



Figuring the Prison: Prerequisites of Torture at Abu Ghraib¹

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This article presents a critique of prevailing left-of-center journalism and academic scholarship on the revelation of torture of Iraqi prisoners of war by United States military personnel at Abu Ghraib in the spring of 2004. We argue that the resulting discourse suffers from a certain critical bankruptcy in its failure to think about the nature of imprisonment as such. This failure is an effect of two procedures: (1) a narrowing of the field of inquiry that relies on the metonymic reduction of imprisonment through and as the practices of torture, and (2) a reification of the prison that both relies upon and displaces the racialization of imprisonment as an institution of black spatial containment and social control. In response, we call for a renewed understanding of and appreciation for the singularity of racial slavery and its afterlife in future research on carceral formations in and beyond the US.

These frightening comparisons to the African American experience illustrate that history not only repeats itself, but also exposes the ever-changing face of the replacement Negroes in our society. (Lamont Slater 2004, "The replacement negroes")

If the insolence inherent in racist caricature proves to be among the most durable of social and semiotic forms, its wounds are equally perennial . . . The latest abject subject is positioned with familiar and long-standing visual tropes that proscribe the limits of political signification on the very flesh of the body. A simple drawing is all that is required to announce who the "nigger" is now. (Jennifer González 2004, "Lip")

Blackness, in the end, functions as a constant underlying mark of racialization as does no other racial designation. (Lewis Gordon 1997, *Her Majesty's Other Children*)

From the circuits of mass media journalism to the trade publications of academic scholarship, discourse on the constellation of human atrocity

now gathered under the heading of “Abu Ghraib” suffers from a certain critical bankruptcy, one that promotes ethical digressions and fosters unnecessary and, needless to say, unaffordable political compromises. The challenge is not easily broached, for even otherwise enriching analyses often obscure the discussion by either talking around the prison or simply taking imprisonment to be the sign of other, ostensibly more fundamental, processes: the trace of hidden truths about the nature of modern warfare, the symptom of global capitalism, or the perverse emblem of the “American way of life”. The resulting conceptual problem can be stated in summary as a failure to think about the nature of imprisonment as such. This failure is an effect of two procedures: (1) a narrowing of the field of inquiry that relies on the metonymic reduction of imprisonment through and as the practices of torture, and (2) a reification of the prison that both relies upon and displaces its racialization as an institution of black spatial containment and social control.

To date, the prevailing left-of-center concerns about the trouble stemming from the United States military imprisonment at Abu Ghraib have focused most intensely on the motif of torture as defined by the liberal consensus of international law, which is to say particular forms of prisoner abuse,² including the most extreme forms of mistreatment, humiliation, brutality, and lethal violence. Critics have rightly insisted that torture is, always and everywhere, unprotected by the covenant of human rights, even if its practice is woefully widespread and systemic; even if what is understood to be torture in the legal sense involves far more than most, especially in the US, would suspect; a whole range of activities daily discussed in all seriousness as if they were merely tactics in the US military’s legitimate intelligence-gathering and counterinsurgency arsenals.

Meanwhile, the corporate media, the presidential cabinet, and the public relations wing of the US military have gone to great lengths to justify torture, a campaign dating back most immediately to the early days of George W. Bush’s first term. Par for the course, this invidious rationalizing has been accompanied by a blitz of vindicating television programming, talk radio punditry, newspaper editorializing, and pyrotechnic filmmaking (Pollard 2003; Solomon 2003). This flurry of ideological labor has sought to push the envelope of acceptable public debate and to facilitate the reconciliation of a procedural authoritarianism³ with a popular rhetoric of “democratic transition” in the Middle East. On this score, Slavoj Žižek is quite correct to announce that the most fundamental danger of the War on Terror—beyond more recognized items of necessary ethical concern: the obvious and predictable human devastation wrought by conditions of everyday warfare, the political and economic realignments under pursuit that will surely claim more lives in the short and long term—is the transformation of the *background* against which political deliberation and action unfold *tout court*

(Zizek 2005).⁴ However, this background change is not most worrying because of the moral distance it promises to take us; not, in other words, due to the intended extension of moral limits which might ultimately render torture permissible. Rather, the problem is much closer to hand and bears on the conditions of possibility for those more spectacular forms of violence that seem endlessly to fascinate our critical sensibilities. What the ascendant practical philosophy of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC)⁵ renders most illegible, and thereby naturalizes most forcefully, are the *prerequisites of torture*: the forms of capture and captivity, immobilization and confinement that represent state building at its least contested (Gilmore 1998). Put simply, imprisonment itself.

As of this writing, the military detention center at Abu Ghraib houses a population of Iraqi prisoners of war (POWs) numbering in the thousands. However, before lodging arguments about the rights of the imprisoned, we must consider that these prisoners are where they are because they were, unambiguously, abducted by a nearly indescribable military force—the most massive the world has ever known—and they are maintained in their incarceration by that same overwhelming and unrivaled force. The point we seek to underscore here is that once the body has been seized in these ways, the necessary conditions for any subsequent brutality have already been met. The sufficient conditions, on the other hand, are those contingencies about which we continue to wage what is, for all intents and purposes, an auxiliary debate. To the extent that we are unprepared or uninterested to contest the process of *roundup* at its most basic level, we continue to find ourselves reduced to denunciations structured by a moral economy aimed at the conduct of prison guards (or, more rarely, their superiors), their dereliction of duty and abdication of operational standards. At best, we can make legalist recourse to the toothless external objections of the international human rights regime. In either case, what we chastise is the purported *corruption* of power and not the ostensibly legitimate power with which the gatekeepers are entrusted, power that has been, in fact, seized by *coup*.

Having ceded this conceptual ground, the ensuing discussion must satisfy itself, whatever its declared political leanings, with passionate arguments about the nature of *reform*, its scope and scale, its method and pace of implementation, the forms of its institutionalization and oversight. This entrenched analytical retreat is roundly criticized by Angela Y Davis in a recent collection of published lectures about the emergence and expansion of the prison-industrial complex within the US. Her comments there are crucial to the current enterprise:

As important as some reforms may be . . . frameworks that rely exclusively on reforms help to produce the stultifying idea that nothing lies beyond the prison. Debates about strategies of decarceration, which

should be the focal point of our conversations on the prison crisis, tend to be marginalized when reform takes center stage. (Davis 2003:20)

Decarceration, a prospect that, at best, bends toward the abolition of the prison system itself (where abolition obtains in a vision of radical social change), appears here as an element of destabilization for the ongoing US military occupation of Iraq. It targets the frontline mechanisms by which the civilian population—whether compliant, resistant, or “insurgent”—is suppressed. That is to say, the military prison is the most concentrated institutional site of a broader array of incarcerations erected out of the field of battle, an emergent political geography that is both pervasive and multidimensional. Looking at Abu Ghraib from this angle links the alloy of aggressive military policing and the expanding military prison to the establishment by military decree of curfews and the designation of free-fire zones, the commandeering or destruction (usually by aerial bombing from “no-fly” airspace) of water and food supplies to the takeover of communication technologies, transportation systems, and material supply routes, so forth and so on. Needless to say, such operations are expressions of a more encompassing prerogative that the US has confiscated in plain view of the international community: “intervention” or the (non-)right of invasion and conquest. If our level of inquiry about Abu Ghraib, as a node of the unfolding occupation, is confined to the savageries committed *within* its walls while we overlook the savagery *of* its walls—the materialization or concretion of the processes of capture—we have failed to acknowledge, much less dispute, the entire militarized arrangement. Within the US, this radicalized temperament would require moving past (while retaining in some form) the *habeas corpus* preoccupations of the National Lawyer’s Guild or Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch and pressing forward with the campaign for abolition, bringing about the conditions of *emancipation* that would relieve prisoners’ most immediate jeopardy, working to transform—and undo—completely the prison system as we know it, and thereby contributing in some way to prisoners’ ongoing struggle for *freedom*.⁶

In this respect, it would seem past time to recast and rethink notions of “cruel and unusual punishment”, the legal and political basis of most critique of the US military and civilian prison to date. Perhaps we are now capable of affirming the argument, dating back at least to the historic invention of the penitentiary in the early nineteenth century, that imprisonment is inherently both a cruel and an intensely unusual condition of human being. The prison, despite the fluctuations of any reformist impulses, participates in a reconfiguration and redeployment of repressive state powers, displacing while retaining spectacles of corporal punishment and public execution by providing for their proliferation in privatized spaces beyond democratic inquiry.⁷ Giorgio Agamben

properly amends the customary didacticism on this count in his well-known genealogy of the political techniques of the concentration camp, a study that, though attuned to rather different concerns, is not without bearing for the present discussion:

The correct question to pose concerning the horrors committed in the [prison] is, therefore, not hypocritically to ask how crimes of such atrocity could be committed against human beings. It would be more honest, and above all, more useful carefully to investigate the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer a crime. (Agamben 1997:110)

For those who would describe Abu Ghraib as a “space of exception”, a deviation from the norm, a place of unregulated chaos existing in stark opposition to standard military operations, we can only reply that it was the very theater of operations, the shooting war and scene of combat unfolding around Abu Ghraib, that enabled and permitted the horrors eventually revealed inside (Gregory 2004). It was, in other words, the incorporation of the prison—*refurbished* by US forces from the rubble to which it had been reduced by an Iraqi crowd during the storming of Baghdad in March 2003—into the arena of ongoing military intelligence that defined its protocols (Hersh 2004). In this respect, Abu Ghraib seems not so much an exception as it is a facet of the rule, a foreseeable consequence of imperial design and rampant militarism—all of which requires states of confinement in order to execute the necessary dirty work. Analysis that does not situate the prison in this broader context misrecognizes the prison *per se*. This is why any call for reforms at Abu Ghraib—for the humane treatment of prisoners, the end of abuse, the cessation of torture—that does not connect such demands indelibly to the end of military occupation and the withdrawal of troops, which is to say the positive restoration of Iraqi *sovereignty*, does not simply fail to address the roots of the problem. It also contributes, directly or indirectly, to the elaboration of a better prison and, by fiat, a better and more intractable occupation, capitulating, as it were, to the current stage of the US *imperium*.

We are by now well aware that torture is endemic to the contemporary prison–industrial complex, that this recent and rapid build up of the American Gulag has stretched across more than half a dozen administrations from both sides of the aisle, that it represents one of the few truly “successful” bipartisan projects of the last half century and that it involves, by definition, the collaboration or coalescence of all three branches of the federal government and a related coordination of activities at the state and local levels. In fact, as Paul Wright finds, mass incarceration is “the most thoroughly implemented social experiment in

American history” (quoted in Silverstein 2003:1).⁸ It thus seems profoundly mistaken to discuss recent events at Abu Ghraib as an extension or projection of mass imprisonment in the US and, at the same time, an effect of the peculiarities of the current administration, the agenda of hard-line elements within the Republican Party, the short-term interests of the US corporate class or particular sectors of the domestic political economy. For Susan Sontag, to take only the most well-known example, the photographs from Abu Ghraib “are representative of the fundamental corruptions of any foreign occupation together with the Bush administration’s distinctive policies” (Sontag 2004). Yet, the breadth and longevity of both the great prison buildup and the myriad of US foreign occupations renders problematic the notion of “distinctive policies” for the present administration. On the matter of US foreign policy objectives, we must ask: distinctive at what level, strategic or tactical? What, after all, is the strategic difference between Clintonesque “multilateralism”, wherein the US pursues consensus issues among the elite through a manhandling of the UN, NATO, the IMF and World Bank (Ali 2000; Chomsky 1999), and a recrudescing “unilateralism”, wherein the US openly flouts international institutions and/or simply drags them into its wake (Feffer 2003)? For radical critique, one would think these are differences of degree—tactical distinctions—not differences of kind.

Rather than join the clamor that has arisen on the subject of Abu Ghraib, weighing in on precisely what it tells us about the folly of Operation Iraqi Freedom or the ferocity of the neoconservative program or the miserable character of contemporary US society, we may do better to consider why so many observers, observers who quite frankly know better, have seen fit to speak of it in such evocative, often melodramatic and bewildered, language? In the scramble to provide explanation for the litany of violence—presuming that such images of violence shock and confuse and disorient viewing audiences, rather than corroborating our existing knowledge and outrage and dissent—our critical commentators have, each in their own ways, attempted to reduce an elusive and disturbing political, economic, social, and cultural complex to a fixed aspect or moment or source in US society, to fashion an identifiable and stable object of criticism and opposition. Though the tropes vary somewhat, it is the Janus head that has surfaced, if inexactly, as the leitmotif of this drive (Carby 2004), a restorative figure upholding the possibility that the ideal, to say nothing of the infrastructure, of “American democracy” is, in fact, the other face of the gruesome visage revealed behind the prison wall, the promise on the periphery of the current and continuous mortification: the better angels of the indomitable democratic experiment, the old Spirit of ’76: infinitely redeemable and fundamentally decent (Whitney 2004). We submit, in contrast, that this overarching metaphorical initiative is as inapt as those that serve as its supports.

Without the buttressing of its figurative keystone, the initiative may give way altogether.

Social critics across a range of publication venues have asserted, time and again, that there is a linkage between the atrocities at Abu Ghraib and the legacies of racism and other forms of oppression in the United States, particularly the history and present of anti-blackness—whether that link is one marked by scattered recollection or one that discloses “a direct, but hidden, line” (Carby 2004). But for all this imaginative trafficking, none has felt obliged to *explicate* the linkages, to *justify* the association, or to carry it to its logical conclusion. The latter would require, at the very least, speculation on the ramifications for the domestic front of opposition to the Iraq war, well beyond the rollback of the Patriot Acts and the enhancements of Homeland Security, which is to say, a return to the US of the Clinton administration. In asking whether the Left is, at bottom, willing to bring its critique of US imperialism back home, to say that occupation is corrupt abroad as well as at home, we find that the mobilization of hazy and indistinct metaphors of black experience is neither incidental nor optional. Rather, the imprecision of terms is mandatory to the discourse and such comparative comments are passing by definition. As we will see, to dwell at any length within the analogy, to meditate on the production of its conceptual space, only diminishes the rhetorical purchase of the endeavor. Why, then, forge the analogy in the first place? Why recall it, repeat it, cite it? In order to establish what point? Simply that the US is plagued by problems more long-standing and deep-rooted than is admitted by the tendency to represent Abu Ghraib as an aberration or anomaly? Even so, why make an argument en route that has to do with the enduring history of anti-black racism? What conceptualization of anti-blackness—its placement in time and space—is enabled by and embedded within this gesture?

Despite their insertion into chains of equivalence in the critical literature on Abu Ghraib, the frequent references to the historical experience of blacks in the US—analogy made to the estate of chattel slavery and the subsequent institutions of lynching and mass imprisonment—function as *supplemental* to all other gestures of comparison: for instance, to the brutalities of European colonialism in India (Ghosh 2005), to the barbarities of Nazism on the European continent (Brown 2004), to the desolation of Stalin’s untold gulags (Blumenthal 2004), to the sexual exploitation, violence, and general nastiness of the multibillion dollar pornography industry and its popular culture (Brison 2004). As productions of slavery’s afterlife, the institution of lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the emergence of mass imprisonment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries should be understood as altogether interleaved elements in the evolution of the invariant social control and spatial containment, the permanent social incarceration, of blacks (Wacquant 2002). Yet, whereas the other noted

historic instances inscribe political dispositions that brook viable, if not always unambiguous opposition—decolonization, the end of military occupation, the fall of the regime, the dismantling or rollback of imperial encroachments, transformations in the political economy of sex work, etc—for the conjured figures of black suffering in the US, there is, it seems, no political correlate.

This impossible correlation begs a number of urgent questions, questions shaped and incited by a political milieu that includes both the violence at Abu Ghraib and its opposition, but that are aimed at a certain *transfiguration*. How, at the outset, might we begin to (re)formulate or (re)phrase the question of black freedom struggle today? How, in other words, are we to speak of or with or in relation to the forces of black radicalism *after* Emancipation, *post*-civil rights, during an era in which a “new nigger” or “replacement Negro” appears at each turn (eg exploited and embattled immigrants from Latin America and Asia, profiling and targeted Muslims, Arabs, etc), an era in which black suffering circulates everywhere as a criterion of political appraisal but resonates nowhere (sometimes not even among blacks) as a cause worthy of its own name, let alone a collective effort warranting a certain pride of place? If we cannot square the circle of oppressions as we are wont to do, if we cannot simply *assume* or *assert* an affinity of suffering as the common ground of a united front or a global Left, then how is opposition to US imperialism (its military adventures, its economic machinations, its political black-mail) to proceed in such a way that it does not authorize the alienation or forfeiture, the endless deferral or deactivation, of the most belated of black demands? Is there language that can synchronize and coordinate (solidarity with) an Iraqi (or Afghani or . . .) demand for independence and self-determination, and (solidarity with) a black demand—in and beyond the United States, throughout the African Diaspora—for the reparation of everything?⁹ If not, then why not?

Even if we can agree that Abu Ghraib is more than a symptom of the Bush regime, still we must interrogate the analogical impulse that has disseminated on the heels of Sontag’s “Regarding the torture of others” (2004). As the author rightly opines, “[t]o acknowledge that Americans torture their prisoners [of war] would contradict everything this administration has invited the public to believe about the virtue of American intentions and America’s right, flowing from that virtue, to undertake unilateral action on the world stage” (Sontag 2004). What, then, exactly, is contradicted by the acknowledgment that “Americans torture their prisoners” within the fortress gates of the US? Official virtue is similarly impugned, of course, but what *right* is thereby cancelled? Does it cancel the state’s right to pursue the domestic equivalent of invasion of a sovereign entity, a sort of unilateralism within the homeland? Are we to assume that over three decades of mass imprisonment, or a near century of lynching before it, or the centuries-long slave regime from

which the latter comes into view, are pursued according to the dictates of some US Grand Strategy? In point of fact, the situation is much worse. The profound *continuity* of black captivity across the entire history of the United States indicates not its utility but rather its *excess* in relation to the shifting winds of political expedience (including otherwise paramount economic rationalities), its status as what we might call pre-political, a condition of gratuitous (and not only instrumental) violence that founds the very order of the political and that affords the frame of intelligibility for political conflicts proper. Is this not why the question of black emancipation and the prospect of black freedom has always raised, and catastrophically delivered on, the specter of civil war; why it has required the most exceptional deployments of repressive state power, on all sides; why it has presented the most fundamental questions about the constitution (and Constitution) of the nation-state?¹⁰

The rituals of torture exposed at Abu Ghraib—staged events both reckless and deliberate, a whole theatrics of humiliation, terror, sexual degradation—provide, not contradiction or hypocrisy, but the necessary *counterpart* to the “American” principles of democracy, dignity, and freedom; what Žižek calls “the obscene underside of U.S. popular culture . . . the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values” (Žižek 2004).¹¹ In this sense, what the notorious images of frivolous brutality circulating throughout the global media environment evoke, however obliquely, is the ambient combat, and the attendant culture of authoritarianism, that operates without direct announcement and acknowledgment *within* the United States as an affirmation of its birthright in and as a slave society.¹² This ancient internal warfare is foundational and constitutive; the primary division of humanity it enables launches the syntax of western modernity, the state(s) of democratic citizenship, the promise and compromise of civil society—not the division between the exploiters and the exploited or the rich and the poor, but rather the free and the enslaved, subject and object, person and property (Barrett 2006). The obscene underside of the popular culture, the “repression, torture, and sexual coercion that constitute the underbelly of a particular version of democracy, which has achieved dominance in the world” (Davis 2004:45), and the myriad peculiar institutions of social incarceration it has engendered, is the most intimate possession of black existence in the US—from the political and libidinal economies of chattel slavery (still determinate in current affairs despite wishful thinking from all quarters) to the official endorsements of institutionalized lynching (practices commandeered in recent generations by the proper authorities) and the codification of Jim Crow segregation (whose revival cancels apace the detours thrown up by the modern Civil Rights Movement) to the formation of the urban ghetto (which retains its powers of quarantine even in the aftermath of the “long hot summers”

and the short flight of a fragile black *lumpen bourgeoisie*) to the rise of the modern day prison (whose ghastly presence supplies the hallmark of the so-called post-civil rights era) (Nast 2000).¹³

The latter, it bears repeating, now warehouses well over 2 million people; it carries out a range of “invisible punishments” over another nearly 5 million maintained in its orbit as probationers and parolees; and it produces a ruinous cascade of “collateral consequences” for the millions more considered family, friend, and community to those who are most immediately disappeared and monitored (Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002). We are indicating something of the generative force of the prison, but it must be stated as well that the prison (and its repercussions) is more appropriately understood as a component of an even broader offensive on the apparatuses of the welfare state, a malevolent social transformation for which black communities remain the epicenter—poor black women above all insofar as they inhabit the mesh of hyper-segregation, mass imprisonment, *and* the discipline and punishment of “workfare” austerity. That is to say, the “peacetime” assault finds its *raison d'être* and its most compelling rationalization in the persistence of the domestic black population, and the frontline of this racist carceral regime obtains in the ever-increasing powers of the police exercised particularly over the lives of black women and men (irrespective of class status or educational background), a development for which the term “racial profiling” marks only the tip of the iceberg (Sexton forthcoming).

In the US, there is among both state officials and the general public a long historical preoccupation with weapons of mass destruction in regard to blacks. Black people have been deemed, since well before the inception of the United States, perennial threats to national security—not for *having* such weapons (which might actually lend collective bargaining power—witness Iran or North Korea at present), but for *being* such weapons and thus always in need of containment, surveillance, sanction, deportation, elimination; a point that underscores the accuracy of Lewis Gordon’s formulation of “racism as a desire for black people to disappear” (Gordon 1997:63). What concerns us in this respect is the problematic rendering by many commentators of the torture at Abu Ghraib as, for instance, “eerily” or “hauntingly” “reminiscent of black lynchings”, while those same commentators display considerably less vigilance and indignation about the similar, and entirely contemporary, treatment of a prototypically black prison population here in the United States. Nearly all will acknowledge, perfunctorily, the violations of human rights in “Lockdown America” (Parenti 2000) carefully documented by international monitoring groups, yet few have moved beyond concerns for reform of current practices of incarceration, loosening their most repressive aspects, or rescinding the most egregious of drug laws. More to the point, the analogy between the foreign military prison and the domestic prison tends to obfuscate as much as it seeks to illuminate,

since it is unable to remark the critical *difference* between what is happening in the respective carceral formations and why. Differences not at the empirical level—many practices were exported wholesale or transposed with little variation (Peirce 2004)—but at the structural level, the level at which Wilderson (2004) elaborates what he terms “the political ontology of race”.¹⁴

Now, there are compelling reasons for this general failure of discernment, but this fact makes it no more defensible. While departments of the same repressive state apparatus are called to question in each case, even the most preliminary examination makes clear that divergent aspects of its functioning are at stake at either end of the comparison; divergence between the “hard site” at Abu Ghraib and, say, Louisiana’s Angola Prison, or, more broadly, between the War on Terror and the War on Drugs. This is why, at one level, domestic political opposition to the US invasion of Iraq, or the vaster post-Cold War US militarism, cannot hope to mount viable criticism, much less effective political intervention, if it cannot subject to radical critique the local police forces and the ancillary juridical institutions with which they interact daily. So much goes for the welfare of POWs as well. The disinclination of left intellectuals to date—whether activist, academic, or both—to engage the question of prison abolition on the domestic front finds its counterpart in the hedging of their “responsible” commentary on the military occupation (in Afghanistan, in Iraq) and the accumulation of “unlawful enemy combatants”.¹⁵ There is a significant difference, after all, between calling for the immediate enforcement of Geneva Conventions in the global network of US military prisons (unlikely in any event) and calling for the dismantling of the network itself, the closure and demolition or conversion of its physical plant, and the release of the prisoners held captive within its walls (no more likely, of course, but no more fanciful either). For those who pause in lieu of subsequent reconstructive efforts, those animated by questions like, “What is to be done with former prisoners and the myriad social problems faced by them and their communities?” or “What will happen to Iraq now that it has been devastated by the war, how will it be rebuilt, and who will oversee its renewal?” we could—but will not here—entertain any number of policy packages and spending conversion schemes, none of which seem incredibly difficult to imagine (though most register as alien to the current political landscape) and all of which would certainly be better than present proposals for maintaining the relevant custodial relationship (Ali 2003; Davis 2003).¹⁶

Yet, there is something disingenuous about the unwillingness to advocate the abolition of prison—at home and abroad—unless and until a clear alternative is on hand. “Disingenuous” because it bespeaks a refusal to engage the lived experience of the imprisoned, to enter serious dialogue across prison walls, to become conversant with the archive of research and testimony about their political location, about existence in

a state and status of civic death. This disposition, which, needless to say, concedes to *criminalization*, has a general salience, given that prisoners in the US are officially disregarded and popularly despised as a class. However, the particular virulence that characterizes the institutionalized fear and hatred of prisoners in the US, both men and increasingly women, is thoroughly coded by race, and racial blackness unquestionably functions here as its chief abbreviation. “In racial constructs, the ‘hyper-black’-as-prisoner is slave and so she stands *distinctly debased* from all other racial formations in society” (James 2005a:xiii, emphasis added). Thus we offer that the societal derogation of the imprisoned draws its principal affective power and its strictest ideological cast from the deep wells of anti-blackness, and that the “prisonization” of the US is more accurately discussed as a reverberation or derivation of the social death implanted at the heart of black existence, the quintessence of racial slavery and the principle legacy of its afterlife in altered structural modalities (Hartman 1997; Patterson 1982).

The reticence of the Left to engage arguments, and efforts for prison abolition within the US and to *center* therein the ongoing struggle for black freedom, serves to hamstring its critical resistance to US imperialism abroad, leaving it open to capitulation on the emancipation of those with which it seeks to forge solidarity. It does so by approaching sovereignty as a matter of degree. Still, it is not hard to imagine scenarios—indeed, they already exist—in which the Left licenses itself to pursue radical platforms against imperialism, which is to say abolitionist campaigns *overseas*, while allowing the historical condition of blacks, irreducible to the shifting objectives of empire (or Empire), to serve as little more than convenient metaphor: source of insight and outrage, but only insofar as the trouble is quarantined to the past (as lessons learned) or rendered on scales too small or too big to demand action (as either nagging residue or eternal national shame). On this note, we should admit that there is something unconvincing, unpersuasive, and perhaps even fraudulent about the analogical links drawn between, on the one hand, the scandal at Abu Ghraib and, on the other, the fetid history of lynching or the contemporary horrors of mass imprisonment or both. The pretense is due not so much to the moral non-equivalence of the respective institutions (Winn 2004) as to their strict political incommensurability. Thinking productively about this incommensurability, rendering it legible, requires, above all else, the working through of a persistent screen memory—for “them” and for “us”—that dispatches racial slavery as an allegory for regarding the torture of others:

As an African American, these actions are all too familiar to me . . . When Blacks arrived from Africa during the 1600’s, they were stripped of their clothes, pride, dignity and religion. Africans that were enslaved in America went through a tortuous process known as “seasoning,”

which is a term referring to the process of breaking down the African physically, emotionally, and psychologically, hence making him/her submissive. Once the slaves arrived in America, members of the dominant culture raped women repeatedly, men were publicly humiliated and children were sold and separated. It is probably safe to assume that at Abu Ghraib the similarities vastly outweigh the differences. (Slater 2004)

To conclude, we turn again to our opening questions. Why, really, is it “safe to assume” these overwhelming similarities between Iraqi prisoners of war and prisoners of the US drug war, between Iraqi prisoners of war and black lynching victims, between Iraqi prisoners of war and enslaved Africans? Simply because these similarities are rarely challenged, called to question, or scrutinized? Is this assumption not in actuality ventured with great risk, an assumption shot through with eagerness and overconfidence, an assumption that is not without its own worry, its own fear of exposure? Can these similarities finally be established without the vehicle of an assumption maintained by the ardent repetition of a tenuous and anxious assertion? We submit that it is only safe to assume these similarities, and to foreclose the historical singularity of slavery and its afterlife, if by “safe” we mean guarded, shielded, and sheltered from thought. The assumption is anything but safe, however, if by that we mean certain, sound, and sure. In fact, it is the assumption’s very precariousness, and the forcefulness of its approximation, that allows it to enjoy its privileged discursive function—“a constant underlying mark of racialization”—whether we are figuring the prison at Abu Ghraib or confronting the injustices of a thousand other places. It liberates as well the crushing enjoyment that “these frightening comparisons” incessantly grant to us, in the space of freedom.

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Endnotes

¹ A shorter version of this essay was presented in April 2005 at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in Denver, Colorado.

² We use the term “abuse” deliberately here, not to understate or evade the practices of torture, à la Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, but rather to highlight what may be most disturbing about his rhetorical deflection. It is well known that, when questioned by the press, Rumsfeld refused to discuss the Abu Ghraib scandal under the

heading of torture, insisting instead that the matter was more properly described as abuse and therefore less acute. However, we suggest that to enter the fray of this non-debate (clearly, Rumsfeld is engaged in the usual prevarication) is to form a tacit agreement with Rumsfeld et al, not about the right to torture (which the US surely reserves, quite openly, for its military operatives), but rather about the US military occupation of Iraq more generally. In other words, debating *particulars* about the execution of Operation Iraqi Freedom is to cross the threshold of legitimization for the entire strategic plan.

³ This term is adapted from comments made by Professor Norma Alarcón at a 2000 symposium sponsored by the Department of Comparative Ethnic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. The symposium was organized as a response to and discussion of Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton's then forthcoming article, "The Avant-garde of White Supremacy", subsequently published in *Social Identities* 9:2 (2003). There, Alarcón spoke of what she called "procedural fascism" as part of the conceptual yield of Martinot and Sexton's political-legal diagnosis.

⁴ "Are we aware that we are in the midst of a 'soft revolution', in the course of which the unwritten rules determining the most elementary international logic are changing" (Žizek 2005)?

⁵ For a range of published position papers, see the official website: <http://www.newamericancentury.org>. For a critical introduction to the right-wing think tank, PNAC, see Pitt (2003) and Reynolds (2003).

⁶ James (2005b) describes the important distinction between emancipation and freedom as follows: "Neither advocacy abolitionism nor state abolitionism can control or create "freedom" for the captive . . . Emancipation is *given* by the dominant, it being a legal, contractual, and social agreement. Freedom is *taken* and created. It exists as a right against the captor and/or enslaver and a practice shared in community by the subordinate captives" (James 2005b:xxii).

⁷ This last point is obviously indebted to Foucault's (1995) now canonical treatment of the birth of the modern prison. However, we also endorse James' (1996) critical rejoinder to Foucault, which emphasizes the *continuation* of spectacular state violence by racist allotment, particularly that aimed at and against blacks. "Privatized space" here refers also to the street level violence of the police. When blacks are shot or beaten or choked or stripped or raped by the police, or when they are simply detained and questioned or harassed and arrested, such repressive practices happen in the plain view and clear knowledge of the black communities in which generally they unfold, communities formed in part by these very practices. Yet, this violence produces "privatized" spaces nonetheless because, as an effect of the anti-black disappearance of black suffering, the witness of black communities cannot and does not translate into "publicity".

⁸ As Franklin (2004) notes: "The prison has become a central institution in American society, integral to our politics, economy, and culture. Between 1976 and 2000, the United States built on average a new prison each week and the number of imprisoned Americans increased tenfold".

⁹ This point is not meant to diminish in any way the concrete platforms that have been developed already by the international reparations for slavery movement (Bittker 2003; Robinson 2001). Rather, it is to recognize that such platforms, though rich and far reaching in their potential impact, actually represent a contraction or discounting of the incalculable debt incurred by the US, the West, and the world at the expense of African-descent peoples across the last five centuries. In fact, even if the economic legacies of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in Africa and the Americas were redressed—through, say, a global redistribution of capital—its impact would induce not crisis, which the capitalist system can accommodate, but *catastrophe*.

¹⁰ "From the coherence of civil society, the Black subject beckons with the incoherence of civil war. Civil war, then, becomes that unthought, but never forgotten specter waiting in the wings—the understudy of hegemony" (Wilderson 2003:239).

¹¹ Zizek (2004) is not wrong in his observations about the initiatory rituals of closed communities in the US. However, the Iraqi prisoners here are not being drawn into the orbit of an “American” community so much as their torture serves as staging ground for the reconsolidation of community (through the very act of transgression against them) within US military culture. If anything, the initiatory dimensions of the torture bear on the maintenance of prevailing (if anxious) codes of racial whiteness and heterosexual masculinity in its incorporation of those (overexposed) white women present in the theater of military operations. The latter point is developed further by Davis (2004).

¹² “The prison reveals congealed forms of antiblack racism that operate in clandestine ways” (Davis 2003:25).

¹³ Nast (2000) is insightful on the historical formation of racialized geographies, from the plantation to the ghetto, as a central component of what she describes as “racist oedipalization”, or “the immanence of racism to oedipal familial constructions” coded as normatively white, from the white nuclear family to the familial white nation, and threatened by a repressed “bestial” presence, typically “black”—processes that reveals the psychic life of anti-blackness as a spatialized libidinal economy. We are linking this crucial point to the spatial imaginary of coalition which would ambivalently assimilate this spatial-libidinal economy as the generalizable form of racial oppression even as it holds it apart as its ideal form of distilled exclusion and suffering in the extreme.

¹⁴ Wilderson’s formulations on this score are too complex to adequately summarize here. For a full discussion, see his *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (forthcoming). In the dissertation that forms the basis for the forthcoming book, he writes: “Slaves are not subalterns [as we might consider the Iraqi population, as victims of US imperialism], because subalterns are dominated, in the first ontological instance, by the machinations of hegemony . . . and *then*, after some symbolic transgression, in other words in the second instance, by violence. Blackness . . . is constituted by violence in the first ontological instance” (Wilderson 2004:24–25). This structural difference is only partially indexed in the empirical record. But even in cases where blacks seem to experience similar circumstances (or other target populations seem to be faring worse by some quantitative measure), the explanation for *why* and *how* such circumstances are both incurred and represented returns us to structural analysis.

¹⁵ In his recent article, “The logic of withdrawal”, Arnove (2006) articulates “eight reasons why the United States should leave Iraq immediately”. The most relevant to our discussion is the first, namely, that “the United States has no right to be in Iraq in the first place”. We would agree, but not for the same reasons. Arnove goes through the usual left grievance that the Bush administration lied about its reasons for invasion (ie that Iraq posed a threat of attack to the US), implying, of course, that had this rationale rung true the invasion would have been justified. Critique like this does not question the warrant of the US to make war as such—that is, question *US* sovereignty—and enters the entirely liberal debate about *justum bellem*. Perhaps it goes without saying that to take for granted US sovereignty renders the historical struggle for black freedom a simple matter of social inequality, rather than the deconstructive force it might be otherwise.

¹⁶ In a recent interview, Zinn (2005) makes this point emphatically with respect to the occupation of Iraq: “the one way you can justify an ongoing catastrophe is to posit a greater catastrophe if you don’t continue with the present one . . . So while no one can predict what will happen—I think this is important to say—when the United States withdraws its troops from Iraq, the point is that we’re choosing between the certainty of an ongoing disaster, the chaos and violence that are taking place in Iraq today, and an eventuality we can’t predict which *may* be bad. But what *may* be bad is uncertain; what’s bad with our occupation right now is certain. It seems to me that, choosing between the two, you have to take a chance on what might happen if you end the occupation. At the same time, of course, you do whatever you can to mitigate the worst possibilities of your leaving”.

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