographs were released (Rumsfeld 2004). The acts depicted, Rumsfeld goes on to say, are "acts that can only be described as blatantly sadistic, cruel and inhuman"; they are "fundamentally un-American." Contesting these statements, to document the American-narcissistic context of a much larger US war strategy, the non-exclusivism of sexualized forms of torture, is not enough. Rather we should recall that the problem, here, is the very effectiveness of the framing and staging of these photographs as sadomasochism.

**BDSM and Torture: Performative Efficacy**

How, finally, do we make sense of the relationship between consensual SM and photographic representations of torture? I'll tell one more story. In late December 2002, several newspapers breathlessly revealed that Jack McGeorge, one of the UN arms inspectors deployed to Iraq to find weapons of mass destruction, had been found, and in fact has been an officer in, several sadomasochistic sex groups including Black Rose, the political lobby group the NCRI, and the national Leather Leadership Conference (Grimaldi 2002). McGeorge became the butt of jokes on late-night talk shows, in cartoons featuring him in a leather harness and in news articles with such clever pun-titles as "A Taste of the Whip for Saddam" (Lauer...
2002) and "The UN's Folly into Sadomasochism" (Steen 2002). This humor, as it were, points to a fundamental concern: that there is no difference between Saddam Hussein and the UN, between torture and BDSM. For example, in Slate, Timothy Noah asks, "adults should be allowed to engage in whatever sexual activities they desire, provided all parties consent...but what about when the desired sexual activity is torture?" (2002). He goes on to question the fuzziness of distinctions between SM and torture and how the distinction might be drawn. In response, like the activists on SM-ACT when the Abu Ghraib story broke, liberal "defenders" of BDSM argued that consensual SM is not real, that it is a theater of performance or suffering or that because SM is consented to, it is fundamentally different from torture. For example, David Steinberg, in a supportive column on McGeorge that takes Noah's "disturbing parallel" to task, argues "enjoying pain is not the same as getting beaten up on the street" and "consensuality is the defining difference between empowerment and abuse" (2003). This seems a rather defensive move, driven, as it is, by the need to draw a boundary around definable SM as a practice unrelated to anything that is beaten up on the street by various states, an argument that bolsters the pathologisation of some forms of sadomasochism (state-sponsored, perhaps) even as it claims SM as normative, indeed, as no longer sadomasochistic.  

These insights allow us to refigure the relationship between SM and torture, moving beyond the liberal claim that the difference is that there is no consent to torture, and full consent in SM. Rather, we see in the photographs more than the yielding masques of Iraqi bodies, the feminization and homosexualization of Arab Others. We see the performativity of those Iraqis made to "perform their own (sexual) deviance" (Mironoff 2006:26). This command performance, perversely, produces consent retro-citationally, as Morris argues, "the detainee's submission to the torturer's very command is made to appear as the source of the detainee's own enjoyment, and...the generalized deprivation of all individuals is represented as an expression of their consent" (2007:12). Here, if the Abu Ghraib photographs transform torture into consented to, because always already, sexual/racialized deviancy, how do we read consent within the SM scene? Not as the pure inverse; SM both reveals and rejects the autonomous subject that grounds liberal claims to consent. In part, this is because SM is simultaneously obedient to, by drawing on, and subversive of, by exaggerating and performing, conventions of power. As Deleuze argues, "we all know ways of twisting the law by excess of zeal. By scrupulously applying the law we are able to demonstrate its absurdity and provoke the very disorder that it is intended to prevent or conjure" (1991:88). But beyond this performative mirroring of state (and other forms of) power, SM also "plays social power backward, visibly and outrageously staging hierarchy, difference and power; the irrational, ecstasy, or alienation of the body...SM thus reveals the imperial logic of individualism and refuses it as fate" (McClintock 1995:143). It does so by necessitating liberal consent as the entry point into what is, in the end, a far more socially complex relationality between the bodies exposed and rendered vulnerable in play.

For these reasons, we must try to understand the interrogation scene and the photographs of torture as neither parallel nor oppositional, not a case of original and copy. I am inclined, rather, to suggest that SM and torture are more usefully read in terms of their specific performative effects, the interplay between a staged scene and its effect on the audience. And here, we see a chiasmatic relationship between sexualized power in SM and sexualized power in imperialism. In her reading of the torture in Abu Ghraib, Rosalind Morris argues that the sexualization of the techniques produces dehumanization—a non-relation, a social unmaking—that is grounded in the racialization of religious otherness. This echo of Scarry (although, for Morris, "non-relation" is Lacanian) opens up one way to differentiate torture from SM: effective SM produces social relations; effective torture destroys them. SM works when it connects the scene to the social real, when, even in the safe space of a classroom demo, even for me, the anthropologist in the room, the "just for play" becomes, instead, real, and the audience must risk identification with the bodies at play. Effective SM scenes can open up or expose the practitioner and the audience to different modalities of feeling, being, touching and knowing the tortured body. In contrast, the Abu Ghraib photographs work when they disconnect the scene from the political real. Reading Lynndie England as a sadistic dominatrix closes identification and relationality; she becomes sick, and we (the audience) are shocked by what human beings—other human beings—can do. This distancing from England's particular body is, crucially, a distancing from the USA as body politic, and an effective veiling of the military-imperial scene in Iraq.

We can contrast these two scenes in terms of their modes of operation, as well as their social, performative and ideological contexts. But the interrogation scene, with "Rumsfeld" as sadist, reminds us that the efficacy of SM scenes is dependent on violent referents, unstable relations, and social audiences, just as the spectacle-performance of the photographs as and of torture shows us new, disturbing forms of organizational efficiency and representational efficacy. We should not, then, valorize minoritarian performances in terms of transgression, imagining a split between those performances that cultivate social power and those that uproot it. Rather, both scenes, through repetition, encode, or coalesce bodies both individual and social; both are performances that produce and respond to power organized around effective performance. What remains, then, is to try and parse the complex circuits sexuality travels as it connects private selves and social power via the already mobile and diffused discourses of perversion, pathology and sadomasochism. And here, as the war grinds on, it is a painful irony that, unlike in SM, we cannot halt this particular circuit by simply cursing Rumsfeld.

Notes
1. I use the acronym "SM" (sadomasochism) and "BDSM" (bondage and discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism) interchangeably to denote a diverse community that includes consensual bondage, power exchange, pain/sensation play, role-playing and fetish.
2. For McKenzie, "performance" (cultural performances like SM, technological performance, etc.) high performance computing and organizational performance like "total quality management" has replaced Proustian disdain as the contemporary regime of power/knowledge. McKenzie's "Age of Performance" draws attention to the efficiency or functionality of what he has become increasingly flexible economies, subjects and circuits.

3. This essay is based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2001-2003) with the semi-public, pansexual, adult BDSM community in the San Francisco Bay Area, and 61 semi-formal interviews with those practitioners.

4. "Top" refers to the person on the giving end of any form of BDSM; "bottom" describes the receiver.

5. These are examples of common, sexualized SM play I explore in detail elsewhere (Weiss 2003).

6. "Dominant" refers to the top in an explicitly power-based relationship; "submissive" is the corresponding word for the bottom.

7. Consentual non-consent can also refer to playful, after extensive negotiation and planning, partners suspend a sexualized for a specified time period.

8. The text reads: "to ensure that the manner of arrest achieves...the maximum amount of mental discomfort...arrest him at a moment when he least expects it and when his mental and physical resistance is at its lowest. The ideal time at which to arrest a person is in the early hours of the morning." (CIA 1963: Section IX, C 85).

9. I am stuck here by the strong class component to this scene, and its resonance with the Abu Ghraib army reservists. As Gorius notes, the reservists in the photos were subject to an "implied accusation that their working-class and rural backgrounds produced the propensity for sexual deviancy and cruelty in the grand style of the film "Deliverance" (2001:10). Gorius is commenting on references to England as a "middle class torturer" (Toronto Star 2002) and the guards as "recycled hooligans" (Hersh 2004). Similarly, in this case, Larry took on, at least for me, the classed markings of small-town deviance. In fact, it was this rural, blundering power that I found so threatening.

10. I read the "joke" of Ramsfield, here, as both a gesture to the real (this is needed here) imperialist power from which SM draws much of its symbolism and a mockery of that power. Co-opting the extraordinary power of the name while subverting its claims to rule ("Ramsfield" is interchangeable with words like "red" and "pisspot"); Ramsfield as-sowedood is a form of political critique where one can get off on and enact power at the same time.

11. Recent scholarship on Abu Ghraib has focused on the ways gender, (homo)sexuality, and racialization informed the detentions in the prison (e.g., Richter-Mornert 2007, Slobog 2007), yet the lack of critical attention to the specific modality of sadomasochism renders this picture incomplete. Indeed, in a thoughtful analysis of the relationships between torture as "gay sex," the Arab/Muslim Other and the US homeland, Leslie Pant claims that the "sexual perversion associated with SM" are "something not mentioned at all in the popular press" (2005:23). This comment highlights the lacuna within which this essay is situated.

12. Here I am concerned with the reception of photography in England, not the details of her particular case. For details on her case, plea and retrial, see CJBSAP (2004).

13. Compare England, for example, to Jessick Lynch, another rural, working-class girl who joined the military for economic opportunity. In her media coverage, these figures occupied opposite ends of a gender scale; Lynch was fragile, wounded, feminine, and saved, whereas England was tough, violent, masculine and perpetrator (see Kummer 2004 for a comparison of them in terms of US imperialism). See also Laura Sydsey for an analysis of Lynch's (white) hyper visibility in relation to the invisibility of two (racially) Other(n)ed women in Lynch's company: Shoshana Johnson, an African American soldier injured in battle and taken to an Iraqi military prison, and Lori Piestewa, a Native American woman who was killed as a battle (2007:85-87).

14. There has been some BDSM activism to remove sadism and masochism from the DSM (see Mors and Kleingard n.d.). The latest edition is something of a victory: in the previous edition, simply having SM fantasies was grounds for diagnosis. In the current edition, one must both have these fantasies and have the fantasies cause "clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning" for diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association 2000).

15. For more on the pathologization of BDSM in popular media representations, see Weiss (2006).

16. At the press conference for the release of the report, Schlesinger commented, "it was kind of 'Animal House' on the night shift" (CNN 2004). This reference parallels some of the commentary that the torture was for the "enertainment," "entertainment," and "fixe" of the guards (e.g., Higham and Stephen 2004). An article in Newsweek suggests that "the Abu Ghraib torturers were just having a good, if seedy, time" (Scollon and Nordland 2004:41); the reporters also describe the prison scene as a "party" (42). Ronaldal Morris argues that it was the satisfaction and enjoyment we could read in the photographs (the thumbs up, the smiles), rather than the torture itself, that made the photographs disturbing (2007:103). For Morris, the torturer's enjoyment is based on a reconfiguration of the tortured as satisfied and consenting (2007:123-130). I take up this formulation of consent below; here I want to note only that media commentary describing the torture as "fun" also shows the trivialization of sex: an inability to see the relations produced or destroyed by sexuality as both deadly serious and deeply embedded in modalities of power.

17. Existing aside the (non)effectiveness of torture in the production of "reliable" information, reports note that the Abu Ghraib detainees were, for the most part, of no intelligence value (85-90%) according to the Fay Report 70-90% were "mistakenly" arrested according to the Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross and further, the majority of the abuses (two-thirds, according to the Independent Panel to Review DoD Detention Operations) were not part of interrogation procedures (cited in Morris 2007:127).

18. For example, the Schlesinger report notes that the ratio of military police to detainees was 1 to 75 at one point; the prison was in an active combat zone; Abu Ghraib was "seriously overcrowded, under-resourced and under continual [military] attack" and the military reservists were seriously under trained (2004:10-12).

19. Although I am breaching a more sustained discussion of gender, sex and class as they intersect in the prison and the photographs' reception, my reading of the photographs as imperial sadomasochism must be read in concert with work on Lynndie England's...
body and gender, readings that range from England as racial/gendered inversion (e.g., Feldman 2004), to the sign of the "death" of cultural feminisms (e.g., Ehrenreich 2004), to the terrible consequence of women in the military (Chavez 2004).

20. Megan Ambudkar is the only guard who was not sentenced to prison; she was discharged.

21. Human Rights Watch (with the ACLU) has called for a special prosecutor to investigate Runafeld, Temri, Sanchez and Miller, since "the two people who can trigger investigations and prosecutions for the alleged war crimes and acts of torture...have been deeply involved in the policies leading to these alleged crimes, if not in the crimes themselves" (Human Rights Watch 2005:8; see also 2004).

22. As others have shown, the production and reframing of a split between what Brian Keith Axel terms "national-normative" and "transnational" sexuality (2002:420) draws on gender, class, race and multiple modes of deviant sexualities. My analysis here is focused on sadomasochism as an under-examined national/normative deployment. For an analysis of what is, in some ways, the other side of this scandal, see Jibril Puur and Amit Roi's reading of the construction of the "Monster-Terrorist" figure (e.g., bin Laden) as a damaged, deviant and pathological personality type (2002:12; see also Puur 2005:27).

23. This displacement of horror from the actual torture to its representation — via fascination — is not confined to these photographs. For example, in 2004 the Boston Globe ran a story on photographs depicting American soldiers raping Iraqi women, allegedly to be used to threaten or humiliate Iraqi detainees. The pictures were false; they had come from two internet porn sites (Sex in War, a Hungarian site, and Iraqi Bullets, an American site). However, the coverage provided outrage about the pictures (WorldNetDaily, a conservative news service, dismissed the story as "disseminated by anti-American" or "Arab propaganda"); (Gosswe 2004a, 2004b), but very little outrage about actual practices of rape in the military and the Abu Ghraib prison in particular (Boston Herald 2004).

24. In examining this relationship, I am resisting a diachronic reading in favor of a synchronic reading. In part, this is because I do not see a mutual, temporal, or stable relationship between BDSM and torture at Abu Ghraib. I am reminded here of Elisabeth Freeman's critique of the temporality of Judith Butler's understanding of performativity. Freeman notes that Butler describes two forms of repetition: 1) repetition with a difference, or re-invention, which is progressive (both politically and in temporal terms) and transformative and 2) repetition that is "merely cyclical," a back-ward-looking performance that consolidates norms as originals (Freeman 2000:728). While it is possible to read the events at Abu Ghraib as cyclical and SM play as reiterative, Freeman is critical of this binary reading in her analysis of time and temporal drag, a critique I am extending here.

25. This argument can be mapped on to Deleuze's differentiation of masochism and sadism. Deleuze argues that Sacher-Masoch's masochism and de Sade's sadism are entirely different mechanisms: sadism is institutional, quantitatively repetitive, deconstructive, and hostile to aesthetics, whereas masochism is contractual, qualitatively suspended, imaginative and aesthetic (1991:134). In this analysis, contemporary, consensual BDSM would be a form of masochism, while the detainee torture would be sadism. While I find this line of argument interesting, I am not convinced that breaking these forms apart in this way is a particularly useful path out of the discursive problems generated by "sadomasochism."
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