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Frantz Fanon's "Torture Memo": A Reclamation of Identity and Morality
A New Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*

> "The most painful thing for the inmates there, were the cries of the people being tortured. One day, they brought sheets to cover the cell in order for no one to see anything. They began torturing one of them and we could hear what was happening. We listened as his soul cracked. The sound of his voice really twisted our minds and made our hearts stop. We later learned that this man was Manadel al-Jamadi."[1]
>
> – An Unidentified Iraqi Prisoner

Manadel al-Jamadi's name first became known at the outset of the Abu Ghraib torture and prison abuse scandal in Iraq in April of 2004. It was found that the cause of al-Jamadi's death was due to a torture method called "strappado," "reverse hanging," or the "Palestinian hanging" named after its use by Israeli soldiers on Palestinian prisoners.[2] The infamous picture taken of his frozen corpse next to the cheerful U.S. Army Specialists Charles Graner and Sabrina Harman who posed with "thumbs-up" expressions translates the violence of imperialistic ventures into a powerful and tragic image that captures what Frantz Fanon calls "a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity" (Fanon 2004: 182). The picture as such seemingly encapsulates contrasting emotions. On one side of the photograph, the image of a lifeless tortured body generates sadness and outrage. On the other, the soldiers radiate with effervescent and positive energies. At first, the contrast seems to imply a disconnection between the occupying forces and the occupied, a perpetrator and a victim, or perhaps even a rift between the physical act of violence and its psychological effect. However, the emotions of the soldiers are neither inherently distinct nor merely callous. Both the soldiers and the murdered Iraqi prisoner function within a power structure that redefines who they are. The picture is a mere display of the physical and psychological violence needed to sustain this power dynamic under the banner of "War on Terror." Together they collapse the Cartesian split between mind and body, and the physicality and psychology that Fanon discloses in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In his chapter on "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," Fanon analyzes the psychological effects of colonial wars in an effort to redress the negated self of the colonized. In so doing, he provides the space for "total liberation [that] involves every facet of the personality," and topples the oppressive colonial order (233). In the case of al-Jamadi and the prisoners who "listened as his soul-cracked" but managed to survive him, Fanon's political theories and psychoanalytic methodologies illuminate the pervasive struggle of reframing identity and morality through the practices and justifications of torture.

Fanon begins his chapter on "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" by introducing the "psychiatric phenomena, the mental and behavioral disorders emerging from this war" between colonialism and "genuine struggle for human liberation" (181). He then identifies colonialism as the "systematized negation of the other…[that] forces the colonized to constantly ask the question: 'Who am I in reality?'" (182). Here, he highlights the question of identity in the colonized subject. The examples of the psychological struggles and disorders that follow in his chapter often return to the question of obscured, depersonalized identities, and the constant reconfiguration of morality. Moreover, they emphasize both the stakes in the struggle for

liberation and the prices to be paid. For instance, Fanon recounts the story of a former fighter in an African resistance struggle who suffered from "insomnia together with anxiety attacks and obsession with suicide around a certain date of the year," during which he planted a bomb that killed ten people (184). These reactions are what Fanon calls "the price he had had to pay in his person for national independence" (185). Fanon not only conveys the prices that militants pay for liberation, but he also shows the level of the obscuration of identity and morality wrought on by the process of colonization and in return the struggle to decolonize.

In Fanon's study, the identity of the colonized subject can be obfuscated by an explicit act or trauma such as the man who observed twenty-nine men get executed at point-blank range and as a result became engulfed with fits of rage and paranoia of the French as disguised as Arabs (190). The distrust and weariness in this man is rooted in a discord of identity—or an inability to identify. Similarly, Iraqi prisoners who witnessed the shrieks of pain coming from al-Jamadi were left with their minds "twisted" by the sound of his voice. Although the physical violence is between al-Jamadi and his torturers, the psychological one resonates among the other prisoners. Thus, the order of power is established not only by an act of physical violence, but also by its resonating impact on the psyche of the occupied subjects and through the disintegration of their identities.

The photograph of Charles Graner and Sabrina Harman posing next to the body of al-Jamadi also carries several meanings with respect to identity. Primarily, it captures a power relation between the soldiers and prisoners. The picture is a mere snapshot of a setting for this relation that defines both parties through the roles they play in the imperial framework. For example, Fanon recalls the case of the French officer who runs into one of his victims at the hospital. The anxiety the French officer experiences after encountering his victim discloses a reality that is hidden in both the interrogation room as well as in the picture of the American soldiers and al-Jamadi. The absence of the site of power reveals the role that violence plays in defining the identity of the power-holder as well. The role that the location of power plays also suggests a systematization of violence in the private spaces. For instance, Fanon points to the French officer who begins to torture his wife and children after interrogating Algerian subjects. The violence that burgeons in closed and private spaces, such as the home or the interrogation room, infers the shift of identity in accordance with the site of power, and the absence of this setting collapses the dichotomy between the public and private identities of the torturer.

So far the issue of violence and torture has been discussed with regards to the witnessing of particular events. Fanon however also portrays the impact of torture itself in shaping morality. The first group Fanon discusses consists of torture methods that inflict direct pain on the body such as water-boarding, sexual violation, standing in muscle-straining positions as "forced immobility," and beating (208). The method from which al-Jamadi died was similarly a physical infliction of pain. In a recent article written by John Yoo—former Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Office of Legal Counsel of the Justice Department, Boalt Law School Professor, visiting scholar at American Enterprise Institute, and the author of the infamous "Torture Memo"—he points to Congress's definition of torture as: "Physical pain…[that is] equivalent in intensity to the pain accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death."[3] For al-Jamadi, the verdict on whether or not he was tortured lied in the tragic outcome, however, for others who have survived, Yoo declares

that "interrogation methods…[that] fall short of torture could include shouted questions, reduced sleep, stress positions, and isolation from other prisoners. The purpose of these techniques is not to inflict pain or harm, but simply disorient."[4] He further relies on "United States' understanding" of torture in the U.N. Convention Against Torture in 1994 as differentiating between "cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and torture" where the U.S. "clearly chose to criminalize only torture."[5] The nuances that Yoo suggests to defend these techniques generate a sense of moral ambiguity in the act of torture. Suddenly the injustice that Fanon points to is not merely the victim "having been tortured day in and day out for nothing," but rather one where the victim's experience of torture is erased and redefined by the perpetrator (210). Moreover, Yoo's disintegration of the moral argument ensures the reproduction of the power structure in the victim as "a tortured cause is a weak cause," and "power is the only thing that counts" (210).

Fanon's example of "psychological warfare" in the internment and brainwashing of intellectuals further illustrates the tractability of moral arguments in the colonial framework in Algeria. For instance, in forcing the intellectual to "give talks on the value of French accomplishments and merits," and "take the arguments for the Algerian Revolution and eliminate them one by one," the intellectual later "congratulate[s] himself on having played his role so well," but "perhaps nobody had been duped—neither his captors, nor his co-inmates, nor even himself" (215). The victim then "finds it impossible to explain and defend a given viewpoint. An anti-thetical thought process. Anything which is affirmed can be simultaneously denied with the same force" (215). The lack of certainty and incessant self-doubt erode the moral arguments against torture. For instance, when Yoo is asked whether or not he has "any moral qualms" over his defense of torture techniques in the "Torture Memo," he replies:

> I think there are some moral questions—it's not obvious to see where it goes—do you use interrogation methods against the guy who is the number three leader of the terrorist group which has shown that it could carry out devastating attacks on our country? You could say the moral question is you use these coercive measure but the other side of the moral question is the lives you might save by finding out what he knows.[6]

Yoo essentially reframes the question of morality from "is it moral to torture?" to "is it moral to *not* torture?" Without offering answers or alluding to any moral certainties, the constant shifting of the morality question does not merely infer a moral ambiguity in the oppressor's actions, it also demonstrates that these identities and moral quandaries are "a direct result of the [changing] colonial [and in the case of Iraq imperial] situation" (233).

Manadal al-Jamadi, Sabrina Harman, Charles Graner, John Yoo, and the Iraqi prisoners who are huddled in their cells haunted by the screams of tortured prisoners all exist within a structure of warfare that is entrenched with physical and psychological violence which in turn shapes identities and reframes morality. Fanon's journey into the psycho-affective realm contextualizes the actions and reactions of the individual in the larger setting. It not only highlights the violence of occupation, but also the violence of gaining freedom. He writes, "The ambush or the skirmish, the torture or the massacre of one's comrades entrenches the determination to win, revives the unconscious and nurtures the imagination" (233). Fanon thus

leads us on a poignant journey to reclaim dislocated identities and shaky moralities in order to retrieve power from colonial and imperial realities.

NOTES

[1] Rory Kennedy, dir., *Ghosts from Abu Ghraib*, HBO Home Video, 2007, film documentary.
[2] Jane Mayer, "A Deadly Interrogation: Can the C.I.A. Legally Kill a Prisoner?" *The New Yorker* (14 November 2005; Accessed on 19 May 2008); Available from http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/11/14/051114fa_fact?currentPage=all; Internet.
[3] John Yoo, "Behind the 'torture memos' As attorney general confirmation hearings begin for Alberto Gonzales, Boalt Law School professor John Yoo defends wartime policy," *UC Berkeley News Center* [Commentary on-line] (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 4 January 2005, accessed 19 May 2008); available from http://berkeley.edu/news/media/releases/2005/01/05_johnyoo.shtml; Internet.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] "'Torture Memo' Author John Yoo Responds to This Week's Revelations," *Esquire*, 3 April 2008 [magazine on-line]; available from http://www.esquire.com/the-side/qa/john-yoo-responds; Internet; accessed 19 May 2008.