

INNOCENCE, PERVERSION, AND ABU GHRAIB

Kelly Oliver

In the 2005 Hollywood blockbuster, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*—which generated more off-screen heat in the tabloids than on—Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie play a couple, John and Jane Smith, whose marriage has lost its spark after only “five or six” years and who rekindle their passion by beating, shooting, and cutting each other. The film begins with the couple in therapy reluctant to answer questions about their lac luster marriage, especially about their sex life. In the course of the film we learn that unbeknownst to each other, both are accomplished assassins working for competing companies. They sleep walk through their marriage and everyday lives together like automatons, while their violent killing sprees are executed as manic moments in their otherwise empty lives. The few words they exchange are passionless—until they receive orders from their respective companies to kill each other. Unlike the failed couples therapy mockingly shown at the beginning and end of the film, their brutality toward each other enflames their desires and reinitiates sex and conversation, both of which revolve around violence. Neither loses sleep over their killing sprees; Jane brags that she has lost feeling in three of her fingers and it seems that—outside of their violent mania—neither of them feel much of anything, even for each other. They have become killing machines who abuse others as automatically as they brush their teeth or eat dinner. Their violence is so mechanical that when ordered they turn it on each other without a second thought. And it is their automatic violence that apparently saves them from their robotic marriage.

Watching this glorification of sadomasochism and sexual violence, I was reminded of the young military personal who used sexualized torture to enhance their sex lives at Abu Ghraib, where one soldier gave another pictures of prisoners forced to simulate sex acts as a birthday present, and pictures of sex between soldiers were interspersed with torture photographs. The idea that abusing others is a form of sexual arousal seems to move easily between the everyday fare of sexual violence and

violent sex of Hollywood films and the shocking photographs from Abu Ghraib. Why is one banal and the other shocking? Is it that one is real and the other is fantasy? With reality television and virtual “facts” and virtual personalities on the internet, how can we tell the difference? In fact, don’t our fantasies affect our perceptions of reality? And weren’t the young soldiers at Abu Ghraib not only following orders to “soften up” the prisoners but also acting out their own fantasies? The border between reality and fantasy is precisely the dangerous terrain of human habitation, filled as it is with hair-triggered landmines, images both virtual and real. With these real and imagined images of sadomasochistic violence, it is as if the only way to give meaning to life has become destroying it, that we only embrace life by denying it to the point of murder and suicide. Abu Ghraib displays a sadistic pleasure in violence toward others to the point of murder. And what of the popularity of “cutting” among young people who ritualistically cut themselves in order to “feel something”? Or think of the kids who play the “hanging game” to see what it feels like to cut off their air supply? These attempts to feel something more intensely are dangerous masochistic practices that can and have led to death.

These sadomasochistic forms of entertainment are symptomatic of a general sense of a loss of purpose or a sense of the meaning of life. Media culture feeds this meaninglessness by turning reality into a spectacle. As a result, we desire more intense experiences, more real experiences. We oscillate between trying to shut off our emotional lives with pharmaceutical drugs—antidepressants and sleeping pills—and channel or net surfing to find alternative realities. Witness the fascination with reality television and live internet webcams. Perhaps as reality itself becomes commodified, we crave more extreme forms of bodily experience. Surveillance technologies produced to serve regulatory and disciplinary power, as Foucault might say, also produce desires for more voyeuristic and exhibitionist sexual practices using cameras, video record-

ers, telephones, and the internet. And military technologies designed to facilitate surveillance and containment are now used to disseminate images of “real live bodies in action” that cannot be contained. Reality is no longer something we live but something we crave.

This craving for reality only thinly masks our deeper craving for meaning. We consume reality like the newest breakfast cereal, but because it is lacking in substance, we never feel satisfied. If there is a crisis of Western culture, it is a crisis of meaning. Our affective and emotional lives have become detached from our cultural institutions—schools, churches, governments—that should give them meaning. The civil laws that should help us live meaningful lives together as societies, nations, and citizens of the earth, have become mere regulations that can be bought and sold like anything else. Laws, whether they are the principles of ethics, religious commandments or rituals, civil codes, codes of honor, school rules, or the Geneva Convention have become nothing more than hoops to jump through on our way to pursuing burning pleasure at lighting speed to the point of death. Laws that should give form to pleasure, that should give meaning to our bodily sensations as we live together, instead become regulations to be manipulated. It is not just that “laws are made to be broken,” but that our conception of law itself is broken. Finding loopholes has become an industry unto itself. It is telling that the word “loophole” originally referred to a small slit or hole in a fortified wall for firing guns. Interpreting law is reduced to finding loopholes, which is to say finding omissions in the law that allow otherwise unlawful acts to be carried out within the terms of the law. The activity of interpretation crucial to having a meaningful life has become the sophist’s pleasure in finding loopholes. The Bush administration’s energy and time spent finding loopholes in the Geneva Convention in order to justify torture, and the legal wrangling to redefine torture itself, is evidence of the level of manipulation of law-become-regulation devoid of meaning. The letter of the law has become disconnected from its spirit. This disconnect between letter and spirit in the law is a symptom of a disconnect between words and meaning more generally. This split between words and life, between law and pleasure, is telling in diagnosing the mal-

aise of contemporary Western culture, the culture of pharmaceutical drugs and net-surfing.

In her latest book, *La haine et la pardon* (2005; all translations are my own), Julia Kristeva suggests that what she calls “the drama of Abu Ghraib tragically reveals that our civilization not only fails to produce [an] integration of the symbolic Law in the deep strata of [the psyche] that governs sexual pleasure, but that maybe, it [also] aggravates the disintegration of Law and desire” (346). She says that it is not the army or such and such administration that has failed, but rather it is the integration of the symbolic Law in the psychic apparatus that has failed. This failure is not the result of a lapse in law or the weakening of prohibitions; on the contrary. It is a result of the pervasiveness of surveillance and punitive technologies in all aspects of life. The result is hatred without forgiveness. Rather than forgive meaning in order to make affects intelligible and thereby livable, symbolic law is reduced to regulation and management techniques that police without giving form to desire. Kristeva claims that the so-called “black sheep” of Abu Ghraib, the few bad apples, are not exceptional but “average inhabitants of the globalized planet of humanoids trained” by reality shows and the internet (*ibid.*). This “exploded rush toward disinhibited satisfaction” operates as the counterpoint to the Puritan code, that she identifies with a “ferocious repression,” which robotizes the functions of the new world order. This ferocious repression is manifest in policing technologies and professional hyperproductivity, both of which emphasize efficiency in an economy of calculable risks and profits over meaning. On the other side of law, become the science of management, are ever more violent forms of entertainment: spectacles, scandals, and sexcapades. It is the cleavage between law and desire, between word and affect, between the symbolic and the body, that according to Kristeva, can produce teenage torturers who abuse prisoners seemingly in all innocence—as they claim at their trials—“just for fun.”

Law and order are no longer ways to give structure to life so that we can live together in meaningful ways. Rather, law and order have been reduced to regulatory agencies that multiply rules and the bureaucracy of order for its own sake—or more accurately to ensure or-

derly consumption in a society for whom the meaning of life is produced by commercial television or the internet. Kristeva diagnoses what she calls this new “malady of civilization” as a failure to integrate the symbolic Law into the psychic apparatus (2005: 347). Ten years ago, in *New Maladies of the Soul*, she described these “maladies of the soul” as failures of representation caused by a split between word and affect (meaning and being) which is intensified by media culture with its saturation of images (2002: 207; 443–44). The world of symbols has become disconnected from our affective or psychic lives; the result is an inability to represent (and thereby live) our emotional lives outside of the economy of spectacle. Expressions of affect and emotion take the form of violent images or outrageous confessions of sexual exploits. Our psychic lives are overrun with images of sex and violence on television, at the movies, or on the internet, while the idealized romance and everyday lives of movie stars become our prosthetic fantasies. Imagination, creativity, and sublimation are what are at stake in the colonization of our fantasy lives with media images. Indeed, according to Kristeva, the possibility of creativity, imagination, and representation are impeded by the standardized expressions of mass media. She predicts “if drugs do not take over your life, your wounds are ‘healed’ with images, and before you can speak about your states of the soul, you drown them in the world of mass media. The image has an extraordinary power to harness your anxieties and desires, to take on their intensity and to suspend their meaning. It works by itself. As a result, the psychic life of modern individuals wavers between somatic symptoms (getting sick and going to the hospital) and the visual depiction of their desires (daydreaming in front of the TV). In such a situation, psychic life is blocked, inhibited, and destroyed” (2002: 207). Media images become substitute selves, substitute affects, that impede rather than facilitate the transfer of bodily drives and affects into signification. Images, seemingly transparent, substitute for questioning and interpreting the meaning of the body and therefore of life. The psyche or soul itself hangs in the balance.

In her earliest work, Kristeva makes the presentation of the means of production of meaning and value the primary criteria for what she

calls the “revolution in poetic language.” The transformative possibilities of revolutionary language, or what in her later work she calls “intimate revolt,” depends upon making questioning-interpreting and the process of questioning-interpreting explicit. Ultimately, what must be called into question and constantly reassessed are the unconscious forces that lay behind our actions, particularly our pleasure in violence. Through representation accompanied by critical hermeneutics, we can give meaning to our violent impulses that may help us avoid acting on them. In Kristeva’s words, “insofar as jouissance is thought/written/represented, it traverses evil, and thereby it is perhaps the most profound manner of avoiding the radical evil that would be the stopping of representation and questioning” (2002: 443).

When continued questioning is the heart of representation, it is a form of translation through which meaning is given to being as the gift that bestows humanity. But, this translation requires time and energy, scarce commodities in today’s global economy, where questioning is considered inefficient, a poor use of time; and interpretation is a waste of resources unless it results in profits recognized by the value hierarchies of global capitalism. Our obsession with speed and faster and faster technologies, inducing more and more stress, sacrifices curiosity to efficiency. Because it takes time, energy, and its profits are not immediately grasped, this type of curiosity is not marketable in the new world order. Within this order, meaning becomes a commodity like any other that is valuable only if it can be marketed, distributed, and sold at a profit. The fungibility of meaning, however, places it within an economy of exchange that devalues its gift to life, which cannot be calculated.

The gift of meaning is in excess of the economy of exchange. For, within the economy of exchange, substitution can never move beyond fetishism; there the dynamic and poetic operations of metaphorical substitution are reduced to products or things. Consumer culture proliferates the empty desire for products that create their own needs and only ever lead to partial, incomplete and therefore short-lived satisfactions. The rich are idolized for their wealth and property, individuals with things. Individuals themselves become fungible; their organs are sold to the highest bidder. And monetary value

stands in for values. But, these objects that we crave can't touch the more profound longing for meaningful lives that comes not through a hunger for consumer goods but rather through a passion for life. Unlike hunger, passion cannot be temporarily satisfied. Unlike the thirst for wealth and things, passion has no object; it is not defined in terms of possession and calculations. Passion gives more energy than it takes, in excess of calculations and exchange value. Passion for life is what we risk losing when we reduce freedom to the free market and peace to a leveling universalism that subjects the planet to our norms. Within freedom defined in terms of the free market, anything goes: both strict prohibitions (like those touted by the Christian Right or Muslim fundamentalists) and wild promiscuity (like we see in confessional memoirs and internet porn) are marketable. Within this economy, violent sadomasochistic abuses are performed and photographed in all innocence as "just having fun" at the expense of others.

It is as if these so-called black sheep, these perverse individuals, occupy an abyss between law and desire; that they take refuge from harsh regulations through regression to an infantile state of innocence. Rather than integrate prohibitions that would inhibit violent urges, these individuals cordon off regulations and keep them separate from their sexual and emotional lives where they retreat into polymorphous perversion without guilt. They/we retreat to a presubjective and preobjective psychic dynamic that we might associate with what Kristeva calls abjection; they play with and eroticize the in-between, the ambiguous, the lack of boundaries, to protect themselves from falling into abjection. Fear of contamination—phobia—motivates their perversion, while perverse desire purifies the abject object of their desire. So, rather than integrate the symbolic Law with its prohibitions and command for pleasure, they live in-between in the space of the cleavage between these two aspects of the law. This cleavage or split renders the symbolic Law ineffective in setting up symbolic substitutes for violent drives. Strong prohibition leads to phobia, which in turn leads to perversion as a protection against that which is most feared because it is most prohibited. Phobia of others is negotiated by eroticizing what is seen as their abjection and making

them victims of sexual abuse. The disintegration of the symbolic Law from emotional life leaves us with "innocent" parties who, within the psychic logic of perversion, escape guilt by regressing to a time before guilt, a time before proper subjects who take proper objects, which is to say a time before responsibility. These "innocent" subjects dwell, even wallow, in abjection with the pervert's guiltless glee. They become the cheerleaders of abjection for whom sadomasochistic violence toward themselves and others becomes the prerequisite for a good party.

It is not exactly that these "innocent" individuals don't know the difference between right and wrong, but that by eroticizing the abject, the taboo, the improper, they purify it and thereby purify themselves. Their perverse desire for the abject, the unseemly, becomes a defense against contamination by it. Their sexualization of torture and eroticization of prisoners turns everything into sex; and sex is fun. They are not torturing or committing war crimes, they are just having fun. In an odd way, their/our sexualization of everything, their/our polymorphous perversity, their/our promiscuity, protects them/us from facing their/our own culpability. And the sensational spectacle of scandal turns their torture into a perverse form of entertainment that incites outrage and shocks even as it titillates. By turning the torture at Abu Ghraib into kids "just having fun" or fraternity "pranks" (themselves remarkable in their violence, which is tolerated even endorsed by our culture), and by making it into a spectacular sex scandal, we do not turn our outrage into political protest or action. (Rush Limbaugh called the abuses at Abu Ghraib "pranks" and "letting off steam"; see Sontag 2004: 28.)

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Sigmund Freud argues that small children are without "shame, disgust and morality" and therefore do not restrain their "instincts of scopophilia, exhibitionism and cruelty," which manifest themselves as "satisfaction in exposing their bodies," "curiosity to see other people's genitals," "cruelty toward animals and playmates," and make children "eager spectators of the processes of micturition and defecation" (Freud 1989: 268–69). As children grow up, they learn to control their impulses rather than act on them. They find alternative ways to

express their anger and aggression, more socially acceptable ways. They learn to act according to social laws and codes of behavior. If proper or socially acceptable pleasures are the result of controlling violent impulses, then regression to an infantile state prior to that constraint circumvents the gap between what Freud calls the reality principle—what society requires we do in order to live together—and what he calls the pleasure principle—what our bodies want. In this way, the regressed or infantile individual does not have to wait to satisfy his or her pleasure within a socially proscribed code of behavior. Rather, the regressed individual reverts to unrestrained pleasure within his or her emotional life even while acknowledging a harsh disciplinary structure in other aspects of life. In this way, reality and pleasure are segregated and compartmentalized. Individuals and culture can simultaneously foster conservative mores, sexual promiscuity, and sadomasochistic violence. We can engage in the rhetoric of tolerance and global freedom while our military uses sex, loud music, and dogs as torture strategies as part of what is openly called the “occupation of Iraq.”

In this regressive formation of perversion, there is a breach in what should be an integral link between those social codes and expressions of aggression and sexual urges. Prohibitions that are recognized in one aspect of life are foreclosed from other aspects, particularly when it comes to sexual pleasure. Codes of behavior and propriety are not integrated into emotional life; they exist but can be compartmentalized through eroticizing what is prohibited—violence toward self and others for example. On the one side, there are increasing regulations but they are cut off from any affective significance; they are empty of any meaning insofar as the individual experiences the law as separated from his or her pleasures. The law appears as mechanical regulation, management and surveillance designed to maximize efficiency and control but without touching the humanity of meaningful relations with self or others. The law has become nothing more than the rules of engagement manipulated to establish control over others rather than social relations with them. The military with its chain of command, disciplinary regimens, and discourse of containment, harshly

and mechanically administered, is a prime example of law become regulation and thereby void of any meaning for life. This is why young soldiers can follow a strict schedule, polish their boots, and salute their superiors—all codes of extreme discipline—and at the same time, torture and sexually victimize their prisoners and each other. Military regulations may order the lives of these soldiers, but they don’t provide them with meaning. It is not a lack of regulation, then, that leads to violence against others. Rather, when law become nothing more than regulation it loses its meaning for our lives. We can turn the Geneva Convention into so many loopholes to justify anything. Law becomes a hole in the wall through which we can point our weapons at others—not just for economic and political gains but also now “just for fun.” A deadly abyss is opening between law and pleasure; if we don’t find ways to bridge laws that allow us to live together and pleasures of the body, particularly sexual pleasure, then we risk falling off the precipice of humanity.

These abysmal individuals, as we might call them, the so-called black sheep or bad apples, are not exceptions but rather part of an abysmal culture in which innocence and even ignorance are valorized. Innocence associated with childhood is not only valorized within American culture but seemingly definitive of it. We pride ourselves on our innocence. We continue to feel menaced by corrupt forces that threaten out innocence: Vietnam, 9-11, Abu-Ghraib, Guantánamo. We continue to talk about the loss of American innocence in relation to these events, even while we continue to insist on it. Childlike innocence works as an inoculant against responsibility and guilt. If we are innocent and ignorant, then we cannot be held responsible and cannot be found guilty. The defendants at Abu Ghraib not only claimed that they were just having fun but also that they didn’t know that forcing prisoners to eat pork or stripping them violated their religious beliefs. This defense should not surprise us in a culture that takes pride in its ignorance, which is part and parcel of its imagined innocent. Think of the box office hit movie *Forrest Gump*, in which Tom Hanks plays the lead character, a lovable but clueless innocent who accidentally does all kinds of good things. His ignorance and innocence, his mistakes even, bring good

things to all. He is not responsible for his actions insofar as he does not intend them, yet his innocence itself is the agency of benevolence. The film seems to say that innocence and ignorance are good qualities—if only we could all be more like Forrest Gump, the world would be a better place. Think too of shelf after shelf of books and manuals entitled *Idiot's Guide to X* or *X for Dummies*. We demand that the complexities of life be described in the simplest possible terms. We revel in our image of ourselves as idiots and dummies. We are ignorant and proud of it!

Our ignorance is telling. What we want to know and what we don't care to find out should tell us something about our values and priorities. Innocence-as-ignorance protects us against vulnerability, which is why after 9/11 the media could talk about our loss of innocence along with our vulnerability. Within the logic of this fantasy of innocence, paradoxically, to be innocent is to be invulnerable and without guilt; while to be vulnerable, to be the victim of an attack, takes away our innocence. In fact, the threat from attack is not just a threat to our lives but also to our innocence. Can we understand something like the 9/11 attack and maintain our innocence/ignorance? Doesn't interpreting what happened to us require some reflection on the US role in global politics? And doesn't such reflection challenge our notion of ourselves as innocents? Even now we don't have to spend much time reflecting on the current political situation to realize that behind the rhetoric of American benevolence delivering democracy to the globe there are rich corporations waiting in the wings to reconstruct the infrastructures of the recipients of our generosity.

Our identification with *Dumb and Dumber* not only serves to justify ignorance and innocence but also points to an anxiety about the vulnerability associated with it. Vulnerability is the flip side of innocence. We laugh at ourselves but at the same time this is a nervous laughter associated with the vulnerability of innocence. A vulnerability that the September 11 attacks brought home. Our insistence on our own innocent works to diffuse vulnerability but it does so by denying it. When faced with our own vulnerability, we lose our innocence and the result is hatred and revenge. We become the bully instead of the playground id-

iot. But, this hatred and urge for revenge can be seen as a manifestation of fear, fear of our own vulnerability. Victimization of others literally puts our own vulnerability onto others

In *La haine et le pardon*, Kristeva raises the question of "how to inscribe in the conception of the human itself—and, consequently in philosophy and political practice—the constitutive part played by destructivity, vulnerability, disequilibrium which are integral to the identity of the human species and the singularity of the speaking subject?" (2005: 115). She has dealt with destructivity throughout her work, especially in *Powers of Horror* where she describes the negotiation with the abject as a stage in the process of becoming a subject by excluding that which threatens the borders of proper identity. Starting with her earliest work, she insists on the role of negativity in psychic life. And, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she calls negativity the fourth term of the dialectic; negativity is the driving force of psychic life. In *Intimate Revolt*, she maintains that it is questioning that transforms negativity into something other than merely negation or negation of negation; through endless questioning, negativity is transformed from a destructive or merely discriminatory force that separates self and other, inside and outside, and becomes the positive force of creativity and the nourishing of psychic space (Kristeva 2002: 226). The negativity of drive force becomes the positive force of signification through repetition and response from the other; it becomes the sublimation of drive force into language.

In regression (as I am developing it), however, not yet even a discriminatory force, negativity remains a destructive force. Successfully negotiating and renegotiating abjection sets up the precarious border between self and other; but when the "subject" remains stuck at the level of abjection, confusion between self and other can be both threatening to the extreme of phobia and arousing to the extreme of perversion. It is the polymorphous perversion of this regressed state that can lead to sexual pleasure in violating others. Eroticizing the abject becomes a form of purification that protects the abysmal subject from "contamination" from its phobic object/other.

In *Power of Horrors* it is the uncanny effect of the other who becomes the catalyst for the return of repressed otherness—the abject—in

the self that provokes hatred and loathing, which in turn either can lead to acting out against others or to sublimating the experience of uncanny otherness through representation. In *La haine et le pardon*, the uncanny effect of the other is specifically associated with vulnerability. Kristeva claims that along with liberty, equality, and fraternity, vulnerability is a fourth term that we inherit from Enlightenment humanism (2005: 115). Speaking of the handicapped, and extending her analysis to racism, classism, and religious persecution, Kristeva once again reminds us of the narcissistic wound that constitutes humanity as a scar at the suture of being and meaning. It is our position in-between that makes us vulnerable, and also free. Precisely that which makes us human and opens up a world of meaning, makes us vulnerable. For, as Kristeva says, psychic life is an “infinite quest for meaning, a *bios* transversal of *zoë*, a biography with and for others” (2005: 115). The uncanny encounter with another, then, puts us face to face with our own vulnerability “with and for others.” And, it is the fear and denial of our own vulnerability that causes us to hate and exploit the vulnerability of others. To repeat Kristeva’s question, how can we acknowledge that to be human is to be vulnerable? In other words, how can we accept our own vulnerability without violently projecting it onto others whom we oppress and torture or alternatively “civilize” and “protect”?

These questions point to the need for interpretation and meaning. We integrate our own violent impulses into our emotional lives in productive ways by interpreting them rather than merely acting on them. By interpreting our hatred and loathing as a response to our own vulnerability, we gain the distance necessary to prevent ourselves from acting on them. We turn our fear and loathing into words so that we can live with them and with others. Rather than act on instinct or aggressive urges—whether sexual or violent—we stop to interrogate our own emotions and actions. Rather than wallow in sadomasochistic pleasure in violence toward ourselves and others, we transform bodily pleasures into joy through interpretation. By giving meaning to our pleasures they become joy. After all, satisfying bodily impulses does not in itself produce a satisfying life. Meaning and purpose in life

come through the integration of those pleasures into social structures of meaning that allow us not only to live together but to love each other.

Curiosity and interpretation can be the sources of joy that takes us beyond the realm of finite sensuous pleasures and puts us in touch with the realm of infinite meaning. This joy in playing with words gives meaning to our violent impulses, now expressed in words rather than in actions. The articulation of our violent emotions transforms hate into forgiveness and allows us to live with our own vulnerability and tendencies toward violence—which is to say our humanity—without killing ourselves or others. But how do we distinguish between forms of articulation that participate in violence, even inspire it, and forms that diffuse it? For example, do violent films like *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* represent violent urges to prevent us from acting on them; or do they actually feed the impulse to violence and desensitize us to it? At stake in these questions is the effect of representations of violence that saturate media images and fuel the culture of the spectacle.

More problematic than films like *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* that are obviously fiction, are reality shows and fictional documentaries that use reality as a selling point. It is our fascination with the spectacle of reality that makes the videotapes from Osama Bin Laden or the videotapes of beheadings in Iraq terrifying. Terrorism relies on media for its effect. Without the media and dissemination of images of violence there would be no mass terror. The beheadings in Iraq have been ritualistically staged and recorded for maximum effect, for an audience. They are intended to shock, threaten, and exploit vulnerability. Decapitation is especially threatening because it is aimed at the head. Given various philosophies of the significance of the face, particularly that of Emmanuel Levinas, we might conclude that the face and the head are the most vulnerable parts of the human body; or at least insofar as they are associated with language, thought and ethics, as well as kissing and looking, they signal what we take to be essential characteristics of humanity, including, perhaps especially, vulnerability in relation to others. And the head is associated with the mind, the soul, and individual sovereignty, to the point that our leaders are called the heads of state. Within

Western culture the genitals, specifically the male genitals, are the only rival in terms of their association with vulnerability. Freud's entire developmental psychology revolves around the threat of castration and the vulnerability of the male organ. Perhaps this is why so much of the torture at Abu Ghraib as was aimed at the prisoners' genitals. Probably the most terrifying images from Abu Ghraib are the photographs of dogs threatening prisoners who are shown looking horrified holding their hands over their genitals. In the case of torture at Abu Ghraib and the ritualistic beheading performed by Al Qaeda, the goal is not just to hurt or kill; rather given the way that bodies are used and abused, the goal is to terrify by exploiting feelings of vulnerability. In neither case do the perpetrators simply inflict pain or simply kill; rather the hurting and killing are performed ceremoniously and the photographs and videotapes of those debasing rituals are then used to intimidate others. The photos and videos are used to make others feel vulnerable by exploiting the vulnerability of the human body itself.

In *Visions Capitales*, the book that accompanied the Louvre exhibit on severed heads in the history of art curated by Kristeva in 1998, she repeatedly suggests that artistic representations of decapitation are sublimatory means of negotiating anxieties over castration and death, what following her latest work we could call anxieties over vulnerability. The threat of decapitation has long been connected with the threat of castration. Kristeva suggests that artists paint and sculpt severed heads in order to mitigate anxieties over vulnerability as an alternative to projecting and abjecting it onto others. Here and throughout her work, she argues that representations of violence can prevent real violence; echoing Lacan, she maintains that what is effaced in the imaginary and the symbolic risks returning at the level of the real. Analyzing images of beheadings from the French Revolution, she concludes that perhaps the figures of decapitation and severed heads can be seen as an intimate form of resistance to what she calls the "democracy" of the guillotine. She says "above all, if art is a transfiguration, it has political consequences" (1998: 110; all translations of *Visions Capitales* are my own in consultation with a translation by Sarah Hansen). This sentiment could not be

more relevant today as we witness gruesome beheadings in video taped spectacles that could be diagnosed as a refusal to examine the role of fantasy in constructions of reality, where the inability to represent sacrifice leads to real sacrifice, and where reality itself has become a commodity.

What is the difference between Caravaggio's painting of beheading in "David and Goliath" and recent video-tapes of beheadings in Iraq? This question itself may be shocking because the difference couldn't be more obvious: one is art while the other is making a spectacle of gruesome murder. But, given psychoanalysis's insistence on the role of fantasy in perceptions of reality, can the difference be simply that between artifice and reality? If artificial death abolishes the uncanny effect of real death, does this imply that the more realistic the representation the more uncanny it becomes? What about artists like August Raffet or Gericault, whom Kristeva discusses, and who used real severed heads and accident victims as their models (cf. Kristeva 1998)? And what of the artifice involved in the ritualistic staging and recording of the beheadings in Iraq? What of the staging involved in using green hoods and stacking prisoners in a pyramid for the camera at Abu Ghraib or standing a hooded prisoner on a box, arms outstretched attached to wires, reminiscent of crucifixion? Where is the border between artifice and reality? Navigating that border is precisely what is threatened by the contemporary fascination with reality television and live internet webcams. Freud is right that the uncanny effect of the real is more powerful than artifice; but does the need for greater degrees of reality in violence and sexual victimization of others become perverse when representation becomes a form of acting out? Perhaps degrees of perversion can only be measured in terms of the suffering of its "objects."

The American version of freedom, which has been reduced to the free market, is another version of the exploitation of vulnerability, particularly economic vulnerability. In her discussions of freedom and peace in *La haine et le pardon*, Kristeva argues that global capitalism has appropriated one version of freedom from the Enlightenment and has mistakenly taken its legacy to be abstract universalism; following Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel

Kant, this prominent version of freedom is not negatively conceived as the absence of constraint but as the possibility of self-beginning that opens the way for the enterprising individual and self initiatives. This is the freedom of the free market, which, Kristeva says, “culminates in the logic of globalization and of the unrestrained free-market. The Supreme Cause (God) and the Technical Cause (the Dollar) are its two co-existing variants which guarantee the functioning of our freedom within this logic of instrumentalism” (Kristeva 2005a: 30).

This form of freedom may be the foundation for human rights, the French notion of Liberty-Equality-Fraternity, the English Habeas Corpus, and the American universal individualism; yet, it also effaces the singularity of each individual and reduces human life to an equation. This version of freedom in which every individual is equal to every other leads to something like the free-market exchange of individuals in a calculus that offers only Formal Freedom and Empty Equality. Freedom becomes defined in terms of economies and markets; and governments liberate through occupation in order to open up new markets and free new consumers with little regard for cultural differences that might undermine the universalization of this fungible freedom. Technology becomes the great equalizer through which all individuals are reduced to this lowest common denominator; its brokers are paying lip-service to respect for cultural differences even as they exchange some freedoms for others in the name of the ‘F’ word, Freedom with a capital F.

It is noteworthy that President Bush introduced the phrase “women of cover”—an analog to women of color—in relation to the freedom to shop. In a speech before the State Department shortly after September 11, 2001, Bush told “stories of Christian and Jewish women alike helping women of cover, Arab-American women, go shop because they were afraid to leave their home” and in a news conference a week later he again invoked the religious unity of America epitomized in women getting together to shop: “In many cities when Christian and Jewish women learned that Muslim women, women of cover, were afraid of going out of their homes alone . . . they went shopping with them . . . an act that shows the

world the true nature of America,” suggesting that true nature of America is the freedom to shop for women of all faiths (Saffire 2001: 22). Perhaps it is telling that Bush’s 2004 inaugural address, which repeats the rhetoric of women’s freedom, appeared on CNN.com next to a Victoria’s Secret advertisement with a provocative photo of a bikini clad model with pursed lips looking seductively at the camera that reads “Create your perfect bikini . . . suit yourself, any way you like.” As I argue elsewhere, freedom becomes women’s freedom, which becomes women’s sexual freedom, which becomes the commodification of women’s sexuality reduced to the right to choose any bikini.

Kristeva reminds us, however, that there is a second version of freedom that reemerges from the Western tradition as a counter-balance to universalized individualism, which “is very different from the kind of calculating logic that leads to unbridled consumerism” (Kristeva 2005a: 30). This type of freedom comes through language and meaning as they support the singularity of each individual. Singularity is at odds with individualism insofar as it cannot be reduced to a common denominator in the name of equality. Indeed, neither meaning nor singularity can be fixed within an economy of calculation; they are fluid processes that engender the products and individuals of the free market as leftovers whose cause-and-effect logic effaces the very processes through which they arise. Both meaning and the singularity of individuals are imbued with unconscious dynamics that may be manipulated by the market but that always exceed it. This second kind of freedom is not concerned with maximizing relations through efficient technologies of marketing, management and surveillance, but rather with meaningful relationships. Freedom as the quest for meaning is an ongoing project. Kristeva calls it an “aspiration . . . driven by a real concern for singularity and fragility of each and every human life, including those of the poor, the disabled, the retired, and those who rely on social benefits. It also requires special attention to sexual and ethnic differences, to men and women considered in their unique intimacy rather than as simple groups of consumers” (Kristeva 2005a: 31).

Acknowledging the link between freedom and vulnerability moves us further from conceiving of freedom as the absence of prohibition to conceiving of freedom as the absence of sacrifice. Freedom is not anything goes but everyone stays, not no-thing is excluded but no one is excluded. In *Visions Capitales*, Kristeva suggests that artistic representation expresses a freedom that resides “not in the effacement of prohibitions, but in the renouncement of the chain/gear of sacrifices [*l’engrenage des sacrifices*],” which moves us beyond loss to “a joy that loses sacrificial complacency/indulgence itself [*la complaisance sacrificielle elle-même*]” (1998: 152). Transcending a sacrificial economy requires moving beyond identities based on the exclusion of others toward inclusion and interaction enabled by questioning and representing what it means to be an “individual,” an “American,” a “Muslim,” a “human,” etc. This reversal of perversion with its fear and loathing of other people who are different from ourselves requires overcoming an Us-versus-Them, you-are-either-with-us-or-against-us, mentality by interpreting and articulating our desires and fears in relations to others. Moving beyond the abjection and exclusion of others that results in phobic and perverse relations, representation of hatred and fear translates violent impulses into creative life force. Meaning replaces violence toward self and others; representations of sacrifice and human vulnerability replace literal sacrifice. Instead of representing, articulating, or interpreting their violent impulses or hatred and fears, fundamentalists act out their violent fantasies in the real world; which as contemporary politics teaches us all too well, leads the members of one religion to sacrifice the members of another, along with themselves. We continue to witness this sacrificial violence taken to the extreme with suicide bombers who sacrifice themselves to kill others.

Perhaps the most uncanny manifestation of the culture of sacrifice and death are the women suicide bombers, called *shahidas*, the Arabic word for feminine martyr. Traditionally, women have been denied access to education and positions of power. They have been relegated to procreation, to a natural role as the bearers of life. So, how do they become the bearers of death? As Barbara Victor’s book chronicling the lives of some women suicide

bombers makes clear, most of them have been shunned by their families because they do not fulfill their designated functions as wives and mothers (Victor 2003). Some of them are barren and cannot have children or choose not to, other have been shamed by rape or sexual assault, and others are divorced or without husbands. Many of them have been given the seemingly poisonous gift of Western education, which leaves them in a no-man’s land caught between the opposing values of two cultures. They are in the impossible situation of trying to navigate one set of prohibitions and another, such that for some it seems that martyrdom becomes the only way to reach paradise. As Victor’s account shows, for the most part these are excellent students who want more from their lives than being the good woman as defined by tradition. But their surrounding environment, especially their families, are hostile to this aspect of their personalities.

Kristeva claims that “the triumph of the culture of death, disguised behind an appeasement [*une pacification*] promised beyond, reaches its height in the figure of the kamikaze: the *shahida*” (2006; 2005: 431). She suggests that the cleavage between *zoë* and *bios* is most violently realized in the destructive acts of women suicide bombers. She explains that women have been relegated to the realm of procreation or being (*zoë*) and been denied access to representation (*bios*). She concludes that these women occupy two incompatible universes of family and school, which results in “double personalities” or “psychic cleavage” that renders them politically vulnerable to the rhetoric of extremists (cf. Kristeva 2005: 89–90). Yet, insofar as they are “sent off to sacrifice and martyrdom in imitation of the warlike man and possessor of power,” they are killing in the name of principles that have excluded them; the representatives (never representing) of life are sent to kill. This is to say that the very culture that reduces them to the bearers of life now makes them the bearers of death and life gives birth to the culture of death (Kristeva 2005: 89–90). Following Victor’s biographies, Kristeva calls the lives of these women “amorous disasters—pregnancy outside of marriage, sterility, desire for phallic equality with man” (Kristeva 2006; 2005: 431). These women are shunned and shamed

by their families for their breach of traditional values, particularly as they center around marriage and children (women's role as procreator). Kristeva goes so far as to say that "fundamentalism dedicates those women it wants to rid itself of to idealization and the sacred cult, for the amorous life of these women, with their intolerable and inassimilable novelties, marks the incapacity of the religious word to pacify the ambivalent bonds of free individuals, emancipated of archaic prohibitions but deprived of new justifications for their lives" (Kristeva 2006). Undesirable women are sacrificed to traditional law as their last attempt at redemption. Their difference can only be forgiven through their sacrifice as a form of purification ritual. But this notion of forgiveness is merely the flip side of vengeance; it is a perversion that idolizes sacrifice and killing. We could say that forgiveness is precisely what these women lack and lack of forgiveness leads to depression and suicide (cf. Oliver 2004). A more life-affirming type of forgiveness comes through interpretation that gives meaning to life as a gift, what Kristeva calls "par-don." This alternative notion of forgiveness operates outside of the economy of vengeance or judgment to offer meaning to life within representation outside of sacrifice. Forgiveness offers a renegotiation with laws and traditions such that meaning supports the singularity of each individual rather than prohibiting it.

While the enlisted women whose photographs have been associated with war in Iraq may not be amorous disasters, they are poor women who typically join the military to avoid the poverty that can lead to various sorts of "amorous disasters." Think of Lynndie England, pregnant by Abu Ghraib "ring-leader" Charles Graner (who later married another soldier indicted for abuse, Megan Ambuhl) at the time she was charged with the abuses at Abu Ghraib. England's story could be one of amorous disaster. With her baby son in her arms at her trial, she was bitter about Graner's marriage to Ambuhl. And it was Graner's testimony that undermined her defense and led to the retrial in which she was convicted. In an article titled "Behind Failed Abu Ghraib Plea, A Tangle of Bonds and Betrayals," journalist Kate Zernike described the soap opera like scene: "In a military courtroom in Texas last

week was a spectacle worthy of *As the World Turns*: Pfc. Lynndie R. England, the defendant, holding her seven-month-old baby; the imprisoned father, Pvt. Charles A. Graner Jr., giving testimony that ruined what lawyers said was her best shot at leniency; and waiting outside, another defendant from the notorious abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, Megan M. Ambuhl, who had recently wed Private Graner—a marriage Private England learned about only days before" (Zernike 2005).

As Victor notes in her research on suicide bombers, many of them are from middle class families. Victor suggests and Kristeva argues that it is their middle class access to Western education that puts them in the no-man's land between two cultures that leads them to desperate acts of suicide and murder. The situation of poor women in the United States military is radically different in some ways in that they join up in order to gain access to middle class education, which will give them opportunities to escape poverty and the rural lives back home. What these women share, however, is the necessity to continue to navigate patriarchal conventions and institutions, like the military for example. As different as the traditions of these cultures may be, in both women's roles are defined in relation to their bodies, which may be expectations of marriage followed by pregnancy and child-rearing, or in American popular culture, associations between women and sex. While Victor's and Kristeva's analysis goes some distance in giving us a perspective on these women that acknowledging the significance of their socio-historical contexts, or subject positions, we must also keep in mind that these women are participating in traditionally masculine activities of war. While it is crucial to analyze the ways in which their acts are governed, even overdetermined, by their circumstances as women in patriarchal cultures, it is also important not to displace their public persona back into the domestic sphere. They may be "amorous disasters" as Kristeva says, but theirs are not just private or domestic disasters but also public disasters that trade on hate and not just love, or failed love. The very question of the meanings of love and hate, particularly as they come to bear on women's lives, is at stake.

What we need is not just the rhetoric of equality—equal opportunity killers—but

rather a new discourse of the meaning and joy of life, not life as mere biology but also as biography, not merely *zoë* but also *bios*. Fundamentalisms may use the rhetoric of women's equality to valorize women's suicidal violence, but they do not give women true freedom to recreate what it means to be a woman. If women have been freed from age-old restrictions on their freedom, restrictions that justified their lives only in terms of the biology of procreation, then we need discourses that provide new justifications for women's lives that move beyond procreation. Otherwise, at the extreme, women are free only to kill themselves.

The *shahida* can be read as a symptom of patriarchal restrictions within which the only meaningful place left to women who do not conform to the ideals of motherhood and femininity is martyrdom. She represents the return of the repressed uncanniness of human procreation, of human life and death, which straddling nature and technology, on the frontier between biology and biography, cannot be assimilated into or circumscribed by patriarchal social codes. This uncanny aspect of our existence has been relegated to women, maternity, and female sexuality. And as women begin to occupy the position that we have built for them discursively, that is to say the position of deadly weapon, it should be no surprise that the return of the repressed explodes in our face.

This account of the situation of these women is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the paradoxical position of subaltern women, caught between a modern world in terms of which their traditions seemingly render them passive objects, on the one hand, and traditions that seemingly make them agents, but only of their own suicide, on the other (Spivak 1988). Discussing the traditional Indian ritual of sati in which widows throw themselves on the burning funeral pyres of their husbands, Spivak shows how within the rhetoric of the traditionalists, these women were free agents who chose to burn themselves; but within the rhetoric of Western feminists, these women were victims of repressive and deadly patriarchal customs of a "backward" culture. The double-bind is that we don't want to perpetuate the stereotype that women are merely passive helpless victims who don't possess any agency of their own; but

at the same time, we don't want to embrace a practice that not only serves patriarchal inheritance laws but moreover kills women. So, which is it? Did these women jump on the burning pyres of their own free will, or did their culture push them, so to speak? On Spivak's analysis, it is precisely our stereotypes of women, and subaltern women in particular, that constructs this dilemma in which women have agency, but only the agency to kill themselves. In the case of women suicide bombers, we see a similar phenomenon. On the one hand, feminists want to insist that these women have agency, in this case powerful political agency with which to resist colonization. On the other hand, feminists want to insist that these women are pushed into a deadly suicidal position by forces of colonialism and patriarchy. In order to navigate this divide, we need rethink our notions of freedom and agency.

It is helpful to note that Kristeva's discussion of "amorous disasters" is embedded in her delineation of two pillars of peace that come from Kant's essay on "Perpetual Peace": "first, that of universality—*all men are equal* and all must be saved. Second is the principle of *protection of human life*, sustained by the love of the life of each" (Kristeva 2006; 2005: 424). She insists that although we are far from achieving economic justice for all, it is the second pillar and not the first that is in the most danger today: "Yet whatever the weaknesses, the efforts for realizing social, economic, and political justice have never in the history of humanity been as considerable and widespread. But it is the second pillar of the imaginary of peace that seems to me today to suffer most gravely: The love of life eludes us; there is no longer a discourse for it" (Kristeva 2006; 2005: 424–25). It is not just economic, racial, and religious inequalities that prevent peace, but also the lack of a discourse of the love of life. The culture of death fosters war over peace because we are losing the ability to imagine the meaning of life and thereby ways to embrace life. Life as amorous disaster is a result of women liberated from traditional roles that reduced the meaning of their lives to procreation, but without being able to create new justifications for life. Even as women and others gain the negative freedom from prohibitions, how do they gain the positive freedom to

create the meaning of their lives anew? What does their unique biological difference mean outside of a discourse that reduces them to procreation? How can their singularity be articulated in creative forms of representation that give meaning to their singularity beyond an economy of perversion that relegates difference to the realm of abjection through phobia or eroticization?

How can the cleavage between *zoë* and *bios*, between biological life and recounted life, between being and meaning, be repaired? How can we reintegrate law and desire to ensure meaningful rather than violent relations with others? When diagnosing the disintegration of the paternal law in relation to emotional life, Kristeva suggests that it is a matter of integration. But doesn't integration imply once again freedom as calculus, a culture or globe made whole through the integration of its parts? Perhaps instead we should conceive of the relationship between different elements as an interaction instead of integration. Kristeva suggests as much in her discussion of rights for the handicapped when she says "I distrust the term 'integration' of the handicapped: it feels like charity toward those who don't have the same rights of others. I prefer 'interaction' which expresses politics becoming ethics, by extending the political pact up to the frontiers of life" (2005: 102). In this regard, we should be mindful of at least two senses of "integration": the mathematical process of finding the solution of a differential equation or producing behavior compatible with one's environment, on the one hand, or opening society or culture to all without erasing their differences on the

other. We should be wary of the rhetoric of integration that proposes formal equality without giving meaning to the freedoms opened up by that equality. For, this notion of integration risks turning individuals into simple variables within an equation rather than acknowledging that it is their singularity that gives their lives meaning.

What is lacking or threatened by modern forms of perverse regression is not merely the integration of law into emotional life but any interaction between pleasure and joy. Bodily pleasures at the level of our physical existence are cut off from joy enabled by the realm of meaning. Joy is reduced to pleasures unto death because pleasure is cut adrift from meaning. We shop until we drop . . . or, we engage in dangerous practices of cutting, hanging, suffocation, etc. in order to feel something in our bodies . . . or we abuse, torture or kill others to ward off our own feelings of bodily vulnerability. Rather than circumscribe our bodies with meaning, contemporary versions of law have become techniques designed to manage, regulate, and spy in order to more efficiently contain. Within this military-industrial consumer culture, we mess around in the abject space between images and reality to the point of a perverse regression to infantile pleasures in sadomasochistic violence toward ourselves and others. Within this culture of spectacle and death, the only way to imagine sexual fulfillment and satisfaction with life is through possession and violence. When, like Mr. and Mrs. Smith, we can only imagine pleasure as brutalized bruised and bleeding bodies, perverse pleasure replaces passion for life.

TEXTS CITED

- Freud, Sigmund. 1989. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: Norton.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1998. *Visions Capitales*. Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux.
- . 2002. *The Portable Kristeva*. Ed. Kelly Oliver. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2005. *La haine et le pardon*. Paris: Fayard.
- . 2005a. "Thinking about Liberty in Dark Times," in *The Holberg Prize Seminar*, 2004. Bergen, Norway: Holberg Publications. This lecture, delivered in English, is the first chapter of *La haine et le pardon*, "Penser la liberté en temps de détresse."
- . 2006. "For Teresa," in *Living Attention*. Eds. Alice Jardine, Shannon Lundeen and Kelly Oliver. Trans. Shannon Hoff. Albany: SUNY Press. This chapter appears in French in *La haine et le pardon* (2005) as "Peut-on Faire La Paix?"
- Oliver, Kelly. 2004. *The Colonization of Psychic Space: Toward a Psychoanalytic Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Saffire, William. 2001. "Coordinates: The new location locution." *New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 28): 22.
- Sontag, Susan. 2004. "Regarding the Torture of Others." *New York Times Magazine* (May 23): 24.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 271–313.
- Victor, Barbara. 2003. *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Zernike, Kate. 2005. "Behind Failed Abu Ghraib Plea, A Tale of Breakups and Betrayal." *The New York Times* (May 10): A1 and A14.

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37240