Afterimages: White Womanhood, Lynching, and the War in Iraq

Shawn Michelle Smith

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Afterimages:

12:14 a.m., Nov. 8, 2003. SPC ENGLAND points to the penis of one of the detainees. (see www.salon.com).
White Womanhood, Lynching, and the War in Iraq

Shawn Michelle Smith

Private First Class Lynndie England emerged as the most salient figure in the U.S. media coverage of the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal. No one can forget the images of the woman holding the leash, or pointing to men's genitalia and signaling “thumbs-up.” As the Abu Ghraib photographs circulated globally and instantaneously on the World Wide Web, the infamous “hooded man” became the international icon of the anonymous Arab victim, and England, a white female soldier, became the international icon of the American torturer. England became the poster girl for the war gone wrong, and as such, she figured as the negative image of that other gendered symbol of the war, the heavily scripted hero, Jessica Lynch.

This essay examines the inverted pairing of images of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England in U.S. media coverage of the war in Iraq. Looking specifically at the ways in which white womanhood has figured in representations of the war, I investigate the gendered and racialized logics that have shaped responses to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in particular. I argue that the sensation occasioned by photographs of Lynndie England registered the return of a repressed afterimage from the American legacy of lynching.

If the afterimage is literally that which remains impressed on the retina when one closes one's eyes, the residue or trace of an image left after one has looked, then one might symbolically consider the afterimage the shadow of a previous spectacle. It is in this sense that the Abu Ghraib photographs function as afterimages of American lynching photographs. Part of their disruptive power lies in their strange familiarity, in the way they evoke lynching images, encouraging one to remember, and to see as linked, a long legacy of American violence. But another part of the shock of the Abu Ghraib images lies in the way they make manifest what was always repressed by the discourses surrounding lynching, namely the image of the sexually uncontrollable white woman with equivocal desires toward the dark male body. The photographs of England simultaneously recall a disturbing history and reveal what was obscured by the discourses of American lynching torture.

As afterimages, the Abu Ghraib photographs “return” saturated with gendered and racialized national logics that shape and inform the United States's international “war on terror.” While they disrupt visions of an American past, they also powerfully unsettle contemporary narratives that seek to justify the current war. If the “liberation” of Iraq (and Afghanistan) has been predicated, in part, on discourses of gender inequity in the Arab world, then American women must serve as exemplars of women's freedom, without, however, challenging a U.S. patriarchy. Jessica Lynch, figured as both a brave soldier and a damsel in distress, performed this function perfectly, but Lynndie England turned that...
spectacle inside out. As the international icon of the American torturer, England’s image ruptured narratives of U.S. “liberation” by revealing how discourses of gender and race have served American practices of torture and terror, past and present, at home and abroad.

Gendered Heroes and Horrors

The media images that celebrated Pfc. Jessica Lynch at war were carefully crafted and controlled to convey a specific message of gendered heroics. Lynch, an Army supply clerk in the 507th Maintenance Company, was injured near the city of Nasiriyah in Iraq on March 23rd, 2003, when her convoy was ambushed after straying off course. On April 1, 2003, U.S. Special Operations Forces recovered Lynch from a Nasiriyah hospital, apparently planning the documentation of the rescue with forethought as a usable photo-op for the Department of Defense. After her highly publicized rescue, Lynch became a complexly gendered national hero, both militarized and vulnerable, celebrated as a hometown, military, and media darling.

Initial reports of the ambush on Lynch’s convoy highlighted the soldier’s brave defensive maneuvers. Those stories were ultimately undermined by Lynch herself, however, when she revealed that her gun had jammed during the attack, and she was unable to fire her weapon. Faced with this narrative setback in its framing of an American hero, the Department of Defense quickly recuperated the story and renarrated it as the classic tale of a damsel in distress. In the military-media production of Jessica Lynch at war, her experiences ultimately could be reinscribed in a long-standing narrative tradition as those of the virtuous white woman who must be rescued from a dark enemy and avenged. Her inability to fire her weapon could readily be used to reinforce the historical logics of the white woman in distress. Even though a trained soldier, Lynch could be transformed into the time-honored vulnerable, victimized, blameless white woman, gendered symbol of (white) national virtue. The story of her capture, injury, and rescue could become calculated propaganda for the war.1

In the Department of Defense’s made-for-the-media rescue footage of Jessica Lynch, available on the Internet, eerie green images depict soldiers in fatigues and helmets carrying a stretcher. The details of faces and place are indiscernible, but the formal characteristics of the images are unmistakable: They are produced through a military night-vision video camera. As such, the images advertise their secret status; they recall covert military actions, even as they are produced and reproduced for a public gaze. The media framing of these images asserted that they depicted the dramatic rescue of a wounded war hero, Jessica Lynch. The footage epitomizes the viewing politics of propaganda, for in order to see them, one must literally look through military eyes, through the night-vision viewfinder of a U.S. soldier.

The words that Jessica Lynch has used to describe the media extravaganza that spun stories of her heroism and then dramatic rescue from Iraq — “they used me as a way to symbolize all this stuff” — could also be used to describe the vilification of her counterpart, of she who has been deemed the “anti-Jessica,” namely Lynndie England. England is best known, of course, for her role in the Abu Ghraib prison torture scandal. The infamous Abu Ghraib photographs were taken on seven days in October, November, and December of 2003. Many of them were made by Private Jeremy Sivits, the first U.S. soldier to be court martialed and imprisoned for mistreating Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib.2 The images were initially made public when aired by the CBS news program Sixty Minutes II on April 28, 2004. After their televised release, the photographs were reproduced in The Washington Post, and then in countless other news media, and circulated globally via the World Wide Web.3

If the spectacle of Jessica Lynch epitomized national propaganda, the unofficial photographs of Lynndie England and other U.S. soldiers inflicting torture on prisoners at Abu Ghraib dramatically disrupted the official images of patriotic display. In one of the photographs, Lynndie England poses in front of a group of naked male Iraqi “detainees.” The men, with stiff green bags covering their heads, are lined up against the wall of a drab institutional hall in Abu Ghraib prison; they cover their genitals with their hands. One has been singled out from the row; he stands slightly forward, his body outlined by the harsh light and shadows produced by a flash. England, dressed in army fatigue, lurches toward this naked man, her leering mouth clenching a cigarette. With one hand she signals thumbs-up, and with the other cocked like a gun she points at his genitals. Through the blur of a censoring edit one can just barely discern that the man has been forced
to masturbate. An unofficial military image leaked to the U.S. press, this photograph, and others like it, became the most public of images from the war in Iraq, circulating globally to an international audience on the World Wide Web.

The impact of the Abu Ghraib images was widespread, and led to international protests in which much of the focus centered on the images of England torturing and degrading inmates. In an article for *Time* magazine, Claudia Wallis declared: “Perhaps the single most shocking thing about the images from Abu Ghraib prison is the woman in so many of the pictures. . . . It’s the all-American face of Private First Class Lynndie England. The girl next door, a Jessica Lynch gone wrong.”

The Abu Ghraib torture photographs are disturbing for any number of reasons, most obviously, of course, for the torture they depict. Therefore, I am curious about an American audience’s particular shock at seeing “the woman” in the pictures — Why was Lynndie England’s presence — as a woman — so uniquely offensive to an American audience (to say nothing of an Arab audience)?

In Wallis’s response to the images one can measure a U.S. audience’s shock at seeing the woman in the photographs. Wallis is not reacting to England’s presence in the images from the point of view of her victims; in other words, she is not here suggesting that the shame and humiliation of sexual exposure used to torture Iraqi male prisoners was heightened, for the Iraqi men, by the presence of a female viewer. Instead, Wallis is noting “our” shock, and suggesting that for viewers in the United States the horror of the images is heightened by the fact of the soldier’s womanhood. And Wallis is not alone in her response to these images; she is, in fact, registering a broad reaction. Katha Pollitt also notes that such response was widespread in the United States, as she imagines a nation wedded to the idea of American exceptionalism asking: “What, Americans commit atrocities? Our boys! Our girls!”

In a companion essay to Wallis’s story for *Time* magazine, an article titled “The Rules of Interrogation,” Amanda Ripley quotes an unnamed “U.S. Army official” who declares: “When women have power and control over you, that sets the male psyche out of equilibrium.” The official goes on to say: “It’s not for the squeamish. But the typical Arab male will do anything to avoid it.” In his statements, the Army official directs attention to the specific context of the Abu Ghraib prison, surmising that the presence of a woman at the scene of an Iraqi man’s sexual humiliation might have particular force for Iraqi victims and viewers. But the official’s statements do not begin focused on that specific cultural context. The initial comments cast a much wider web — “When women have power and control over you” — meaning when women have power and control over me, a male U.S. Army official — it “sets the male psyche out of equilibrium.” “It’s not for the squeamish” — meaning it would be tough on any(male)body, even though it may (or may not) be especially difficult for Arab men. Male dominance is still so pervasively, if uneasily, ingrained in U.S. culture (and especially in U.S. military culture) that the mere fact of a woman having power and control over a man is enough to radically disturb the male psyche — such a gender dynamic is itself a form of torture.

In the widespread denunciations of Lynndie England that followed the circulation of the Abu Ghraib photographs, commentators clearly responded to and rejected the torture in which she participated, but in so doing they also expressed unresolved anxieties about the role of women in the military. If “our girls” were capable of torturing, was military service perverting their proper femininity? Those anxieties were heightened by the sexual nature of the torture depicted, and by the stories of England’s own sexual escapades. The Abu Ghraib images that feature England are sexually explicit, and some, such as the infamous leash photograph, draw on S&M themes in their choreography of humiliation. Unreleased photographs purportedly show England engaged in sexual acts with her superior, Charles A. Graner Jr., and England became pregnant while serving in Iraq. All told, England’s behavior could be used to reinforce an often-rehearsed objection to women in the military, namely, that such inclusion can only lead to one thing — sex.

**Double Negatives**

Separated by more than a year, the stories of Lynch and England were nevertheless paired after the revelation of the Abu Ghraib images. The May 25, 2004 cover of RedEye, the *Chicago Tribune’s* newspaper for young adults, effectively encapsulated the ways in which Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England were conjoined as inverted images of women at war in the wake of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. The cover features headshots of Lynch and England torn from
GOOD GIRL, BAD GIRL
Lynch and England have it...
formal portraits that show the women dressed in army fatigues and uniforms, posed in front of the American flag. The roughly “cropped” headshots are placed side by side, just overlapping, a proximity that highlights the contrasting expressions on their faces. Lynch looks directly at the camera, and thus out at viewers, a smile brightening her face and exposing her perfect teeth. In contrast, England’s emotionless eyes stare out to the side of the frame, seeming to avoid eye contact, and the lack of expression on her face makes her seem sullen or simply blank. The caption to this doubled image reads: “Good Girl, Bad Girl: Lynch and England have become symbols of the Iraq war and the role women are playing in it.”

Visual pairings of the two young women soldiers abounded in the summer of 2004. On May 28, Reuters circulated images of Lynch and England with the caption: “The vividly contrasting images of American soldiers Jessica Lynch (Top R) and Lynndie England (Bottom L), one portrayed as a heroic victim and the other as depraved villain, symbolize the souring of U.S. opinion of the Iraq war, experts say.” In the top image, Lynch, strapped into a car seat, reaches out of the open door to shake the hand of a young admirer. She beams at the girl, as an older woman looks on, smiling, from the back seat. Although Lynch is distinguished in the group by her formal military uniform, the image presents a triangle of white female gazes in which blond women openly express their mutual admiration for one another. In the bottom image, England stands in what is presumably a hallway at Abu Ghraib prison. With her left hand she holds a leash attached to the neck of a naked man lying on his side on the concrete floor. The leash runs at a diagonal line directly parallel to Lynch’s seatbelt in the image above, further encouraging a comparison of the two paired images. As Lynch becomes the icon of hometown hero, England becomes the icon of international torturer.

The striking similarity in the personal histories of the two women seemed only to reinforce the symmetry whereby one became the inverse of the other, the dark flipside of the same coin. They are both from tiny towns in West Virginia, both from white working-class families, and both entered the service in the hopes of paying for their education. Indeed, if we read the RedEye cover from left to right, and the Reuters pairing from top to bottom, in both cases we have a visual narrative in which the smiling Lynch serves as a “before” to the “after” of the sullen England. The good girl is closely entwined to her bad girl inverse, and one can readily become the other.

The Legacy of Lynching

Lynch and England are heirs to a long-standing American tradition whereby “good” white women have been called upon to represent the virtues of their race and nation, and “bad” white women have been condemned as vicious villains. In the days of the early Republic (the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries), white women were posed as the moral foundation of the nation, the first educators and molders of patriotic sons who would go on to shape the institutions of the country. First positioned as largely spiritual influences, white women were reconceived as the physical bearers of a racialized white Americanness over the course of the nineteenth century. By the beginning of the twentieth century, under the pressures of increased immigration and the growing popularity of eugenics, white (“native” born, Anglo-Saxon) women’s sexual reproduction was construed as essential to the stability of the nation. The regeneration of national character would be the literal gift of her bloodlines.

Within these powerful discourses, white womanhood was figured as the pure and innocent fount of the white race and nation. Popular eugenicists, armed with a scientific discourse of white supremacy, deplored the tendency of elite white women to seek schooling instead of motherhood during their reproductive prime. They encouraged middle- and upper-class white women to reproduce prolifically to ensure the dominance of the white race. Thus, while eugenics “elevated” white women to a place of extreme importance in the reproduction of the race, it also provided a discourse whereby white women’s lives and sexual activities could be scrutinized and critiqued.

As pure white womanhood was invoked as a symbol of racial and national virtue, her inverted shadow, the sexually promiscuous white woman, had to be held in check, her disruptive powers repressed. As white women were figured as the literal and symbolic reproducers of a racialized nation, their sexuality had to be rigorously monitored and controlled.
Such discourses were especially salient in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century rhetoric surrounding lynching, a white supremacist form of torture that sought to consolidate white nationalism in the context of an internal struggle over racialized national belonging in the post-Reconstruction United States.

In the history of lynching, white womanhood served as the symbolic banner under which the murder of men and women of color was condoned. In this white nationalist form of terrorism, the fury of a white mob was most often raised with the call to protect white women from the advances of African American men, depicted as rapists. Indeed, as antilynching activist Ida B. Wells demonstrated in the 1890s, the rhetoric of rape and revenge was so widespread, and so effective in converting murder into a form of “justified” retribution in the eyes of legal authorities and a wider (white) public, that the cry of rape eventually could simply be assumed as the explanation for lynching.1

Several complicated cultural legacies converged to make the discourse of rape and retribution surrounding lynching so powerful. In the antebellum South, access to the bodies of women, both white and black, had long been a privilege exercised by the white men of the planter class, and that privilege served as a sign of a Southern white patriarchy’s economic, legal, and social ascendancy. In the post-Reconstruction South, as African American men gained social, economic, and legal power, despite disfranchisement and segregation, the threat they posed to a white patriarchal power structure was symbolically figured through their newly imagined access to the bodies of white women.2 In other words, white anxieties about a shifting social and economic terrain were translated into sexual fears and apprehensions concerning reproduction. The bodies of white women could symbolically serve as the ground on which white men staked what they claimed to be exclusive privileges. Thus, the idea of African American men raping white women, the imagination of that rape, could tap broad cultural anxieties in white communities.3

Raising the cry of interracial rape, the lynching mob deemed white women in need of white male protection, while simultaneously schooling white women in the unspoken but visibly manifest dangers they might incur in loving black men. The mob’s fury over interracial sex also resonated with eugenicists’ warnings about the dangers of miscegenation, which they claimed always corrupted the superior (Anglo-Saxon) racial “stock.” By proclaiming to protect white womanhood, the lynching mob could imagine itself defending a white patriarchy, the white race, and a white nation.

As several commentators have noted, the Abu Ghraib images recall the photographs of lynching.4 They shock because they show the perpetrators of crimes, of torture and murder, posing with their victims, taking pleasure in their brutality, and assuming an audience of sympathetic viewers. As in lynching photographs, the unabashed presence of the torturers in the Abu Ghraib images suggests their blatant disregard for the law, and their assumption of immunity from the law. In both cases, the fact of the photographs attests to the self-righteousness of the torturers.

In one of the widely reproduced Abu Ghraib images, seven naked men with stiff green bags covering their heads are stacked in an awkward pyramid. Behind them Specialist Sabrina Harman crouches down, positioning her beaming face at the apex of the human pile; she signals thumbs-up at the camera. Behind her, Specialist Charles A. Graner stands with his arms crossed, signaling thumbs-up with one of his green-gloved hands, his face broken into a broad grin. A “reverse shot” photograph of the pyramid reveals how exposed the victims are, and in this context Graner’s gloved hands seem particularly menacing. Behind this sadistic grouping, a heap of clothes, presumably those of the naked men, stretches along the right side of a wide hallway divided by the bars of a prison gate.

Placed in personal digital archives beside novelty images of camel rides and tourist attractions, the torture images functioned as souvenirs for the soldiers.5 A pile of naked men became something “fun” to pose behind. The images might have been intended as digital postcards for friends and family back home. Just as lynching photographs were taken and circulated for pleasure and the perpetuation of power, reinforcing a white supremacist community of like-minded individuals, the very fact of the Abu Ghraib photographs suggests that the perpetrators felt justified in their actions, and that they assumed an audience of others who would share their views.

Like the lynchers who came before them, the smiling soldiers at Abu Ghraib are not performing a “grim duty,” and they are not afraid of being caught
in the act. They do not feel that their performance needs to be obscured by intense secrecy. The men and women posing and performing for the camera did not perceive that the images could be used as evidence against them. Either they did not perceive their activities to be criminal, or they believed themselves to be above the law. The grins and cocky performances for the camera make clear that the photographs were “authorized,” at least in the minds of the perpetrators they depict.

The soldiers who participated in the torture of Iraqi prisoners and other commentators have suggested that one of the aims of taking the photographs was to further humiliate the Iraqis, threatening them explicitly and implicitly with blackmail, through the potential for further exposure to a broader audience. According to a government consultant interviewed by Seymour Hersh, “It was thought that some prisoners would do anything — including spying on their associates — to avoid dissemination of the shameful photos to family and friends.”

Taking cues once again from the archive of American lynching photographs, one can infer that the images were meant to be circulated to Iraqi...
viewers as a threat, to spread terror and fear to an ever wider audience of Iraqi men. Here, then, the visual archive was conceptualized and used as a weapon.

As Mark Danner has argued, “the ubiquitous digital camera with its inescapable flash” became the “ultimate third party,” “there to let the detainee know that the humiliation would not stop when the act itself did but would be preserved into the future in a way that the detainee would not be able to control.”18 In other words, the photographs were an important part of the torture process. In several of the images, a soldier with a digital camera, making and reviewing images, is caught in the snapshot made by another soldier. In these images, the role of photography in the ritual of torture is documented and made manifest. Just as photography became integral to the ritual of lynching, photography was central to the torture at Abu Ghraib.

In this context, the famous image of the hooded man takes on new resonance. In black robes, the figure becomes the dark inverse of a white-cloaked Ku Klux Klan member. Rendered in bold black strokes against a field of white in Richard Serra’s Stop Bush print, the figure is transformed into an ominous apparition that appears to be reaching toward the viewer, threatening attack.18 A repressed image of racialized violence has returned to haunt the national scene.

The legacy of lynching also explains the sexual nature of the torture at Abu Ghraib. Several commentators have noted how the low-resolution, amateurish images of naked bodies posed in sexually explicit positions recall the imagery of “gonzo porn,” a genre of pornography “marked by handheld cameras, the illusion of spontaneity and a low-tech aesthetic meant to suggest reality.”19 Indeed, the Abu Ghraib images of torture were conceived and orchestrated as spectacles of pornography. But these particular pornographic images are also informed by the racialized sexual logics of lynching torture, in which the emasculation of men of color was central to the ritual. Lynching often included both stripping and castrating the victim, brutally displaying white supremacists’ desire to control and contain the symbolic locus of African American manhood. Indeed, if lynching displayed the power of a white mob over the black body, that spectacle was focused fetishistically on genitalia as the site of power.20 As rape was the call that incited the white supremacist mob, castration of the fantasized black rapist was the retribution the mob sought. Much of the torture depicted in the Abu Ghraib images also focuses on male genitalia as the site of masculine power, and soldiers exert control over Iraqi men by forcing them to simulate sexual acts and to masturbate. As Lynndie England points at a penis and signals thumbs-up in a number of the photographs, she revels in her power and control over the Iraqi male body, taking pleasure in her symbolic emasculation of Iraqi men.

Afterimages
In the twinned stories of Lynch and England, we see a cultural anxiety surfacing, a return of the repressed, an afterimage of the legacy of lynching. For in the historical rhetoric surrounding lynching, white women could only be used to symbolize racial and national purity when they could be controlled, when their actions, and most importantly their sexuality, could be effectively harnessed to such narratives. Indeed, in the discourses surrounding lynching, actual white women were best kept hidden. They might be displayed as eroticized victims to be avenged, and they might witness and participate in lynchings, but white women functioned foremost as symbolic subjects on whose behalf terror was perpetuated.

In the context of lynching, the signifier of “pure white womanhood” always exceeded its signifieds, remaining ultimately out of reach of those who would shelter themselves under its shadow. Rehearsed discourses of “pure white womanhood” served to mask white patriarchal anxiety, for could white nationalists ever really be certain of their control over white women’s sexuality? At the height of lynching in the United States, Ida B. Wells tapped that anxiety, declaring, “Nobody in this section believes the old thread-bare lie that Negroes assault white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”21 For this statement, Wells’s newspaper offices were burnt to the ground, a lynche mob was sent for her, and she was not able to return safely to the South for decades. Through the hysterical reaction to Wells’s commentary one can measure how closely intertwined have been the images of the pure white woman as victim and the sexually adventurous white woman as villain. Precisely as white, patriarchal, national honor is
draped on the shoulders of “pure white womanhood,” the specter of the sexually uncontrollable white woman looms large.

As white womanhood was posed as an icon of national virtue, women of color were erased as victims and victors on the national scene. Such erasure continues today, for as Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England functioned as spectacles of national fascination, women soldiers of color remained relatively absent from the national spotlight. Take the example of Shoshana Johnson as a case in point. Spc. Shoshana Johnson was a member of the Army’s 507th Maintenance Company, and along with Jessica Lynch, she was ambushed and captured near Nasiriyah in Iraq on March 23, 2003. Johnson became the first African American woman prisoner of war, and she was held captive for twenty-one days until U.S. Marines rescued her and several of her comrades. But Johnson failed to receive the same kind of media fanfare that greeted her blond colleagues. As one commentator noted, “Only Lynch got the headlines, the TV movie, the prime-time television interviews and a biography written by a Pulitzer Prize–winning writer.” The relative lack of media coverage of Johnson’s heroics may be due in part to what one might variously call her shyness, her tact, or her dignity, for as Nadra Kareem reports, there was at least a momentary media frenzy when Johnson and her colleagues returned to El Paso, Texas. Or, in the end, the relative inattention Johnson finally received may have been a matter of racism. As a thirty-year-old African American single mother, she did not neatly fit the whitewashed iconography of womanhood; she did not register within the racialized national archive bequeathed by lynching.

Despite the fact that her image quickly faded from the national spotlight, Johnson did receive a hero’s welcome and reception in Ebony magazine, one of the premier African American popular media sources, as well as within some prominent African American organizations such as the NAACP. In the August 2003 issue of Ebony, photographs show Johnson being escorted by U.S. marines to a transport plane at the time of her rescue, as she is being honored by Congressman Elijah Cummings at a tribute by the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington, D.C., as photographed with U.S. Representative Diane Watson, and at a “Free At Last” celebration in Los Angeles. According to Ebony magazine, Representative Watson organized a whirlwind tour of Los Angeles for Johnson in part because she was disturbed to see some of the other former POWs “getting accolades but not Shoshana.” Except for the photograph showing her rescue, all of the other images presented in Ebony situate Johnson as the hero at African American-sponsored events and celebrations. In other words, Johnson received a “hero’s welcome” within the African American media, and within African American communities, even as she was largely effaced within a predominantly white national media. Johnson’s simultaneous visibility and invisibility in different media contexts highlights the extent to which the national archive remains segregated in the United States.

Other women of color also remain invisible in the war imagery from Iraq. In the Abu Ghraib photographs the spectacular presence of white women torturers and sexually victimized Iraqi men obscures the place of Iraqi women in the U.S. administration’s justifications for the war. In other words, while Iraqi women are absent from the current spectacle of torture, their presence nevertheless haunts these images. In rhetoric that was particularly pronounced during the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, and which has continued to echo in the war in Iraq, President Bush proclaimed that the U.S. military was “liberating” Muslim women from the oppression they suffered at the hands of religiously conservative Muslim men. Reconfiguring the gendered and racialized lynching discourse whereby white men are said to protect white women from black men, the President’s war rhetoric proclaims that American soldiers will save Iraqi women from Iraqi men. This new gendered and racialized rhetoric is further complicated, however, by the fact that many American soldiers are women.

The military-media spectacle of Jessica Lynch as heroic victim carefully balanced the two competing representational strategies at play surrounding white women in the war. She was “liberated” as a soldier in the armed forces, but nevertheless vulnerable as a woman among men. The spectacle of her rescue worked to recode the American military as the masculine rescuer of women, both American and Iraqi. In this context, the shocking images of Lynndie England as American torturer disrupted racialized patriarchal ambitions both at home and abroad. The photographs of England showed that “liberators” were also torturers, that “liberated” white
American women were “free” to torture like men, and that the actions of white women could not be contained through a national rhetoric of their purity and vulnerability. In the photographs of England, the repressed flipside of the national icon of the pure white woman raised it’s ugly head and signaled “thumbs-up.”

The sexually adventurous Lynndie England, who has sex at will and takes pleasure in the humiliation and torture of dark men, demonstrates how easily a good white girl can “go bad,” exposing the instability of discourses of national virtue founded on the “purity” of white womanhood. England illustrates what has always been the (unacknowledged) case — the image of white womanhood cannot be fully controlled or contained. That racial gender representation has long functioned as a political construct that disciplines American white women in service to a narrative and program of racialized national violence. But Jessica Lynch can become Lynndie England. Indeed, she almost did. If it were not for the “gentlemanly,” “patriotic” restraint of Larry Flynt, photographs of Lynch’s own sexual escapades in the military might grace the pages of Hustler magazine. The pinnacle of white American pride, the pure white woman, can easily transmute into the sexually promiscuous white woman, and like Lynndie England, she may have her own sadistic desires toward the dark male body.

Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England revive after-
images of a long-standing national visual archive. Even though they are American soldiers, actors in a national military drama, they nevertheless continue to function as symbols of a racialized and gendered national mythology. Lynch represents the gendered epitome of national virtue, the white woman in distress, while England represents the repressed flipside of that iconic virtue made manifest. Appearing at her initial court hearings eight-months pregnant in military fatigues, Lynndie England embodied, quite literally, a long legacy of national anxiety.\textsuperscript{30} Historically, in the logics of lynching, controlling the white woman’s reproductive capacity was imperative if she was to be heralded as the foundation of a white race and nation. The image of a pregnant England suggested that the reproduction of the nation, both literally and figuratively, was out of control. The United States could no longer claim to contain its “liberated” women, either at home or abroad, and white womanhood could no longer be figured as the fount of democracy as a white woman became the emblem of the American torturer in the war on terror.

I presented earlier versions of this essay to several different audiences whose engaging questions helped shape its final form: Gender and History Workshop, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; American Studies Colloquium, Saint Louis University; College of Mass Communication and Media Arts Colloquium,

11:27 p.m., Nov. 7, 2003. The detainees were brought into the hard site for their involvement in a riot. The seven detainees were flexi cuffed and thrown into a pile on the floor. Soldiers then jumped on the pile, stomped on their hands and feet. PFC ENGLAND stated she posed for this photo. (see www.salon.com).
YORK: PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2004), pp. 36-38. The images were conducted by the U.S. Army’s Criminal Investigation Division. That investigation was instigated by Specialist Joseph M. Darby, who secured two CDs of digital photographs from his status as a torturer of Iraqi men, it is important that its effectiveness as a torturer of Iraqi men, it is important that England’s actions be measured and condemned in the United States according to her status as a woman.

Shawn Michelle Smith is Associate Professor of Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Notes
5 I would like to make clear that I think Lynndie England’s actions as documented in the photographs, and those of her colleagues, and the commanders who authorized or indirectly condoned those actions, or simply failed to stop them, are absolutely reprehensible. But while the fact of her womanhood may (or may not) have played a central role in her effectiveness as a torturer of Iraqi men, it is important that England’s actions be measured and condemned in the United States according to her status as a soldier and not according to her status as a woman.
17 Danner 2004, p. 72.  
26 I would like to thank Jonathan Smith for his insights along these lines.  
27 Takacs 2005, p. 300. In several speeches President Bush argued that U.S. military action has made life better for Afghani women and girls, as well as for women throughout the Middle East. He consistently cited Afghan girls attending school and their mothers living free from the fear of public whippings in "the public square" and executions in "sports stadiums" at the hands of the "backward" Taliban as evidence of the liberating power of U.S. military might. In comments made to Senior Floridians at Daytona Beach International Airport on January 30, 2002, President Bush proclaimed, "There’s nothing that makes me more joyous than to know our great military have been liberators; liberators of oppressed women and children, liberating people from the clutches of one of the most barbaric regimes in the history of mankind." In his remarks at the Victory 2004 Rally in Holland, Michigan on September 13, 2004, the President declared: "I believe women in the Middle East long for a day of their freedom."
28 Kumar, 2004.  
30 Pfc. Lynndie England was sentenced to three years in prison and given a dishonorable discharge from the Army. Josh White, "Reservist Sentenced to 3 Years for Abu Ghraib Abuse," washingtonpost.com, September 28, 2005.