

“CULTURE KNOWLEDGE” AND THE VIOLENCE OF IMPERIALISM

REVISITING THE ARAB MIND

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“I always knew the Americans would bring electricity back to Baghdad. I just never thought they’d be shooting it up my ass.” – Iraqi translator, Baghdad, November 2003¹

This essay considers the Orientalist culture assumptions² about “Arabs,” Muslims,” and “Islam” underlying United States imperial domination practices in the early 21st century. Such consideration is particularly important in light of the revealed U.S.-sponsored abuse and torture of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib Prison and the explanations and discourses that circulated in response. These culture assumptions operate as a racializing project³ that occurs at least partly through putative knowledge of gender and sexuality norms. The brutal practices visually represented in photographic and video images, like other practices unrepresented visually but documented in the personal testimonies and reports of Muslim and Arab men prisoners, are constitutive rather than marginal aspects of the U.S. “war on terror.”

Since September 11, 2001, U.S.-sponsored torture has been widely documented in Iraq, at the U.S. Naval Base prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in Afghanistan, and in federal custody on U.S. territory. In April 2004, approximately a year after the U.S. invaded Iraq, print media, television, and Internet sources disclosed and began widely reporting on digital photographs that depicted Iraqi men prisoners in the Abu Ghraib facility being tortured by U.S. military and intelligence personnel and subcontracted mercenaries.⁴ These and additional images released later, as well as human rights reports and prisoner affidavits discussing prisoner abuse, torture and murder, have indicated the extent to which “culture” assumptions structured which techniques would be deemed effective for the purposes of domination and control. Methods of subjugation depicted and described included undressing prisoners and keeping them naked for long periods of time, photographed separately and in groups; forcing naked prisoners to lay atop each other in human piles; forcing prisoners to masturbate; raping prisoners and forcing them to rape each other or to simulate rape scenes; simulating homosexual and heterosexual encounters in which prisoners are bound, gagged, wearing hoods over their heads, attached to metal bars, and/or leashed; creating scenes in which imprisoned Arab or Muslim men have women military personnel undress in front of them or smear them with menstrual blood; and forcing men prisoners to wear women’s panties on their heads or around the midsection of their bodies.⁵ Wendy Kozol and Rebecca DeCola have noted how the Abu Ghraib photographs highlight the ironic speciousness of claims that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq was liberating and civilizing for Iraqis, “precisely because there is no visible sign of Iraqi political agency.”⁶

The torture and violence depicted and the second level of subordination indicated by seemingly casual digital photographing by U.S. military personnel and mercenaries, clearly intended to demean, debase, and control, reportedly for the purposes of recruiting collaborators and informants, are premised on and produced

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through the prism of Arab and Muslim cultural difference from “us,” or the West, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality norms. Such cultural constructions assume the West to be dynamic, modern, and providing potential spaces of resistance, transformation, and freedom for its subjects. In contrast, the East is produced as frozen-in-time and always already oppressive, with subjects who are over-determined by free-standing constructs (e.g. religion, patriarchy, modesty, clan, honor, and so on). The markers of “east” and “west,” however, are deceptive because the cultural assumptions of Orientalist racializing frameworks are geographically unfixed: the “traits” are assumed to be psychologically ingrained, producing the plural and emancipated subjectivities of those deemed modern, and a generalized “mind” for those constructed as backward and subordinated, wherever they are located. Consistent with existing racial notions, especially in the United States, Arab and Muslim cultural practices and subjectivities are assumed first to be *known*, and further to be static and untouched by hybridizing processes, a range of debates and contestations, or factors such as colonialism, imperialism, ideology, socio-economic location, and national differences. As a result of such assumptions, diverse groups of people are misunderstood as an undifferentiated “them.”

The dominant culture knowledge informing the subordination techniques of U.S. and U.S.-sponsored prison personnel and their superiors, it appears, was that forced nakedness, homo- and heterosexualized degradation and threats, and associations with things and subject positions deemed womanly violated modesty, heterosexual, and masculinity norms (where degradation equals the feminine in misogynist terms), and thus would be peculiarly effective in demeaning the Arab and Muslim men prisoners and breaking their will to resist collaboration. Such (projected?) assumptions are particularly ironic given the long history of Western discursive constructions of “the Orient” in travel and other literature as a ground for “erotic fantasies of aberrant and illicit sexuality,” as Hema Chari and others have pointed out. Chari insists that these sexual fantasies were often about subordinating *colonized men to colonizing men*, while at the same time scripting colonized men as “aberrant other[s] to fulfill Western psychosocial needs” to both avow and disavow “sexual desire between men.”⁷⁷ This does not negate Jasbir Puar’s point that the sexual acts simulated in many of the scenes of Iraqi prisoners were not “specifically and only gay sex acts.” Also important is Puar’s point that “race and how it plays out in these scenarios is effaced via the fixation on sexuality....”⁷⁸ Indeed, my point is that the techniques used in the racial-political subordination of prisoners in the boundless U.S. war on terror and of Iraqis under U.S. occupation continue to be informed at least partly by specious culture knowledge about Arab or Muslim gender and sexuality norms. This “knowledge,” moreover, is hegemonic in the U.S. It appears, further, that in the cases under discussion, the “culture knowledge” produced by weak social science is privileged over that found in western travelogues, novels, memoirs, and other writings that have provided so much grist for post-colonial and cultural studies.

THE POLITICS OF CULTURE IN *THE ARAB MIND*

The purported logic behind the torture methods used against Arab and Muslim men at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, and many of the narratives that circulated in response, rearticulated particularistic assumptions about Arab Muslim “mentalities” and attitudes toward nudity, sexuality, and gender relations as most famously explored and argued in Raphael Patai’s *The Arab Mind*.⁹ *The Arab Mind* focused on what Patai variously called Arab “psychology,” “mentality,” or “mind,” explaining to Western readers (assumed to be white, Judeo-Christian, and educated) the cultural habits and ways of being Arab. This agenda is underpinned by a narrative structure that rationalizes and legitimates Western domination over the Eastern other by making a case for the civilizational and cultural superiority of the

former. Arab politics as compared to Western politics, and Arab resistance to “Westernization” B with Zionism and Israel constructed as representative of Western modernity -- are recurring and insistent themes in the book.

Patai’s study, according to a consultant to the U.S. government for the 2003 Iraq war referenced in an exposé article by journalist Seymour Hersh, became “the bible of the neocons on Arab behavior,” who concluded that “Arabs only understand force” and their “biggest weakness...is shame and humiliation.” The idea was that “some prisoners would do anything B including spying on their associates B to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends,” and thus would agree to collaborate with the occupation forces upon release.¹⁰ In his April 30, 2004, *New Yorker* article, Hersh referenced New York University professor of Middle Eastern Studies Bernard Haykel as stating that while “such dehumanization is unacceptable in any culture, ...it is especially so in the Arab world. Homosexual acts are against Islamic law and it is humiliating for men to be naked in front of other men.”¹¹ Such culture assumptions and the techniques of subordination informed by them have been notably unsuccessful as indicated by the strength of the anti-U.S. insurgency; and the anonymous U.S. consultant acknowledged this failure in the Hersh article published in *The New Yorker* on May 15, 2004.¹²

Patai’s preface in the first edition of his book operates as a pre-emptive self-defense that situates the author as a credible academic with no intent to harm. Patai informs readers that his claims about Arabs and Muslims emerge from his intensive training in Middle Eastern, Islamic, and biblical studies; informal relationships with living Arabs; knowledge of Arab and Islamic history and theorists (who are deployed throughout the book as anticipating his own arguments about a modal personality); training and experience in the languages of the region, especially Arabic; and “life-long attachment” to people and things “Araby.” Readers learn that Patai grew up in Budapest, completed doctoral studies in Hungary and Germany before attending graduate school at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the “spring” of 1933 (earning the first Ph.D. awarded by the university in 1936, and Patai’s second doctorate), where he studied “Palestinology, which comprised the history, historical geography, and topography of the country; and Arabic.”¹³ Patai’s claims to being attached to Arabs and his educational credentials often provide the basis for defense of *The Arab Mind*.

In summer 2004, the *Middle East Quarterly*¹⁴ republished the foreword to the 2002 reprint of *The Arab Mind*. The foreword was written by Norvell B. De Atkine, who described himself as a retired colonel in the U.S. Army who served in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Vietnam (where he was a combatant), holds a graduate degree in Arab studies from the American University in Beirut, and “teaches at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.”¹⁵ While we cannot know from available information how military personnel absorbed and applied this training, Atkine writes that *The Arab Mind* “forms the basis of my cultural instruction [of military officers], complemented by my own experiences of some twenty-five years living in, studying, or teaching about the Middle East.” He adds that he has “briefed hundreds of military teams being deployed to the Middle East,” who upon returning “invariably comment on the paramount usefulness of the cultural instruction in their assignments.”¹⁶ While it is difficult to argue or provide evidence that such instruction was *not* useful to these military personnel, my point is that the assumptions and putative knowledge about local culture that such personnel bring with them interactionally *constitutes* culture rather than simply reflecting or respecting its indigenous forms.

Atkine echoes Patai’s stated empathy with and liking for Arabs and Muslims, and describes *The Arab Mind* as scholarly, with “neither animus nor rancor nor condescension.”¹⁷ However, since all scholarship is informed by the foundational assumptions, methodologies, and epistemological understandings and subjectivities of authors, it is difficult to argue that the book is neutral or apolitical. The driving arguments in *The Arab Mind* are clearly informed by Patai’s personal

history and ideology as a European Jewish Zionist who was the son of an activist Zionist father.¹⁸ My analysis of *The Arab Mind* reiterates some of Edward Said's criticisms of the claims and arguments about Arab and Muslim character made by U.S.-based academics such as Sania Hamady, Bernard Lewis, Patai (in earlier works), and others in the 1960s and 1970s, whose research represented what he termed the "latest phase" of Orientalist scholarship.¹⁹ A quick search of the Internet indicates that these works and their authors B dated, over-generalized, and problematic as they are B continue to be recommended by conservative websites, bloggers, and websites sponsored by the U.S. state as providing incisive and accurate explanations of the region and its peoples. In a Google search, for example, I encountered an unclassified U.S. Central Intelligence Agency document that positively reviewed *The Arab Mind* in the context of the overall intelligence utility of "national character research."²⁰

The most famous and respected practitioner of this type of research was anthropologist Ruth Fulton Benedict, whose book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* grew from research produced at the request of the U.S. Office of War Information.²¹ It is not surprising that these personality-type frameworks have been revived and rearticulated at the dawn of the 21st century, given the extent to which "culture" differences are used to explain the motivations of perceived or real enemies of the "west." The "war on terror" triggered by the September 11, 2001 attacks in the U.S., and the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq (whose excuses have shifted over time but appears to be primarily motivated by a desire to control the region's natural resources), have had few sovereignty, citizenship, or legal limits. Thus these wars are in special need of an overarching legitimating framework that describes the targets of the war as culturally and civilizationally inferior to those using military power to push the mantle of civilization and democracy.

In defense (published in the "Letters" section of *The Nation*, September 19, 2005) of their late father and his book, Daphne Patai and Jennifer Patai Schneider are right to insist that Raphael Patai cannot be blamed for the possible use of *The Arab Mind* in the training of military personnel deployed in hostile Muslim-majority or Arab fields, or the torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. military forces. Patai and Schneider's defense is nevertheless disingenuous in its argument that Raphael Patai's subjectivity is irrelevant to evaluation of *The Arab Mind*, as indicated by their rhetorical question: "Or might it be that Patai's work is suspect because he is a Jew, a European?"²² It is widely acknowledged and recognized that Seymour Hersh, the U.S. author of the stories that most famously exposed torture behind prison walls in Iraq and U.S. government complicity at the highest levels, is a journalist and muckraker of Jewish background. More problematic is the daughters' stated assumption, shared by Norvell B. De Atkine, that criticism of *The Arab Mind* is the same as criticism of "having some understanding of a foreign culture."²³ The sisters write, for example, that "We would certainly hope that neocons, the left, the military, the press and others actually turn to scholarship in attempting to formulate their views of cultures other than their own."²⁴ Atkine uses a similar strategy when he argues that critics of *The Arab Mind* should instead be encouraging education and understanding of other cultures= terms.²⁵ The argument for the importance of cultural education is a red herring, however, in that critics of *The Arab Mind* are likely to agree that cultural knowledge about other societies and peoples is important, as is knowledge of history and language, and being open to new information and ways of behaving in unfamiliar contexts. Such an argument elides the degree to which the cultural representations in *The Arab Mind* are accurate or complete, and how such representations inform politics, policy, and military strategy.

Although *The Arab Mind* has been widely-read by a certain intelligentsia, it cannot be treated as *explaining* torture by U.S. forces (in Abu Ghraib or elsewhere), especially given the ubiquitousness of torture and other extrajudicial violence in U.S.

wars and foreign interventions. Rather, the book is one source that has helped to articulate and legitimate longstanding hegemonic European and Western idioms for understanding and controlling the other, especially the Arab and Muslim other, in the service of colonial or imperial projects. While there is little debate that Saddam Hussein was a dictator, it is widely recognized in the region that U.S. foreign, military, and economic policies have historically worked against democratic movements in the post-Ottoman and post-colonial Middle East and North Africa, and the U.S. state has a robust history of supporting policies and individuals that facilitate the interests of U.S. capitalism. Indeed, as Naomi Klein recently reminded readers, people who responded to the Abu Ghraib images of U.S. state-sponsored torture as if it had “never before” occurred suffer from historical amnesia, since torture by U.S. military and intelligence forces has been quite common-place. According to declassified School of the Americas training manuals, U.S. torture methods have included: “early morning capture to maximize shock, immediate hooding and blindfolding, forced nudity, sensory deprivation, sensory overload, sleep and food manipulation, humiliation, extreme temperatures, isolation, stress positions B and worse.”²⁶ These strategies of subjugation were used but denied during U.S.-led and sponsored wars in Vietnam and Latin America. Torture in the Bush II administrations, in contrast, is publicly embraced and defended by the state at the highest levels.²⁷

PERSONALITY AND CULTURE IN *THE ARAB MIND*

Because of space and scope considerations, I only analyze parts of *The Arab Mind*. Most claims about Arab personality and culture in the book are overdrawn. Moreover, expositions of “the Arab” occur in negative contrast with an explicitly superior Western mode and way of being, rather than being discussed according to historical foundations, contextual operations, debates, alternative practices, hybridities, plurality, and transformations. This is true despite Patai’s occasional folklorist admonitions to the “we” readership not to judge the other by our standards. Not surprisingly given its popularity, *The Arab Mind* is compelling in some of its arguments, not least of which because it makes some research-based truth claims that reasonable people can agree with, and people with knowledge of Arab societies and people can recognize. Patai argues, for example, that there is a “national [Arab Muslim] character” produced from shared culturally-bound child-rearing and socialization processes. What social constructionist, clinical psychologist, teacher, or feminist can disagree that the dominant childrearing and socialization techniques of a group impact self and subject formation? The problem with Patai’s formulations is that they are frequently ahistorical, acontextual, and over-generalizing. Arab childrearing and socialization systems, for example, are understood by Patai to be rigid rather than flexible and variable, and all-determining in impact rather than producing different individual trajectories. In his words, there is a “hold [of] traditional values...over the...Arab mind.”²⁸ Within such an understanding, members of Arab societies cannot be individuals, but are similar to drones in a Borg-like collective that suppresses creativity, critical thinking, and individuality.²⁹ The contemporary reader of *The Arab Mind* can be forgiven for concluding that there is a primordial Arab-Muslim child-rearing system that by definition is impervious to change, history, education, migration, ethnic difference, class, legal context, ideology, television, radio, music, and the Internet.

The Arab character, according to Patai, is “the sum total of the motives, traits, beliefs, and values shared by the plurality in a national population,” or the “modal personality.”³⁰ These Arab traits include family cohesion and hierarchical loyalties, honor in death rather than humiliation, self-respect, and dislike of subordination to authority.³¹ Men, he argued, over-rely on verbal utterances without the ability to follow through because of access on verbalized demand to the mother=s breast until age three.³² Child-rearing also impacts achievement

orientations, which in turn explains differentials in national development rates.³³ Male virility and manliness are valued by Arabs, as is sexual privacy, although to a lesser extent than virility.³⁴ Arab “self-esteem” or “self-respect” depends on the sexual honor of women, courage-bravery, and hospitality-generosity, all of which Patai defines as “syndromes.”³⁵ The term “syndrome” implies a disease, disorder, or abnormality. In this case, it appears to be a permanent condition caused by an all-determining and inferior culture that is inculcated especially through child-rearing. Arabs, he argued, “are prisoners of their cultural values” and all their actions are designed to save face.³⁶

Patai discussed the Arabic language as stylistically exaggerated and elaborate, full of “florid expressions,” giving the language a “delicious quality” in terms of style. Patai compared this style with non-Arabic, “primarily English, standards” of expression, which he described as tending toward the “brief,” “dry,” and invariably “repetitive” in how, for example, people greet each other in the morning.³⁷ Arabic language style predictably translates into negative political implications, however, so that “exaggeration and overemphasis intrude even into Arab political statements and discussion.” This is illustrated for Patai by the reported statements of Syrian, Iraqi, and Saudi Arabian leaders to Palestinian nationalist Musa Alami on the eve of the “1948 Israeli War of Independence” that the Arab militaries could easily defeat the Jewish Zionists: “The common denominator in all these verbal assurances was that they were greatly exaggerated statements as to what the Arabs intended or hoped to do, as to what they believed they were capable of doing once they began to fight the Jews; in reality, these statements were not followed by serious or sustained efforts to translate them into action.”³⁸ Because this claim is premised on an axiom about Arab culture as it inheres in the structure and nature of Arabic, Patai and those of similar persuasion have difficulty seeing resemblance between Arab and non-Arab leaders who exaggerate, lie, withhold information, or manipulate reality and information for the purpose of reinforcing their own position vis-a-vis their publics or opponents.

Given the circulation of Orientalist discourse about Arab attitudes toward gender and sexuality in response to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, it is important to discuss Patai’s contradictory claims about “the realm of sex,” as he titled chapter VIII of *The Arab Mind*. Patai writes that Arabs consider sex to be “taboo” and “sinful,” and indeed are “severely” sexually repressed. In the same chapter, however, he discusses Arabs as “matter of fact,” even open, about sex. Sexual openness is demonstrated in popular Arab and Persian erotica, whose “explicitness...is not equaled in the comparable European erotica,” an attitude learned by children who freely listen to adults, especially in gender-segregated venues, discuss and banter about sexual issues.³⁹ After stating that traditional Arab sexual attitudes have changed as they increasingly follow “Western ways,” Patai follows with a Freudian-inspired grand theory of the “sexual repression-frustration-aggression syndrome of the Arab personality.”⁴⁰ He makes many other sweeping and ahistorical claims about gender and sexuality, such as

Insofar as women are considered inferior to men -- this is a pre-Islamic concept confirmed by the Koran (4:34) B and insofar as the main value of a woman from the point of view of the group is her capacity as potential or actual mother of male group members, if she commits a transgression which makes her unfit for this supreme task of womanhood, she seals her own fate: she must die.⁴¹

Variability based on place, time, and individuality are irrelevant in the service of these generalized culture claims. Moreover, lived realities are treated as parallel to norms. Even when Patai references empirically-based studies, they often do not substantiate his expansive statements, as occurs, for example, in his discussion of Arab versus Western male sexualities in the 1950s.⁴²

Regional cultural precepts in the contemporary period delineate that sexual relations should be limited to marriage. At the same time, restrictions on sex outside of marriage by the monotheistic religions have always actively competed with a range of illicit sexual activities by men and women of all backgrounds. Indeed, a range of sexual practices and attitudes are demonstrated at various points by Patai as well. He randomly notes, for example, “Even before the onset of Westernization, the relative freedom enjoyed by young men and girls even among the most noble Bedouin tribes often led to love affairs between them, and many a girl became pregnant, frequently with tragic consequences.”⁴³ It remains true that in most Muslim-majority countries, Muslim men are allowed to marry up to four women at a time (a small proportion does so) and sex outside of marriage by women is treated more seriously than men’s violations. At the same time, using Patai’s framework, only “Westernization” can explain individual challenges to male dominance, a particularly ironic claim since such dominance remains part of most Western institutions by custom if not by law. Such framings easily allow Occidentalizer reversals (in which the East is superior) by cultural fundamentalists, so that indigenous challenges to male hegemony or hetero-normativity are discursively and strategically constructed as inauthentic mimicry of the West.

With respect to virginity and honor, Patai states that: “Both virginity and ‘ird [honor invested in women’s sexual propriety in patriarchal terms] are intrinsically parts of the female person; they cannot be augmented, they can only be lost, and their loss is irreparable.”⁴⁴ While the connections Patai makes between hegemonic concepts of honor and unmarried girls’ and women’s virginity and sexual propriety are accurate in most parts of the Arab world, hymen repair surgeries in Lebanon, Morocco, Egypt and Turkey, for example, indicate that girls and women are willing to violate and indeed redefine the meaning of these precepts. It is also important to recognize the existence of girls and women who marry without being virgins and without undertaking hymen surgeries (or are unmarried and sexually active). Similarly, many men and women are redefining the terms and nature of marital contracts, and the nature of the licit in sexual terms. While empirical research always remains to be done, existing evidence indicates that changes are ongoing with respect to sexuality and gender relations, and there have always been differences among variously situated Arabs and Muslims, challenging many of Patai’s unequivocal statements.

With respect to homosexuality, Patai is again contradictory in his claims regarding an Arab mind, although he familiarly recoups the idea of Western superiority. Moreover, Patai assumes the homosexual subject, Western or Arab, to be male. He writes:

[T]he attitude to homosexuality is more liberal among the Arabs than it was in the West until the ‘gay liberation’ movement of the last few years. The taboo on homosexuality is not so strong as it was in America in the 1950s..., and ‘the active homosexual role in particular is thought of by the Arab students as compatible with virile masculinity.’ In this respect, the Arab attitude coincides with that of the Turks, among whom performance of the active homosexual act is considered as an assertion of one’s aggressive masculine superiority, while the acceptance of the role of the passive homosexual is considered extremely degrading and shameful because it casts the man or youth into a submissive, feminine role.⁴⁵

Patai states that while “in most parts of the Arab world, homosexual activity or any indication of homosexual leanings, as with all other expressions of sexuality, is never given any publicity,” such practices “seems to be common” and “popular opinion...takes no stand against them.”⁴⁶ Despite this apparent sexual polymorphousness, Patai concludes that Arab sexuality is marked by “polarities,” and “in comparison to the West [which has a more “athletic” attitude], the realm of

sex constitutes more of a problem for Arabs and hence elicits more concern and more preoccupation.”⁴⁷

Patai’s sex and gender analyses are weak partly because his arguments often rest on hegemonic religious and moralistic precepts, rather than how variously located people respond and behave, and how these responses and behaviors differ across time and place. As a result, rather than revising his argument or weakening it, Patai’s random deployment of research, personal experience, various and sundry statements by “locals,” and language knowledge (he frequently makes leaps from an Arabic word root, or *masdar*, to the meaning and implications of conjugations), either provide evidence for his argument or are “exceptions to the rule.”⁴⁸

The Arab Mind provides few tools for understanding the emergence of non-heteronormative sexual movements, communities, and identities; generational rifts (with young people who are more socially conservative or more socially liberal than their parents); ideological disagreements; class and urban-rural differences, and so on. Moreover, ongoing cultural and moral debates in the U.S. about abortion, gay marriage, the heterosexual family, divorce, homosexuality, and birth control seem to compel different comparisons between “Arab” and “Western” ways. These issues were not resolved in the U.S. at the time Patai was writing, and remain contentious today. Specifically, rather than Patai’s easy juxtaposition of a collective Arab mind against an individualist Western self, notions of liberal individualism are historically contested in the U.S., and continue to be so, especially for women, people of color, the poor, working-class people, sex-gender minorities, immigrants, non-citizens, and intersections thereof. Neither the differences nor the similarities between Western and Arab or Muslim provide a basis for easy judgments of either as culturally or socially superior to the other.

GENDER, SEXUALITY AND CULTURE KNOWLEDGE IN THE IRAQ WAR

While there had not been widely circulated *visual* evidence of torture and sexual assault of Iraqi girls and women by 2004, there were reports of their torture, murder, and rape by U.S. forces directly and by Iraqi forces under U.S. supervision, including in the February 2004 International Committee of the Red Cross report on detainees and prisoners in Iraq.⁴⁹ An Associated Press story by Scheherezade Faramarzi about women prisoners held by U.S. forces in Iraq captures how framing gender and sexuality as “traditional” Iraqi or Muslim cultural problems distracts from deeper feminist analyses and critiques of imperial operations. In the AP story, Faramarzi describes Iraq as “a conservative Islamic tribal society where women are closely guarded” and writes that nine women Iraqi prisoners between the ages of 20 and 30 were, according to “human rights activists,” being used by U.S. occupation forces as bargaining chips to pressure wanted male relatives to turn themselves in.” The issue of the Iraqi women prisoners had reemerged because a U.S. woman journalist, Jill Carroll, had been taken hostage by insurgents and was being threatened with death unless the Iraqi women were released. Faramarzi writes that “the practice of detaining women in security raids has become an inflammatory subject in this conservative society, where men sometimes kill female relatives who have been raped because of ‘shame’ brought to the family.” While the author does not mention that holding hostage family members of wanted individuals are gross violations of human rights, she does include a statement from an Iraqi woman activist working on behalf of women detainees that only “some” men surrender in response to the arrest of their “wives, daughters and mothers,”⁵⁰ indicating the limits of U.S. assumptions.

Cultural “tradition” discourses situate Iraqi responses to the imprisonment of women as uniquely Arab-Muslim and thus a mark of Iraqi backwardness, which in turn discursively legitimates foreign occupation. Similarly, the Arab “tribal” culture framework as explanatory discourages a comparative analysis that may find

nationalist patriarchies to be working similarly when one compares Iraqi responses to the U.S. detention, rape and/or torture of Iraqi girls and women, with U.S. representations of and responses to the injury, supposed capture and rape by Iraqis, and highly touted U.S. military “rescue” of Private Jessica Lynch from an Iraqi hospital between March 23 and April 1, 2003.⁵¹ More generally, primordial and essentialist understandings of gender and sexuality in Arab or Muslim cultures do little to clarify the social operations of gender and sexual frameworks in various contexts. Such culture shortcuts miss the possibility that new misogynist iterations of honor, East/West binaries, and patriarchies are being developed, and leave unanalyzed the purposes these iterations serve for the institutions, groups, or individuals encouraging them. The few press stories that have discussed how victims and families are responding to assaults, detention, and torture of Iraqi girls and women indicate a range of realities, including raped women who have committed suicide following prison release; released girls and women who have disappeared with their families; family members who have killed women and girls who had been sexually assaulted; family members who have refused to do violence on former female prisoners with support from local religious leaders; family members and released prisoners who speak publicly about their ordeals; family members and released prisoners who want to remain anonymous; and one woman, Huda Alazawi, who reported that she was divorced by her husband following her release.⁵² Since 2005, a number of additional rape and rape and murder cases of Iraqi women and girls by U.S. and Iraqi forces have been revealed. In February 2007, moreover, two Iraqi married women did the unusual when they reported on Arabic satellite stations separate incidents of being gang-raped in their homes by Iraqi policing personnel.

Following the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib prison, the most widespread discourse, especially in Western media sources, explained its significance and outrageousness within the framework of humiliated, homophobic, and conservative Arabs or Muslims. For example, Julio Godoy quoted a French woman academic as saying that U.S. torturers (like their French predecessors in Algeria) used knowledge of Muslims to design effective torture methods, such as “humiliating” them through nudism in front of women and using dogs to intimidate and hurt them.⁵³ In an article published in the Dublin-based *Sunday Business Post*, Tina Marie O’Neill opined that “reaction in the Arab world to images of US troops abusing Iraqis in Abu Ghraib prison has been one of predictable rage. Homosexuality and public nudity are at odds with conservative Islamic culture.”⁵⁴ The author does not consider anger to be a rather predictable response from any group watching abuse by unaccountable power, in this case an invading and occupying power that used the legitimating language of liberation. The outrage of torture is trumped by the putative “cultural” outrage produced by images of nakedness and simulation of pornographic acts.

While many Western and U.S. feminists and queer activists have been critical of the Iraq war and the torture of Iraqi prisoners, some have at the same time reproduced the problematic culture discourses discussed in this essay. While feminist Zillah Eisenstein called the events torture, because of unidimensional understandings of gendered subjectivities, sexual torture by U.S. white women soldiers could only be understood as women behaving like men, rather than recognizing the imbricated gender, racial, sexual, and class subjectivities of men and women.⁵⁵ A U.S. on-line queer magazine pundit recognized the way in which sexualized abuse portrayed in the released images was treated as exceptionally outrageous, so that the

thousands of Iraqis [and Afghans] killed by U.S. bombs, long-range guns, and by ‘accident’ when their homes are raided or their cars stopped at checkpoints have bothered few consciences. But snapshots depicting homosexual humiliation provoked abject public apologies from the President Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld....⁵⁶

In the service of a queer agenda in the U.S., this anti-war writer confounds consensual sex with rape, and the humiliation of prisoners with the games sexual partners play. Sex is highlighted and violence elided when the author further argues that it is public nudity, homosexuality, and the presence of women that makes these events “so outrageous to Muslims.” Such a representation reproduces a contemporary Orientalist fantasy of backward, repressed, patriarchal Arab or Muslim societies. In this fantasy, moreover, “out” queers, undressed bodies, and public sexual expression and displays of affection are assumed to represent the height of modernity and advancement.

Rather than focusing on its sexualized aspects, or extracting the sexualized torture from context and history, Arab and other Third World journalists and editorialists were the most likely to treat the Abu Ghraib torture as part of a larger violent, subordinating, imperial U.S.-led project in the region that included the dropping of “500-pound bombs” and killing, non-sexualized torture, and other violence by coalition forces throughout Iraq.⁵⁷ These events were seen as part and parcel of the destruction of Iraqi social and physical infrastructure, as well as individuals and their communities, who were not “treated with the respect human beings deserve.”⁵⁸ In Azmi Bishara’s words, the real “perversion” was a foreign occupation which by definition requires “physical subjugation,” repeatedly reminding readers to “Ask the Palestinians!”⁵⁹ News reports, editorials, and activists from the Arab world commonly used the exposés of U.S. torture in Abu Ghraib to discuss their own repressive militaries and governments; execution in a variety of countries whose regimes are supported by the U.S. government; U.S.-sponsored or perpetrated torture and killings in prison facilities in Guantanamo and Afghanistan; and kidnappings and disappearances of suspects.⁶⁰ Many also used the Abu Ghraib revelations to demand an end to torture by regional states, as well as accountability for previous torture.⁶¹ Discussion of torture by regional states (including rape of political opponents) in the independent Arab press pre-existed the Abu Ghraib revelations as well.⁶²

In an illustration of the unbounded nature of Orientalism and its Occidentalist reversals, some Muslims or Arabs responded to the Abu Ghraib torture revelations by articulating a “we” that was oppositionally and *essentially* different from a Christian or Western “them.” Some of these native commentators and journalists communicated outrage against humiliation and reproduced convenient East versus West caricatures of culture and homophobia. For example, an Iraqi (or Iraqi American) male graduate student in Middle Eastern studies at the University of California, Berkeley, whose editorial was published in the *Los Angeles Times*, criticized former U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s specious distinction between “abuse” and “torture,” but reinforced a sense of collectively injured Arab masculinities:

But for a proud nation shocked by photos depicting the sexual abuse of its men, [the distinction] represents callousness and insensitive rationalization in the face of a moral quagmire.... [T]he photos of U.S. soldiers abusing and humiliating naked Iraqis are a direct blow to the essence of their pride.... It is also a cruel reality that all the approximately 10,000 detainees have been stigmatized by the shame at Abu Ghraib, *no matter what those detainees claim...* Americans and their allies must understand that Iraq is not a pragmatic society when it comes to religion, culture and sexual mores. (emphasis added)⁶³

To conclude, this discourse relies on reified and reductive definitions of “culture” without recognition of complex social dynamics, change, differences, historical context, and internal social debates and differences. In this case, while a number of men prisoners from Abu Ghraib testified to their torture while masked

or did not use their names,⁶⁴ quite a few pointed themselves out in the torture pictures, have testified, and are bringing charges against various agents of the occupation authorities.⁶⁵ In addition, a number of Iraqi men detained at the Abu Ghraib prison provided sworn and signed statements to U.S. military investigators in January 2004, before the photographs were widely revealed, which are translated into English. In these statements, which are published by the *Washington Post* and available on-line, the men are explicit and extensive in describing the torture and violence, including of the sexualized varieties, that they directly suffered and watched others suffer at the hands of U.S.-sponsored military and intelligence personnel, as well as their ongoing fears and nightmares, indicating that they are interested in holding their torturers accountable.⁶⁶ Their insistence on justice also demonstrates the limitations of the hegemonic culture knowledge that is the focus of this essay.

ENDNOTES

The author wishes to thank the peer reviewer of this essay and Maha Yahya.

¹ Cited in Mark Danner, "Abu Ghraib: The Hidden Story," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 15, (October 7, 2004), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=17430 (accessed February 20, 2007).

² As Edward Said wrote: "As a system of thought about the Orient, [Orientalism] always rose from the specifically human detail to the general transhuman one; an observation about a tenth-century Arab poet multiplied itself into a policy towards (and about) the Oriental mentality in Egypt, Iraq, or Arabia.... [T]he great likelihood that ideas about the Orient drawn from Orientalism can be put to political use, is an important yet extremely sensitive truth.... It necessarily provokes unrest in one's conscience about cultural, racial, or historical generalizations, their uses, value, degree of objectivity, and fundamental intent." Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Book, 1978), p. 96.

³ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁴ Some of these photographs can be found at <http://www.antiwar.com/news/?articleid=2444>; http://photos.signonsandiego.com/gallery1.5/view_album.php?set_albumName=Abu_Ghraib_prison_abuses; http://www.salon.com/news/abu_ghraib/2006/03/14/introduction/; and http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/02/16/abu_ghraib/. Links to documents, reports, articles, commentary, and images related to the Abu Ghraib prison abuses can also be found through Julia LeSage's website, *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, "Abu Ghraib and Images of Abuse and Torture," <http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/links.html> (accessed February 26, 2007). Former prisoners have testified that military and military-affiliated personnel not only photographed, but regularly videotaped torture, rape, and murder.

⁵ Torture and violence have included a range of other techniques, including electric shock torture, severe beating, suffocation, the use of un-muzzled dogs to threaten prisoners, keeping prisoners in stressful positions for extended periods, sleep deprivation, noise torture, withholding food or provision of infested or dirty food, extended isolation, and "waterboarding," or submerging prisoners in water or sewage, drowning or nearly drowning them. Danner, "Abu Ghraib"; Mark Benjamin, "The Abu Ghraib Files," *Salon.com*, (February 16, 2006), http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/02/16/abu_ghraib/ (accessed February 22, 2007); Emad Mekay, "Rights: Abu Ghraib Said to Influence Prison Abuse in Egypt" (June 22, 2004), IPS-Inter Press Service, Lexis Nexis Academic Universe (accessed January 9, 2006); Suzanne Goldberg, "Bush Memos Reveal Stance on Torture," *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (July 2, 2004), Lexis Nexis Academic Universe (accessed January 9, 2006); "Conspiracy to Torture," editorial, *The Nation*, vol. 281, no. 22, (December 26, 2005), p. 3-5; Moustafa Bayoumi, "Disco Inferno," *The Nation*, vol. 281, no. 22, (December 26, 2005), p. 32-35; Raymond Whitaker, "A Year of Horror: More Bombs, More Pain, More Tears," Part I, (December 26, 2004), *Independent on Sunday* (London), Lexis Nexis Academic Universe

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⁶ Wendy Kozol and Rebecca DeCola, "Remapping the Visual War on Terrorism: 'U.S. Internationalism' and Transnational Citizenship," in *ReThinking Global Security: Media, Popular Culture, and the "War on Terror"*, ed. Andrew Martin and Patrice Petro (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 188 and p. 179-205.

⁷ Hema Chari, "Colonial Fantasies and Postcolonial Identities," in *Post-Colonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 277 and 279 p. 277-304.

⁸ Jasbir K. Puar, "Abu Ghraib: Arguing Against Exceptionalism," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 522-534.

⁹ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1973).

¹⁰ Hersh, "The Gray Zone."

¹¹ Hersh, "Torture at Abu Ghraib." These statements make little sense given the long tradition of gender-segregated public baths in the Muslim and Arab world. Moreover, textually, homosexuality is no more admonished in Islam than it is in Christianity or Judaism. Finally, such cultural claims are classically Orientalist in their non-acknowledgement of complex social practices and histories regarding sexuality.

¹² Hersh, "The Gray Zone."

¹³ Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 1 and 3.

¹⁴ It is not irrelevant that the *Middle East Quarterly* is published by the Middle East Forum, a nonprofit think tank that, according to its own mission statement: "works to define and promote American interests in the Middle East through research, publications, and educational outreach. The Forum's policy recommendations include fighting radical Islam (rather than terrorism), convincing the Palestinians that Israel is permanent, reducing funds going to the Middle East for energy purchases, slowing down the democratization process, and more robustly asserting U.S. interests vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Forum works to improve Middle East studies in North America." <http://www.meforum.org/about.php>, 2006 (accessed January 13, 2006).

¹⁵ Norvell B. De Atkine, "The Arab Mind Revisited," *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. xi, no. 3 (Summer 2004), p. 47-55; foreword by Atkine and biographical description for Atkine can be accessed at <http://www.meforum.org/article/636>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Palestine was under British colonial rule during the 1930s and Patai, according to various sources, was the son of a "prominent scholar, editor and Zionist who published a biography of [the founder of the Zionist movement] Theodor Herzl...." Patai's father founded "the

Zionist organization in Hungary and was instrumental in procuring support for the settlement of Jews in Palestine, where he settled with his family in 1939. Raphael Patai migrated to the U.S. in 1947, where he taught until his retirement in 1966.” John D. Stinson, “Raphael Patai Papers, c. 1904-1988,” The New York Public Library, Humanities and Social Sciences Library Manuscripts and Archives Division, <http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/rbk/faids/patai.pdf>, (February 1991), p. 2.

¹⁹ See Said, *Orientalism*, esp. p. 284-328 and p.134, 349.

²⁰ Lloyd F. Jordan, *Review of The Arab Mind*, released in full July 2, 1996, CIA Historical Review Program, http://www.cia.gov/csi/ken_csi/docs/v18i3a06p_0001.htm, p. 29-32 (accessed January 15, 2006).

²¹ A biography for Ruth Fulton Benedict can be found on the Vassar College website, which also indexes her archived notes, correspondence, and research writings: http://specialcollections.vassar.edu/benedict/benedict_text.html; Ruth Fulton Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1946).

²² Daphne Patai and Jennifer Patai Schneider, “Minding ‘The Arab Mind,’” *The Nation*, (September 19, 2005), p. 2 and 24.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Atkine, “Arab Mind Revisited,” p. 3.

²⁶ Naomi Klein, “Never Before! Our Amnesiac Torture Debate,” *The Nation*, vol. 281, no. 22, (December 26, 2005), p. 11-12.

²⁷ Ibid; Anthony Lewis, “The Torture Administration,” *The Nation*, vol. 281, no. 22, (December 26, 2005), p. 13-15.

²⁸ Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 117.

²⁹ According to a web-site about the television program Star Trek Voyager, Borg are “humanoid drones” with “cybernetic implants embedded inside and outside their bodies. These implants connect all the drones to each other in a massive collective called the hive mind, which suppresses each drone's individuality....” <http://www.startrek-voyager.info/j.html> (accessed January 15, 2006).

³⁰ Patai, *The Arab Mind*, p. 18.

³¹ Ibid, p. 21-22.

³² Ibid, p. 31-32.

³³ Ibid, p. 37.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 92 and 99.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 96-97.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 103 and 105-106.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 50.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 51.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 118, 128 and 136-137.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 128-131.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 125.

⁴² Ibid, p. 130.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 132.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 120.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 134-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 135.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 140-141.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 134.

⁴⁹ *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) On the Treatment By the Coalition Forces of Prisoners of War and Other Protected Persons by the Geneva Conventions in Iraq During Arrest, Internment and Interrogation* (Geneva: ICRC, February 2004). This document, which was prepared by the ICRC for the state signatories of the Geneva Conventions, was leaked and is widely available on-line; also see Al-Jazeera, “Iraqis Reported Dead After U.S. ‘Gang Rape,’” (June 9, 2003), available on <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/463A40A8-7DA8-492E-B0A4-73F71EFB8609.htm> (accessed July 22, 2004); Annia Ciezadlo, “For Iraqi Women, Abu Ghraib’s Taint” (May 28, 2004), *Christian Science Monitor*, Lexis Nexis Academic Universe (accessed January 9, 2004); Luke Harding, “Women: After Abu Ghraib,” Remy Ourdan, “American Tortures, Iraqi Claims” (June 30, 2004), *Le Monde* (Paris), in French, FBIS translation, World News Connection (accessed July 21, 2004); Roubba Kabbara,

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⁵⁰ Scheherezade Faramarzi, “Female Prisoners Are Point of Contention in Iraq,” *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 22, 2006, p. A3.

⁵¹ John W. Howard and Laura C. Privera, “Rescuing Patriarchy or Saving Jessica Lynch: The Rhetorical Construction of the American Woman Soldier,” *Women and Language*, vol. 27, no. 2, (Fall 2004), p. 89-97; for evidence of U.S. male anxiety regarding the U.S. woman soldier at war in Iraq, see George Neumayr, “Your Mother’s Army,” *The American Spectator*, (May 2005), p. 23-27.

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⁵⁶ News Slant, “Queer Doings at Abu Ghraib: The Hypocrisy Over the Abuse,” *The Guide: Gay Travel, Entertainment, Politics & Sex*, (June 2004), <http://www.guidemag.com/magcontent/invokemagcontent.cfm?ID=7B54C7B5-C094-4252-B3E7CB4988D33ECC> (accessed June 7, 2006).

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⁶¹ Asim Khan, “Torture Claims: Egypt Bars Prison Visit” (June 15, 2004), Aljazeera and agencies, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/33D76ECA-E883-4020-ABE0-B855B810B707.htm> (accessed July 22, 2004); Agence France Presse (with additions), “Bahrain Demand Torturers Face Trail” (June 26, 2004), <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/91673A8D-CAF7-431C-9156-7CE042FAA397.htm> (accessed July 22, 2004); Agence France Presse, “Torture ‘systematic’ in Morocco Jail” (June 24, 2004), <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/903D3C7C-BFA0-4696-B2AF-5F02E8A6E6A9.htm> (accessed July 22, 2004); Al-Bawaba Reporters, “US Implementing Israeli Torture Practices in Iraq” (June 28, 2004), Lexis Nexis Academic Universe (accessed July 21, 2004); Lawrence Smallman, “Torture Rife in Tunisian Jail” (July 1, 2004), Aljazeera.net, <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/73EA4B67-F4D9-4B13-98B7-5BBD0C018348.htm> (accessed July 22, 2004).

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