

Strange Fruit: American Culture and the Remaking of Iraqi Males at Abu Ghraib.

By Warren Steele

On April 28th, 2004 the CBS news program, *60 Minutes*, broadcast a collection of photographs which had been circulating throughout the American military for months prior to their eventual exposure on national television. These pictures, which writer Carolyn Strange describes as “the workplace snapshot-cum-trophy photo”, not only provided the American public with unflinching visual evidence of prisoner abuse at the hands of U.S. soldiers, but also of torture both physical and psychological at the behest of their commanders.¹ After all, despite Secretary of Defense,



Donald Rumsfeld’s deliberate avoidance of “The T-word,” and somewhat Orwellian abuse of the English language in order to evade the problematic associations of such a term, the *torture of people by American citizens* is an unavoidable reality. Because despite insistence by the Bush administration that such acts were the work of “a few bad apples,” and that, in the words of Brigadier-General Mark Kimmitt:

The Army is a values-based organization. We live by our values. Some of our soldiers...die by our values, and [that the] acts that you see in these pictures may reflect...individuals, but by God, [they do not] reflect my army.”²

¹ Strange, Carolyn. “The Shock of Torture: A Historiographical Challenge,” *History Workshop Journal* 61 (2006). pp. 148.

² CBSNEWS.Com. “Abuse of Iraqi POWs by GIs Probed,” *CBS News*. 28 April 2004. Accessed 21 August 2006. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/27/60II/main614063_page3.shtml>.

The fact remains that similar acts have occurred—and continue to occur—not only at facilities based in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo Bay, but also in innumerable “black sites” found all over the world.³ Secret prisons in which torture can no longer be seen as an aberration in the midst of a ‘just’ and ‘righteous’ cause, but rather as a systematic, government sanctioned practice, which facilitates the goals of that cause; whatever it may be.⁴

Naturally, the culpability of the American government in the practice of such abuse has revealed a glaring contradiction between the utopian rhetoric of its leaders, and the practical policies of both its military and its intelligence gathering community. Because how does one reconcile the rape, murder, and unlawful incarceration of Iraqi citizens when the pretense for the original Operation (was) Iraqi Freedom? Moreover, how does one find reasons for, and create meaning from, such obvious incongruities—such ironies!—when the production of meaning and the search for context, is either a) confined to the hypocritical actions of one presidential administration, or b) is continually penned in by that great historical barrier—that great beginning and end—known as September 11, 2001: *the* single experience which has served as both the starting point, and the ultimate justification for every event to follow, whether they are related or not.

As Carolyn Strange points out:

Most historians, no matter what their field of specialization, find such narrow time-frames for historical analysis inherently dubious; yet historians have hardly dominated the ranks of those who have exposed and criticized human-rights abuses committed in the course of waging the global war on terror. Investigative journalists, lawyers, political scientists, media theorists, [and others] have contributed evidence and provided perspectives that have profoundly challenged

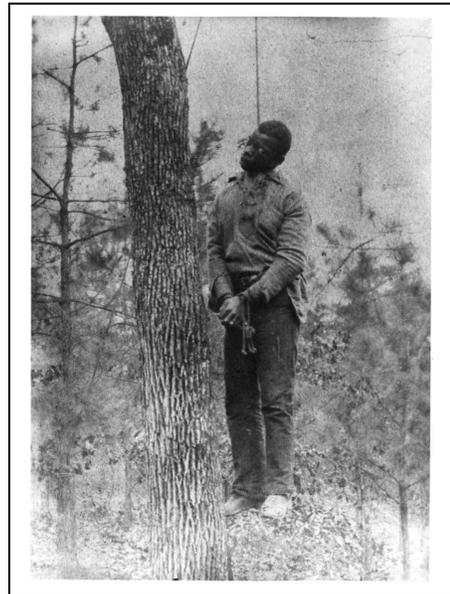
³ Priest, Dana. “CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons,” *Washington Post* 2 Nov. 2005. pp. A1.

⁴ For more information on the U.S. government’s culpability in the practice of torture by their own people please refer to: Greenberg, Karen, and Joshua L. Dratel, ed. *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

the framing of the war according to mainstream media outlets and political administrations, yet [most] have done so without grounding their critiques in history.⁵

Some scholars, however, such as Benjamin Whitmer and Carolyn Strange have attempted to penetrate beyond such narrow time frames by consciously choosing to break away from the temporal brackets created by the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and thereby place themselves in a far more favourable position historically. Specifically, one which can more accurately trace America's current use of torture to a more substantial root cause, because despite the immense significance of 9/11, the event itself can also be seen as just one more symptom of a much larger social disease. In fact, when placed within its proper historical context, September 11th quickly becomes the most recent catalyst for the subsequent re-emergence of torture and other war-time atrocities as accepted practice among the U.S. citizenry.

For example, both Whitmer and Strange maintain that torture at Abu Ghraib and other U.S. facilities can be traced to accepted practices within the American penal system. While others, such as Susan Sontag have gone further, and stated indirectly that such acts of abuse stem from a sense of inherent racism which has haunted the United States since slavery. After all, much has already been made of the link between Abu Ghraib and the images found in



⁵ Strange, Carolyn. "The Shock of Torture: A Historiographical Challenge," *History Workshop Journal* 61 (2006). pp. 135-136.

American lynching photography taken from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Sontag writes:

If there is something comparable to what these pictures show it would be some of the [photos]...of black victims of lynching taken between the 1880s and 1930s, which show small town Americans...grinning, beneath the naked mutilated body of a black man or woman hanging behind them from a tree. The lynching photographs were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done. So are the pictures from Abu Ghraib.⁶

Indeed, each set of photos features tortured, humiliated, and castrated ‘others,’ both in the literal and figurative sense. Moreover, each feature what writer Hilton Als calls, “a lot of crazy looking white people, as crazy and empty-looking in the face as the white people who stare at me”, and presumably, all those they deem to be non-white.⁷ Yet, despite the many similarities which lie between these two distinct historical points, the links that join them have never been made concrete. Instead, the most recent collection of pictures is only said to recall the other, and as such, evoke only feelings of embarrassment and shame at how little progress has been made since the institution of Jim Crow.

Of course, most scholars are very wary of making such connections, and rightly so, since there is an inherent problem in stating that A is identical to B, that *this* is analogous to *that*, or that one form of hatred is the same as another. In all cases, such absolutes are invariably false, since historical events are never identical. However, as Zillah Eisenstein writes, sometimes comparison is necessary, since the ever-present “racializing of difference...requires that we look through or in-between the horrors of hatred.”⁸ Because even though

⁶ Sontag, Susan. “What Have We Done?” *The New York Times*. 23 May 2004. Accessed 12 August 2006. <<http://donswaim.com/nytimes.sontag.html>>

⁷ Als, Hilton. “GWTW,” *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Ed. James Allen et al. Sante Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000. pp. 39-40.

⁸ Eisenstein, Zillah. *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized*. New York: Routledge, 1996. pp. 13.

racial lynchings do not bespeak the same hatred as do the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, or the concentration camps of Nazi Germany or Bosnia...the slaves who died on the slave ships [do] share a [larger] history of hate with the Jews and the Gypsies of the holocaust...histories [which] must be recognized, explored, and compared, because these accounts are part of a similar, though not identical 'otherness.'⁹

In fact, despite the many temporal and contextual differences which constitute and complicate each specific example of hate, all forms of hatred whether racial, religious, sexual, or political all share the same general but closely related characteristics. Namely: the establishment of hierarchy through the inscription of violence on the body of the victim. In this sense, the photos gleaned from Abu Ghraib, as well as all those found in the annals of American history *are* comparable to one another, because each is part of a larger continuum of hate of which Iraq is only the most recent initiate. A continuum in which 'others' are produced and purged not only to help "purify" the whiteness of the State, but also to strengthen its resolve against those who would threaten it with difference.¹⁰ In other words, the racist must create, or in the case of Abu Ghraib, *recreate* his inferior.¹¹ Furthermore, he or she must seize upon that newly constructed difference and then remake that which is threatening, into something controllable and familiar, palatable and inferior.

For example, on May 4th, 2004, conservative pundit Rush Limbaugh made the following statement on his syndicated radio show; in an episode he titled somewhat ironically—albeit inadvertently—"It's Not About Us; This Is War!":

CALLER: It was like a college fraternity prank that stacked up naked men...

⁹ Eisenstein, Zillah. *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized*. New York: Routledge, 1996. pp. 13.

¹⁰ Leonard, David J. "The Real Color of Money: Controlling Black Bodies in the NBA," *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 30. 2 (May 2006). pp. 159.

¹¹ For more information see: Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967; Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1968.

LIMBAUGH: Exactly! Exactly my point! This is no different than what happens at the Skull and Bones initiation and we're going to ruin people's lives over it and we're going to hamper our military effort, and then we are going to really hammer them because they had a good time. You know, these people are being fired at every day...you ever heard of emotional release? You ever heard of a need to blow some steam off?¹²

Weirdly, and in spite of Limbaugh's mind-bending hubris, the metaphors used by this ultra-conservative spokesman really struck at the heart of the matter; although again, it was accomplished inadvertently. In fact, Limbaugh's comments were—and still *are*—so accurate and so telling that scholar Slavoj Zizek would pick up the same metaphor two weeks later when discussing the very same issue. As Zizek writes:

To anyone acquainted with the reality of the American way of life, the photos brought to mind the obscene underside of U.S. popular culture—say, the initiatory rituals of torture and humiliation one has to undergo to be accepted into a closed community. Similar photos appear at regular intervals in the U.S. press after some scandal explodes at an Army base or high school campus, when such rituals went overboard. Far too often we are treated to images of soldiers and students forced to assume humiliating poses, perform debasing gestures and suffer sadistic punishments.¹³

Yet, whereas Limbaugh sees the innocuous scenario of a few soldiers “blowing off some steam,” Zizek frames the rite as something far more sinister. More specifically, he states that America's use of torture facilitates “a direct insight into ‘American values,’ into the core of an obscene enjoyment that sustains the American way



¹² From “It’s Not About Us; This Is War!,” *The Rush Limbaugh Show*. Aired 4 May 2004. The quote can also be found on-line at mediamatters.com. Accessed 12 August 2006. <<http://mediamatters.org/items/200405050003>>

¹³ Zizek, Slavoj. “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib,” *In These Times* 28.15. 21 May 2004. A version is also available on-line at: *Inthesetimes.com*. Accessed 23 July 2005. <http://www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/what_rumsfeld_doesnt_know_that_he_knows_about_abu_ghraib/>

of life.” Indeed, Zizek postulates that in “being submitted to the humiliating tortures [inflicted upon them by U.S. soldiers], the Iraqi prisoners were effectively *initiated into American culture*” by their captors.¹⁴ Foreign bodies forced to endure a rite of passage which not only demeaned them as people, but as I will argue, also pushed them through the lens of American history, and thus through the events and ideals which have shaped the arc of North America’s racist past, present, and possible future.

Consider this: Limbaugh’s statements reference two ideas which are not only central to the psychology and cultural significance of the Abu Ghraib photos, but perhaps also to the systematic acts of torture taking place across the world in secret CIA prisons also known as “black sites.” In particular, Limbaugh refers to the concept of initiation, and to the idea of acceptance into a closed community by rite of pain. Moreover—and by implication—he is also referencing the reinforcement of an existing social hierarchy; an element which is often an *invariable* aspect of all closed communities. In this sense, it is enormously appropriate that Limbaugh should refer directly to the secret Yale society known as Skull and Bones, because in doing so, he has not only implicated the current U.S. President and lifetime “Bonesman,” George Walker Bush, *indirectly*, but also established the two poles of the American social order with stunning clarity. Keep in mind, according to Rush Limbaugh both President Bush and the victims at Abu Ghraib are associated with the same practices of the same ‘organization.’ Two members playing two roles that represent the two extremes of the same power structure; namely: a) the role of fraternity president, and b) that of the new fraternity pledge.

¹⁴ Zizek, Slavoj. “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib,” *In These Times* 28.15. 21 May 2004. A version is also available on-line at: *Inthesetimes.com*. Accessed 23 July 2005. <http://www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/what_rumsfeld_doesnt_know_that_he_knows_about_abu_ghraib/>

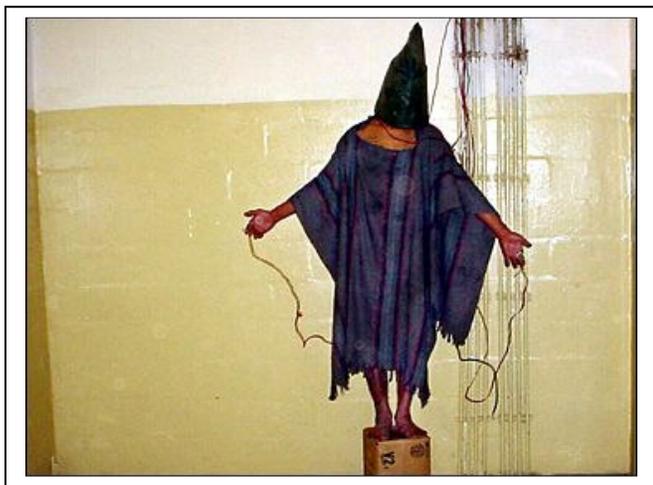
For instance, when torture is reframed as a hazing ritual that grants entrance into a closed community, or more specifically, when torture is reframed as a ritual which grants entrance into a community of *increasing closure* such as the United States, the act not only becomes a rite of passage, but also a kind of performance which ultimately seeks to erase the agency and subjectivity of its victims. Consequently, bodies are redefined as their ethnicity is effaced, and subjectivities are remoulded as any existent religious or political convictions are destroyed and replaced by ideologies and dogmas deemed to be more acceptable by the oppressor. In fact, the systematic practice of physical torture and psychological abuse at the hands of one's "friend" or enemy, actually seeks to inscribe a new tribal identity on the body of the victim. Thereby remaking the person being tortured—a body once considered terribly foreign by the torturer—into a palatable likeness of and for the oppressor. In the case of Abu Ghraib, it is a ritual which not only educates an already "coloured" body on the power and supremacy of American politics, but also on the racial superiority of white skin, white culture, and white history.

After all, as a new entrant into the community hierarchy, the Iraqi male is now forced to take his 'required' place on the lowest rung of the American social order, since his entire being is broken down, and then remade into something which resembles the abused figure of the U.S. 'nigger.' In other words, he becomes a non-person; a castrated and powerless 'Other'; a parody of humanity; a repository for all that is considered bad or undesirable; and, most importantly, the latest in a series of *black* fields upon which the bright light of *white* identity is defined. However, unlike *Skull and Bones*, and yet at the same time, in keeping with the sort of socio-political environment that initially conceived the club back in 1832, the possibility of promotion for this latest pledge is absolutely

inconceivable as opposed to inevitable. Because like the place occupied by the victim's African-American predecessors during and after slavery, the signs inscribed upon the skin of this new American body also read: "Whites Only." Or at best: "This far. And no further."

Before I continue, I feel it is important to first pause, and deal with my use of the word 'nigger,' because it is, and always has been, such a problematic term. One which continues to hold a great deal of power even today; especially when uttered by the wrong person in the wrong context. There are so many issues which arise when such a loaded racial epithet is applied to people or situations that are so far removed from its original signifier. As such, I want to make it clear now, that I am not equating the so-called "N-word" with the figure of the tortured Iraqi citizen. Rather, I am arguing that Iraqi citizens, and Iraqi male's in particular, are being forced through the lens of 'that word' in a time of American imperialism, for the purposes of American consumption. Indeed, a prime example of such racial remaking is found quite easily in one of the most famous pictures taken from the Abu Ghraib scandal. Specifically, the humiliating image of an

Iraqi man standing barefoot on a box; his face and otherwise unclothed body concealed beneath a pointed black hood, and a tattered black robe; his arms forced open and stretched outward, so that his body is not only effaced,



but also transformed and remade into something both familiar and inferior. In effect, this

victim and others like him, become Muslim men moulded in the image of Christ, and perhaps bodies baptised by fire through wires and electrodes that stream upward from their fingertips into some unseen power source just beyond the camera frame.

Since its original publication over two years ago, this photo of the ‘man in the black hood’ in particular has become something of an icon for the current U.S.-Iraq war. It has come to represent the reality of American foreign policy, the intensity of the Iraqi insurgency, and the subsequent brutality of the U.S. military brought on by a careless and/or inept leadership. Most importantly, however—and until now, perhaps unconsciously—it has also come to represent many of the shocking truths embedded within America’s racist past and present. As such, it is a prime example of what Slavoj Zizek refers to rather facetiously as

‘unknown knowns,’ the things we don’t know that we know—which is precisely, the Freudian unconscious, [or] the ‘knowledge which doesn’t know itself,’ as [Jacques] Lacan used to say.¹⁵

Because if one looks closely at the image of this unnamed victim, and pays close attention to the way in which he is dressed, as well as the way in which he is posed, a number of startling patterns begin to emerge. Patterns which not only reveal the extent of American mistreatment, but also some startling visual and ideological motifs, which are ultimately inscribed with the history of those who would invade, oppress, and occupy a sovereign country in the name of democracy.

For example, in the context of American history this particular photo is extremely disturbing, because it resonates with over 400 years of slavery and oppression through the

¹⁵ Zizek, Slavoj. “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib,” *In These Times* 28.15. 21 May 2004. A version is also available on-line at: *Inthesetimes.com*. Accessed 23 July 2005. <http://www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/what_rumsfeld_doesnt_know_that_he_knows_about_abu_ghraib/>

amalgamation of two related, and yet totally contradictory racial images—that of the ‘nigger’ and that of the KKK. Keep in mind, the man posed in the photo is a non-white, dressed in a black robe, which bears a striking resemblance to the uniform of the Ku Klux Klan. From a North American perspective, it is impossible to view this trinity without making some alarming mental connections, as this sort of organized racial hatred has had a tremendous impact on the culture of the American continent. An impact which has not only preserved the political potency of the white supremacists and their clothing, but also allowed the soldiers at Abu Ghraib to improve upon the KKK’s particular brand of oppression, by altering their



normally iconic costumes to signify the inscription of colour. Or more precisely: to signify the inscription of the word “coloured” on the bodies of their victims. Bear in mind that in being forced to wear the black garment, the prisoner is not only educated on the power of white skin, but in turn, simultaneously kicked into the hierarchy of American culture by being both *racialized* and *required* to assume the role of the Black slave.

What’s more, the Iraqi victim’s initiation into the U.S. master-slave relationship is even established through many of the same methods employed by the historical figure of the white American slave owner: in the sense that, such a disturbing power structure is continually reinforced by the oppressor through sexualized means. In particular, through the military’s blatant re-creation of the BDSM fetish scene, and though acts which not

only serve to castrate the prisoners and establish the sexual supremacy of their captors, but also the unquestioned virility of American masculinity, as well as the absolute inadequacy of their foreign victims—who are, incidentally, now classified as ‘bottoms.’ Indeed, to paraphrase the words of one, Benjamin Whitmer, “Abu Ghraib contains the complete theater of sexual aberration,



[including] every form of racial-sexual humiliation and violation endemic” to the colonial history of the United States and its people.¹⁶ All of which are now being “enacted by our uniformed men and women” upon the bodies of these new ‘initiates,’ just as it was done to their so-called ‘Negro’ predecessors only decades earlier.¹⁷

In fact, today, it is both justified and appropriate that such acts of physical abuse and racial hatred should take place within walls of a U.S. prison as opposed to the open air of something akin to the Southern plantation. Because if Abu Ghraib is indicative of American violence and American racism, from the time of slavery and emancipation, to the civil rights struggles which occurred after the end of World War II, then it seems only fitting that America’s current victimization, and subsequent initiation of another non-white race, should take place not only within their most modern *incarnation*, but also within their most blatant *indication* of a continuing and deeply seeded racism. After all,

¹⁶ Whitmer, Benjamin. “Torture Chambers and Rape Rooms: What Abu Ghraib can Tell Us About the American Carceral System,” *New Centennial Review* 6.1. pp. 192.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 192.

in a country where one third of the African-American youth will enter the U.S. justice system *as* convicts, and thus as bodies who will eventually be stripped of liberty, robbed of dignity, violated sexually, and forever marked *as* ‘niggers’ racially, one cannot help but wonder if Abu Ghraib—and all the other secret CIA prisons—are more than just mere “black sites.”¹⁸ But rather sites which locate *blackness* in order to purify, strengthen, illuminate, and define the limits of a world which is dominated by whiteness. As one former intelligence official said to writer Seymour Hersh when describing the official commencement of torture at Abu Ghraib:

They weren't getting anything substantive from the detainees in Iraq. [So the Under-Secretary for Intelligence, Stephen Cambone] says, ‘I've got to crack this thing and I'm tired of working through the normal chain of command. I've got this apparatus set up [called the *black* special-access program] and I'm going in hot.’ So he pulls the switch, and the electricity begins flowing last summer. And it's working. We're getting a picture of the insurgency in Iraq and the intelligence is flowing into the *white world*. We're getting good stuff.¹⁹

¹⁸ David Leonard writes: “At present, people of color account for more than 70% of America’s prison population, with Latinos representing nearly 20% and Blacks accounting for more than 50% of America’s prison population. As of 2004, there were more than 1 million Black people confined to prison. That represents 1 out of 35; if you split that in half, it constitutes 1 out of 17 men; now remove the very old and very young, and this number drops to 1 in 10. Now if you include those on parole or probation, the number is 1 in 4; for those just in their 20s, it is 1 in 3. In America, the land of the free, Black males have more than a 30% chance of doing time at some point in their lives. Compared to Latinos, who hover around 16% (1 in 6), and Whites at about 4% (1 in 24), it becomes clear that the effects of the prison industrial complex are specific to the Black community. Although formal Jim Crow ended with the efforts of activism and organizers through the 1960s, the existence of the prison industrial complex represents a 21st century manifestation of Jim Crow that entails disenfranchisement, family dislocation, virtual enslavement, and forced confinement (Mauer & the Sentencing Project, 2001; Miller, 1997).” For more information see: Leonard, David J. “The Real Color of Money: Controlling Black Bodies in the NBA,” *Journal of Sport & Social Issues* 30. 2 (May 2006). pp. 162.

¹⁹ Hersh, Seymour M. “The Gray Zone: How a Secret Pentagon Program Came to Abu Ghraib,” *The New Yorker*. 24 May 2004. Accessed online 4 August 2006. <http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040524fa_fact>