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## CHAPTER FIVE

## Fight or Fuck

Performing Neoliberalism  
at Abu Ghraib

TONY PERUCCI

When I first saw the notorious photograph of a prisoner wearing a black hood, electric wires attached to his limbs as he stood on a box in a ridiculous theatrical pose, my reaction was that this must be a piece of performance art. The positions and costumes of the prisoners suggest a theatrical staging, a tableau vivant, which cannot but call to mind the "theatre of cruelty," Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, scenes from David Lynch movies.

—SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

You know, if you look at—if you, really, if you look at these pictures, I mean, I don't know if it's just me, but it looks just like anything you'd see Madonna, or Britney Spears do on stage. Maybe I'm—yeah. And get an NEA grant for something like this. I mean, this is something that you can see on stage at Lincoln Center from an NEA grant, maybe on *Sex in the City*—the movie. I mean, I don't—it's just me.

—RUSH LIMBAUGH

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.

—SENIOR ADVISOR TO PRESIDENT BUSH

To consider the staging of torture at Abu Ghraib is to consider the performance of torture, torture as performance, and the photographic representation of torture. In this chapter, I am interested in how these dynamics serve those who adopt the

role of “history’s actors” in an effort to construct the “new realities” that are both the spoils of war and the foundation of empire. These realities are constitutive of what I call the “performance complexes” of neoliberal empire, that is, the staging of an economic and ideological apparatus in which the “magic of markets” in service of profits takes precedence over any competing social interests. While neoliberalism calls for the dismantling of any state power that might regulate or limit corporate power in the interest of public good, and thus threaten profit and the free flow of capital, it also relies on the state subsidization of corporate partnerships in warfare and penalty. The performance of the neoliberal economy thus depends upon the performance complexes that also produce it: the military industrial and the prison industrial complexes. In these institutional networks, the state contracts private corporations to take on formerly government practices of war manufacturing and prison building and maintenance. The profit motive of these corporations drives foreign and domestic policy to perpetual war and expanding incarceration as the neoliberal “idea that the market should be allowed to make major social decisions...[and] that corporations should be given total freedom” (George). These performance complexes are articulated with, and made visible in, the photographs from Abu Ghraib, where we see the violence of neoliberalism. This violence is unique not in its performance at Abu Ghraib, but rather in its revelation, that masked the ubiquity of violence as a constitutive element of the unequal global economic order.

#### HOW WE PERFORM THINGS IN AMERICA

“To live is to be photographed,” suggests Susan Sontag in response to the Abu Ghraib photos, “...but to live is also to pose. To act is to share in the community of actions recorded as images” (28). Sontag’s comments here mark not only the reality of the postmodern spectacle, in which an act is only worth doing if it is being photographed or videoed, but also the way in which the MPs and military intelligence officers in the Abu Ghraib photographs occupy the dual position of performer and spectator. We see in the photos the sadistic glee of the torturer and/as family photographer through the lens of the military camera. “The horror of what is shown in the photographs,” Sontag argues, “cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken—with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives” (26–27). The performed act of photography does not merely, or even primarily, document the violence enacted, but is constitutive of it. It evacuates the performed act of torture by aestheticizing it—transforming it from performance to the image of the spectacle.

There is nothing comparable to this act of photographic violence, she suggests, except the lynching photographs and postcards that circulated the American South

(and often sent to family in friends up North) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These photos register the carnival atmosphere that accompanied the lynching of blacks in America as they reveal the jubilant families posing alongside mutilated corpses. The performed act of lynching photography, like torture photography, represents a “collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done” (27). What Sontag suggests here is that the banality of the act of photography and the casualness of the pose bespeak a violence that the photographs themselves performatively enact, and do not merely represent.

These photographs are, ontologically, not the performance. They are, as Susan Willis describes them, “Performance turned into artifact” (135). The photographs attempt to document the undocumentable, and yet serve as an index of the “horror that the photographs were taken.” The multiplied horrors of the photographs—the corporeal reality of torture as well as the violence of the act of photographing and the enactment of the pose are only indexed but not represented by the photograph. The imminence of these acts—torture, photography, and the pose—are aestheticized and artifactalized in the photograph itself. As Angela Davis notes, following Adorno, part of the social violence of the Abu Ghraib photos is “that we project so much onto the ostensible power of the image that what it represents, what it depicts, loses its force” (*Abolition*, 50). The very spectacularity of the photographic image, thus, allows it to stand in for the performance and its affective potential.

Peggy Phelan’s oft-cited and oft-maligned claim that performance’s “life only is in the present” in that it erupts in a frenzy of the visible in a “manically charged present” of liveness is a propos here in that it is the disappearing “excess” that constitutes an act in performance (146, 148). Phelan’s critical point in articulating an “ontology of performance” is to mark performance’s imminence and ephemerality. For Phelan, performance is that element of the theatrical occasion that disappears, that exists only in its presence and its presentness. There is great radical potential in such an occasion, when the *presentation-of-presentness* makes visceral and haptic, the encounter with what Walter Benjamin calls the “presence of the now (*Jetztzeit*)” an enlivened encounter with the actuality of human pain, suffering, and pleasure that gives rise to the possibility of enacting social change *now* (261). This activating of the now that spurs the potential for activism is precisely what the “society of the spectacle” serves to tamp down. For such a society, Debord contends, is dependent upon a pacifying of the public sphere, as the image disconnects us from each other and from the politics of economic (re)production.

Thus, Phelan deems performance to be the element that operates in the theatrical occasion as an “excess,” because it, by definition, cannot be reproduced, mass marketed, or sold. In her analysis of performance artist Festa’s live enactments of enduring torturous pain, she notes that Festa’s “Presentation-of-Presence” does not operate solely as spectacle, but also calls forth a second performance on the part of the spectator, which is characterized by “the recognition of the plentitude of one’s

physical freedom in contrast to the confinement and pain of the performer's displayed body" (162–163). The artifactuality of the photographs masks the excess of performance that links the fate of the indignant (or jubilant) Western viewer and the tortured prisoner. Neoliberal empire depends upon the linkage between the spectator and spectacle of the photograph remain unmarked, as is demonstrated when George Bush dismissed the acts of the Abu Ghraib photos by saying "This treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people. That's not how we do things in America" (quoted in Rajiva, 12). The theatrical acts at Abu Ghraib are exactly how "we do things in America" in U.S. prisons, sweatshops, and immigration detention centers.

The unreproducibility of performative excess is part of how the photographs as artifact reproduce the violence of the performance of torture itself. That is to say, torture operates to reduce the torture victim to an object, as Elaine Scarry puts it, to a "body in pain." The excessive violence of torture, as with performance's excess, is incommunicable through the flattening artifact of the photograph. It is this process of "performance turning into artifact," the evacuation and erasure of the excess of violence (and of performance) that enables the deferral of that excess, which was manifested when the photographs were sent to MPs' families and friends as mementos, or even to the pleasure of indignation such representations evoke (or the pleasure evinced by Baudrillard in his claim that with these photographs, "America has electrocuted itself" [209]).

However, I want to mark here the performative excess without indulging in the violence of the lingering gaze over these photos, the imaginative recreation of these photos as a reenactment of the violence. Moreover, I want to do so without displacing the humanity of those tortured in the way that "spectacles of suffering" tend to reproduce the violence that incurs them, in no small part by making terror an amusement for the spectator. As Saidiya Hartman contends, even sympathetic white abolitionist recitations of slave coffles often served to "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering" (3). The "shocking" photos at Abu Ghraib conceal as much as they reveal about the "shock and awe" theatricality of the War on Iraq. The spectacularity of these performances serves to mask the performance of economic interests that gave rise to the acts of torture at Abu Ghraib. A spectacular excess, the excess of profit, both causes the performances and is masked by them. The performance of torture at Abu Ghraib—masked by the artifacts of performance (and the artifactualization of performance)—is the performance of neoliberalism, "the terror of the mundane and the quotidian" masked by the shocking "spectacle" (4).

It was Oliver Cox, the radical black sociologist, who argued in the 1940s that it was critical to see lynchings of African Americans not only for the theatrical spectacles of violence that they were, but also as expressions of political economy. The

lynching, he contended, was not a production of a hysterical wildness or "strange madness," but rather a concomitant violence of the operation of capitalism, which required a cowed and exploitable laboring class (579). What Kirk Fuoss has called "lynching performances" were, Cox explains, central to the logic of early twentieth-century capitalism. The success of lynching performances hinged on the production of blacks (those lynched and those not-yet-lynched) as objects; the excess of violence and the excess of performance served to evacuate the subjecthood of African Americans in the interest of the excess of profit. This performance of objecthood served an ideological and economic interest in that it extended the conditions of slavery for African Americans that positioned them as simultaneously laborers and commodities.

Cox explains that the lynch mob is not primarily a spontaneous ensemble of irrational violence, but rather, "The mob is composed of people who have been carefully indoctrinated in the primary social institutions of the region to conceive of Negroes as extra-legal, extra-democratic objects, without rights which white men are bound to respect" (580). A similar corrective is needed in attending to Abu Ghraib, where the photographed soldiers were considered to be anomalous—disturbed individuals enacting "aberrant behavior" (qtd. in Rajiva, 79), rather than enacting a policy and cultural logic of neoliberalism, where "the US needs to pick up some country and throw it against the wall, just to show the world we mean business," as Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute suggests (RETORT, 103). The performance of violence at Abu Ghraib, like those enacted in lynching performances, functioned as such a form of "show business" in which the show served the capital interests of business.

Lynching performances were, in Cox's view, not primarily performances of individual actors, but rather were the performance of an economic order, in which business showed that it meant business. Meanwhile, the spectacle of the lynching recast the racialized black body as the cause of the violence enacted upon it. What Saidiya Hartman calls the "racist optics" of such occasions is driven by such objectification, where the compelled performance of objecthood paradoxically enables the projection of "will" and "agency" onto black body, producing the "dissimulation of suffering through spectacle" (22). This compulsory performance of objecthood operates as a rationalizing force that both justifies and structures the racial economy. "By lynching," Cox argues, "Negroes are kept in their place, that is to say, kept as a great, easily-exploitable, common-labor reserve" (584). Lynching performances are, in Cox's view, "sub-legal contrivance[s]" that operate as an expression of, and in service to, a racialized political economy.

## THE PERFORMANCE COMPLEXES OF NEOLIBERALISM

The performances of torture at Abu Ghraib serve a similar function in their operation as a staging of neoliberal globalization. Neoliberalism is the current reigning

economic philosophy; it mandates the absolute centrality of the market, the privatization of all social services, the end of the welfare state, and the commodification of all aspects of everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism represents the triumph of the corporation over the state, where the state no longer serves a Keynesian function to ameliorate the inequalities produced by capitalism, but rather serves solely to protect the rights and interests of capital. The Keynesian project, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes it,

consisted of investments against the tide, designed to avoid the cumulative effects of downward business cycles by guaranteeing effective demand (via income programmes, public borrowing strategies and so forth) during bad times. The social project of Keynesianism... was to extend to workers... protections against calamity and opportunities for advancement. In sum, Keynesianism was a capitalist project that produced an array of social goods that had not existed under the preceding liberal (or laissez-faire) capitalist state form.

At first gloss, neoliberalism may seem to be simply an elimination of such a project, as government management of the economy is removed in service to the "invisible hand" of the market. Neoliberal empire is characterized in opposition to traditional American "liberalism" as characterized by Keynesian projects like the New Deal, which enact modest redistributive economic practices to counter capitalism's expected deleterious effects on the majority. However, while neoliberalism is "nominally democratic" (Duggan, xiii) it promotes a "culture of upward (re)distribution" (xvii) by *liberalizing* any state laws or regulations that might hinder corporate accumulation of profit. And yet, for successful economic performance, neoliberalism depends upon state-corporate partnerships. These state-corporate partnerships (including those with the military and prison industries detailed below) serve as a form of "protections against calamity and opportunities for advancement" for *corporations* rather than workers.

The emergence of the military industrial complex (MIC) in the mid-twentieth century can be seen as an early expression of the ascendancy of neoliberalism—as functions of the military were dispersed to a host of institutions outside of the state apparatus: namely, private corporations and universities. The government subsidization of private defense industries has been considered to be a form of "military Keynesianism" as the state underwrites the profitability of military production. However, the diffusion of governmental authority to a loose network of non-governmental institutions is often where accounts of the MIC stop—where the primary danger of such an apparatus is the ability of private institutions to circumvent the scrutiny of the public.

We should not romanticize the military as a paragon of transparency operating in the public interest, but we must also consider the way in which the privatization of the military has created an economy dependent on the development and

support of war-making, the institution of what Seymour Melman calls the "permanent war economy." Moreover, the transnational corporation requires the military to secure its profitability through force. As neoliberal apologist Thomas Friedman puts it, "McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas.... And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps" (quoted in RETORT, 195). Thus, the condition of "perma-war" becomes an economic necessity to support the increasingly military-dependent corporations and an economy that depends on those corporations' profitability.

Such a transformation can also be seen in the emergence of a prison industrial complex (PIC), the more recent privatization of prisons, in which prison-building, prison operation, and prison-servicing have become entrenched in national and local economies and supported by a justice system structured by race. The dependence of small communities especially on a prison economy is enacted by neoliberal economic programs, policies, and practices. For example, one of the direct consequences of the shift of manufacturing overseas has been the devastation of many factory towns throughout the United States, resulting in many communities desperate for any large employer. Thus, the new privately owned prison becomes an employer of last resort. Municipalities are transformed, Michelle Brown suggests, into a

"new American city" ... whose self-sustaining abilities depend on the production of hard-line attitudes, more prisons, and, equally significant, more prison towns... culminating in a reconfiguration of social and economic life in distinctly penal terms. (984)

Thus, as cities become dependent upon the economic sustenance of the prison, the profit-seeking prison and the employment-seeking society have an economically linked interest in the ever expansion of prison populations.

The performances at Abu Ghraib represent an exporting of American penal culture—the normalization not merely of the disciplinary mechanisms of the penitentiary described by Michel Foucault, but also of the stubborn resilience of the staging of pain and terror onto the body of the condemned. As Dwight Conquergood writes in his cogent analysis of the "lethal theatre" of American executions, American penal culture remains dependent upon the brutalizing of the bodies of the condemned. Such performances, he explains, "are awesome rituals of human sacrifice through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence" (342). These rituals are increasingly staged as sanitized acts, to mask the state's act of murder, as well as to elide the overwhelming racial basis that underwrites the logic of American executions.

While the publicity of the performance of executions requires the staged sterility of murder, it operates also to conceal the "messier" performances of violence that

operate as a daily ritual in many American prisons. A “political theatrics of terror” rules the lives of American prisons and poor neighborhoods where police maintain occupational presence, where “ritualized displays of terror are built into American policing” (Parenti, 136—emphasis in original). The experience of being inside a maximum security prison is one that is characteristic of what Michael Taussig calls “terror as usual,” which he describes as a “state of doubleness of being in which one moves between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation” (18). Indeed, this performance consciousness is engendered by the American prison through the persistent staging of violence by guards, including mock executions. The theatrical enforcement of terror as usual functions as a part of the racially structured apparatus of the prison industrial complex in service of neoliberal market forces:

many bodies—particularly those of young working class and lumpen men of color—are superfluous to capital’s valorization. A growing stratum of “surplus people” is not being efficiently used by the economy. So instead they must be controlled and contained and, in a very limited way, rendered economically useful as raw material for a growing corrections complex. (Parenti, 137)

The theatrical violence and ritual terror of the prison industrial complex then are those that of neoliberalism.

What is perhaps most striking about the Abu Ghraib photos is that they *seem* to represent abnormality at all. The photos are, in a sense, the publicizing not only of the quotidian practices of American military detention facilities, but also of accepted practices in U.S. prisons. The Abu Ghraib performances, then, can be seen as restagings of the “training” video produced by guards at the privately run Brazoria County Detention Center in Texas, where black inmates were chased and attacked by growling dogs. In fact, a number of the guards who performed in the Abu Ghraib photos were former prison guards, including Charles Graner, who had been “subject to numerous complaints of human rights violations and prisoner abuse” while working at a high-security prison in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania (Brown, 982). The performances at Abu Ghraib can be seen to go beyond Žižek’s contention that they represent the “obscene underside of US popular culture,” which is the normalization of fraternity initiation rites and hazings. Rather, they represent the global staging of America’s new penal culture on the world stage, which celebrates a racialized brutal violence—a culture that is produced both by the economic structures and the cultural logic of neoliberalism. The spectacular revelation of the photographs reverses Taussig’s formulation of the abnormal appearing normal. In these photographs, the quotidian theater of prison violence in the service of capital is seen as an accepted act of individual depravity, and the normal violence of neoliberalism appears aberrant.

America’s prisons operate increasingly as forced labor farms; the shifting of manufacturing jobs to nonunion factories outside the United States has led the state to promise decimated small towns across the United States that the building and running of prisons will rehabilitate local economies by producing short-term construction jobs (though these contracts often go to large, out-of-state, nonunion contractors) and long-term prison guard jobs. It encourages corporations such as IBM, Boeing, and Microsoft to shift high-paying union jobs to prison (i.e., slave) labor—where corporations pay only pennies per hour, with no responsibility for worker safety or retirement and medical benefits. Third, as prisons are increasingly run by mega-corporations like Wackenhut and Lockheed-Martin, the maintenance of a surplus prison population produces profits by the securing of lucrative contracts in which compensation is based on a per prisoner basis.

It is perhaps the presence of Lockheed-Martin and Boeing, two of the largest weapons makers in the world (and two of greatest beneficiaries of the terror war increase in military spending), as beneficiaries of the prison economy that reveals that the relationship between the prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex is more than lexical. It is rather, as Davis points out, a relationship based on “mutual support” and “shared technologies” (*Are Prisons Obsolete?* 86). As the weapons makers who constitute the military backbone of globalization (i.e., the Military Industrial Complex) become increasingly dependent on prison slave labor and prison profiteering, the Military Industrial Complex, and the military imposition of U.S. hegemony as globalization necessitates the maintenance of the Prison Industrial Complex and its exploited labor force.

Thus, the American penitentiary can be seen not only as a condition for, and effect of (military) neoliberalism but also as a site conjoining the “new American militarism” (Bacevich) and the “new American city” (Brown) of penitentiary dependence. As such a conjuncture, the photos of torture at Abu Ghraib can be seen as ones that capture the staging of violence that secures the prison industrial complex and the military industrial complex together in a “symbiotic” (Davis, 86) relationship and as constitutive elements of neoliberalism.

The fact that the invasion and occupation of Iraq can be seen as a staging of neoliberalism as war extends this analysis. The invasion of Iraq, described by the *Wall Street Journal* as “one of the most audacious hostile takeovers ever” (RETORT, 50), was, according to the authorial collective RETORT, “privatization by occupation” (47), a contention supported by then Bush-Cheney campaign manager’s comment that the war was about “getting Iraq ready for Wal-Mart” (49) and Cheney’s own revealing admission that the war was a remarkable “growth opportunity” (41). Thus, in Abu Ghraib, we see not only the staging of what Shamir and Kumar call the “military backbone of globalization” but also the penitentiary logic and practice that are instantiated in militarism and globalization.

## FIGHT OR FUCK

What has been most “shocking” about the photos to many was the frequent presence of sexual humiliation—nude, hooded men stacked in pyramids, and forced to masturbate and simulate fellatio on each other. Most famously, these stagings often featured the cherubic PFC Lynndie England, enacting her celebratory pose of American mastery for the camera—showing a wide grin, and giving an approving thumbs up. In dialogue with shrouded men connected to electrodes, these photos represent, Susan Willis contends, “the pornographic sublime” (120). Indeed, pornography has been a central trope through which critics have reckoned with the photos. It is with the invocation of video pornography that they come to invoke performance: “Much like the producers of a low-budget porn flick, they set the stage for a sadistic theater” (Willis, 130). The coercive staging of sexual humiliation, not on a stage, but for a camera represents “war porn” for Baudrillard, in that “it all becomes a parody of violence, a parody of war itself, pornography becoming the ultimate form of the abjection of war which is unable to simply be war, to be simply about killing, and instead turns into a grotesque reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power” (206). The sadistic theater of power represents the collapse of the real; it implies the imminence of theatrical performance, and supplants it with the hyperreal reality show. But war has never been “simply about killing.” In particular, America’s history of war-making has long been based on a foreign policy driven by corporate profit. Moreover, the powerful depend upon their own performances of mastery “as a kind of self-hypnosis within the ruling groups to buck up their courage, improve their cohesion, display their power and convince themselves anew of their high moral purpose” (Scott, 67). In the context of Abu Ghraib, it was the staging of the soldiers as the subjects of the photographs, and the objectification of the prisoners, that performed this self-hypnosis. Even for the American civilian at home, the distance produced by the photograph allows the observer to *disidentify* with the actors, restoring the morality of the American crusade to spread neoliberal capitalism under the banner of “democracy” by disavowing the performances that secure it.

The spectacularity of the photographs’ pornographic impulse mystifies the political economic function of Abu Ghraib (and on the War on Iraq in general) by casting these acts as primarily individual and sexual, rather than erotic expressions of “the larger cultural narrative...based on class, prisons, and labor” (Brown, 983). The narrative, which is masked by the “frenzy of the visible” (Williams) of the pornographic impulse, is audible as a cultural logic of neoliberal violence. As with pornography, the torture photographs depend upon performance’s imminence modified by the aestheticizing effect of its filming: “the events are real but staged” as Dora Apel points out, and yet “there is no ‘fiction’ of authenticity...because the

pleasure is not meant to be found in their pruriently deployed bodies but in the exultant mastery of those who would wield power over them, representing a different cultural and political order” (93). This mastery is denied at home for these soldiers and reservists who turn to jobs in the military or as prison guards as jobs of last resort where the “prison-industrial complex and military-industrial complex converge in a sociopolitical economy grounded in rural and lower-class life” (Brown, 983). The position of military prison guard enables a performance of mastery that the effects of neoliberalism, such as factory closings and the elimination of social services, have eliminated for them at home. Disciplined in minimum-wage service jobs through countless acts of humiliation and dispossession, they bring with them the cultural logic of neoliberalism as a normative mode of performance.

Moreover, their performances enact what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “ultimate foundation of this entire economic order placed under the sign of freedom...the *structural violence* of unemployment, of the insecurity of job tenure, and the menace of layoff that it implies.” As violence is the structuring expression of freedom under neoliberalism, and is enacted by the American state of “freedom” as one of bombings and occupation, the performances at Abu Ghraib seem to hardly be surprising at all. Thus, Lila Rajiva’s claim that “what makes the torture and terror of the warfare state ultimately pornographic [...is that] our theater appears to be only a perverse enjoyment, a tasting of our freedom from all constraint, the self-pleasuring delight in its own performance” (100). If we consider such a theater of the warfare state to also be that of the economic order that animates it, then understanding Abu Ghraib as a performance of “freedom from all constraint” is an enactment of neoliberal culture.

The violence of neoliberalism staged at Abu Ghraib can be seen as a restoration of behavior rehearsed in American prisons, and as part of a legacy of military and CIA use of sexual humiliation as a torture technique. When Texas prisoner Roderick Johnson complained to prison officials that not only was he being regularly raped, but also that he was being tortured as a “sex slave,” prison officials repeatedly responded that he should learn to either “fight or fuck” (aclu.org). This logic, where the only choices are fighting or fucking, is also that of neoliberalism. And perhaps, within the auspices of neoliberalism, this is the same option as competition of all against all is raised to a sacred position, neoliberalism demands all workers to be constantly fighting each other, and to be fucked by the state-backed corporate apparatus. Abu Ghraib is the staging of fighting or fucking as the realization of military neoliberalism.

Jon McKenzie calls this theatrical and organizational compulsion the command to “perform, or else,” in which the demand to compete is impelled by threat. The “fight or fuck” performance in Abu Ghraib, in which fucking itself was a central part of the theatrics, was a coming together of the “perform, or else” performance of

neoliberalism in what José Muñoz calls “the burden of liveness,” which is the historically constituted condition where people of color are demanded to enact their “difference” for the purpose of disgust, exoticism, or sublimity. But, perhaps more than anything, it is the compulsion to be “live” for the spectator, even a live object, that operates as this burden. I wish to close by considering how this racially constituted and compulsory liveness operates in these torture performances as a way to reckon with how Abu Ghraib connected these performance complexes: military industrial and prison industrial in service of neoliberalism.

This “burden of liveness” characterizes Coco Fusco’s “Other History of Intercultural Performance,” which recounts the legacy of staging racially constituted subjects as exotically figured objects—from slave auction blocks to the Hottentot Venus to Ringling Brothers circus exhibitions of pygmies as part of their animal parade. In the torture photos, exoticism is displaced by abjection, in which the staging of racial violence as banal and celebratory marks the banality of the racial violence of neoliberal globalization. If, as Baudrillard suggests, these photos are not representational because they are so embedded in the war itself, then what do they do? Baudrillard suggests that they are simply another expression of the “pornographic face of the war” (207–208). There is something audible in the frenzy of the visible that these photos cannot represent but instead make resonate (Moten, 196). For this staging of the banality of torture, the self-parody of power that does not know what do with itself, is part of a chain of performances that neoliberalism impels—one that links the MIC and the PIC in resuscitation of primitive accumulation (RETORT, 11). The photographs visually elide yet resonate with the echo of a chain that includes the demonstrations of military force against sweatshop workers in Central America as demanded by U.S. corporations who require wages kept low. The “new realities” that neoliberal empire enacts are theaters of violence—a militarily enforced private penitentiary compelling performances of fighting and fucking—or else. The performances of torture at Abu Ghraib, in their banal and celebratory enactment of violence, are simply the spectacular realization of the ubiquitous violence that neoliberalism produces globally. Would that they would also be its undoing?

## STEP OFF THAT BOX NOW

One of Barack Obama’s first acts as president was to order the closing of Camp X-Ray in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. In signing executive orders on his second day in office to prohibit torture, Obama was seen to have closed the book on U.S. practices of human rights violations. Bloomberg news columnist, Ann Wollner, writes that “Obama lifted the shame conjured by the words Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay,

waterboarding, and extraordinary rendition” such that now so that the “Hooded Abu Ghraib inmate can step off that box now.” Such a perspective mirrors the periodic declarations of the end of the legacy of slavery that began with the Emancipation Proclamation and have enjoyed a resurgence with the election of Barack Obama as president. As critical race theorists have continued to point out, the declaration of the “end of racism” in response to a decline in the more spectacular performances of lynching mask the persistence of institutional and strategically coded forms of racism. As Michael Eric Dyson recently argued, “One black man in public housing in DC [Obama] does not solve the problems of African-American culture across the board. He is an extraordinary man [...], but at the same time that Obama is here, Oscar Grant [a black man executed by BART police in Oakland] is being murdered. Black people are still being imprisoned at disproportionate rates” (*Real Time*).

Dyson has been one of the more vocal critics to remark on how the postelection proclamation of the death of racism is premature. And yet, in many of the numerous panels on which he has appeared liberal and conservative commentators alike bemoan desires to address racial inequality a refusal to accept “responsibility” for black criminality and to not temper every marking of racial inequality with gratitude for civil rights progress. While in conversation with Dyson on a recent edition of NPR’s *All Things Considered*, for example, Joe Klein (who had only weeks before denounced the horrific crimes of Abu Ghraib as the true “Bush legacy”) insisted that the “terror” imposed on African Americans was part of a “disgraceful history” and not of the “now” where we should be focusing on racial “progress” (*ATC*). Similarly, Pat Buchanan yelled at Dyson that “We [white folks] are not responsible for the fact that African Americans commit crimes at 7 percent the rate of white Americans [...] You’re not owning up to anything, fella!” (*Hardball*).

Obama’s reversal of Bush administration practices including CIA-run secret prisons, torture, and the closing of Guantánamo, while being significant changes, have masked the ubiquity of performance complexes of prisons and sweatshops. Moreover, this celebratory mode requires an eliding of the Bush measures that Obama has not reversed and, in some cases, affirmed its right to continue the practice of extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention, and warrantless wiretapping. As the *New York Times* has noted, the “break” from Bush torture policies “does not always seem complete enough” (“Mr. Obama and the Rule of Law”).

Moreover, as long as Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo are considered to be anomalies rather than exemplary practices of neoliberalism, Obama’s assertion that “America will not torture again” will not only prove to be false, it will enable the ongoing violence in American and transnational corporations’ prisons and sweatshops. In her essay “Where is Guantánamo?” Amy Kaplan declares that due to the globality of the dehumanizing practices used there, that “Guantánamo is everywhere” (854). Thus, while the named places of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo may

close, they will continue to exist in the spaces of neoliberalism as long as they prove profitable or as opportunities to extend the power of the market.

## NOTES

1. Portions of this chapter have appeared in "Performance Complexes: Abu Ghraib and the Culture of Neoliberalism" in *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 357–371.
2. In the midst of the banking and housing market collapses in 2008, the reliability of neoliberalism is finally being tested. Vice President Joe Biden commented, for example, that he needed to "save the market from free marketers." While the consensus on neoliberalism has shown some signs of cracking, conservative politicians and pundits continue to deride all plans intended to ameliorate the effects of the crisis as "socialism you can believe in" (Sean Hannity) and "economic Marxism" (Bachmann). Even as the *New York Times* screams "Anglo-American Capitalism on Trial," others declare that reforms of neoliberalism are simply "the way to hell" (EU Chief and Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek).

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