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Book Review
**Fallgirls: Gender and the Framing of Torture at
Abu Ghraib**
By
Ryan Ashley Caldwell

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“Truth,” Edward Said writes in *Orientalism* (1978), “becomes a function of learned judgment, not of the material itself.” The ways by which “truth” is ascertained, circulated, constructed, challenged, and obscured are arguably the central analytical concern of Ryan Ashley Caldwell’s *Fallgirls*, an examination of the court proceedings of Sabrina Harman, one of several military personnel indicted in association with the sexual and psychological torture of Iraqi men at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. Through an ethnographic account of the court martial of Harman, Caldwell addresses how power operates with regard to gender in the military and within the frequently anomic conditions of conflict. The latter environment and its permutations of power profoundly influence the way in which bodies, as gendered, racialized, and imprisoned, are policed. The residue of this power, Caldwell argues, blemished the popular discourse surrounding the release of the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs and, most egregiously, remained operative in the very conspiratorial prosecution of lower-status personnel despite evidence that military and political elites were themselves aware of, if not complicit in, the abuse.

Caldwell terms Harman a “fallgirl,” “a person of feminine gender who is used as a scapegoat or easy victim to take the blame for someone else’s actions or an individual said to ‘take the fall’ in terms of responsibility for another’s exploits,” a characterization standing in stark contrast to the U.S. federal prosecution’s nomination of her as one among a select few “rotten apples.” By juxtaposing variations of these terms throughout the text, Caldwell details sociologically the

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course of Harman's descent into social scorn and, ultimately, criminal culpability. The author organizes her discussion of the relationship between military, gender, and sexuality into six chapters that concern, respectively, the gender-biased tradition of psychological analyses, including that of Milgram and Zimbardo, of social behavior and authority; the association between rationality/bureaucracy with masculinity and irrationality/chaos with femininity and their implications for an Abu Ghraib environment that patently lacked characteristics of the former; an application of Talcott Parsons' notion of instrumental and expressive roles to gender in the military; the affinity between and analytical utility of Jean Baudrillard's and Judith Butler's notions of signification, power, and gender in examining torture practices at Abu Ghraib; and the importance of according attention to context in examining photography and image production. The final chapter features an interview transcript of a conversation that took place in 2007 between the author and Harman. Among the concluding arguments made by Caldwell is that the torture at Abu Ghraib was "ordered and orchestrated by male soldiers in an attempt to reify the masculine role of power" (162).

An interesting organizational quality of the book is the alternation between these chapters and selected excerpts from court testimony, that of military personnel as well as expert witnesses, and Harman's personal correspondence. This creative arrangement between text and testimony reiterates for the reader the context for the analysis and subtly renders the reader judge vis-à-vis the scholarly production itself.

Among the particularly insightful and unique aspects of Caldwell's contribution is her insistence on situating her analysis within a "critical power perspective" and her methodological prowess in examining a host of documents heretofore made unavailable to the public including sworn statements, additional photographs taken at Abu Ghraib prison, and court martial transcripts. By grounding her analysis in these empirical documents, Caldwell attempts to make public what has been (purposely) undisclosed. What does remain disconcertingly silent in this account, however, is a forthright discussion on the part of the author of her positionality in this research endeavor as well as some engagement with critical perspectives on race and ethnicity or the anthropology of violence.

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The editor, Stjepan G. Mestrovic, also her intellectual mentor and colleague, indicates in the preface that Caldwell was a member of the defense teams of the two female soldiers, Harman and Lynndie England, charged in connection to the Abu Ghraib abuse. This is the only occasion that such information is provided to the reader. A more sustained discussion of the context that preceded this book's construction is imperative both academically and ethically.

As a project located at what Caldwell terms an "intersection of sociology, social and cultural theory, women's studies, and critical theory," she attends most artfully to debates within the sociology of gender. However, relatively absent in her discussion is any work on post-colonial critical race theory, the anthropology of violence, or cultural studies analyses that have also addressed the abuse that transpired at Abu Ghraib. These perspectives would have equipped her to more adequately attend to two relations that are important to consider when examining gender and violence at Abu Ghraib: 1) the inversed power relation women did have over men (courtesy of the guard-prisoner arrangement) and 2) the competing masculinities within the context of the prison (between male American prison guards and male Iraqi prisoners) and the undeniable valence of imperial conquest such interaction assumes. Caldwell addresses briefly the former in a footnote (67) whereas, in her discussion of Abu Ghraib torture in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir Puar draws on Veena Das' notion of violence as a form of sociality to specifically argue that "women are not only the recipients of violence, but are actually connected to it and benefit from forms of violence in a myriad of ways, regardless of whether or not they are the perpetrators of violence themselves" (90). To focus solely on the power women *didn't* have in these contexts neglects another glaring form of marginality, which is the way in which the "ArabMuslimSouthAsian" body, and its oft-presumed sexual perversity, is rendered a paradigmatic object of torture. A discussion of masculinity itself requires a more nuanced analysis than overtures that "Iraqi masculinity" is particularly offended by homoeroticism and drag (61, 73, 126), which overextends the culturally specific character of torture and invites the question, what socially constructed masculinity *wouldn't* be compromised by forced masturbation and homoerotic postures? Outside of the context of trials that assign guilt or innocence, isn't a

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critical reflexivity about the power one possesses, and not simply the power one is denied, necessary?

Abu Ghraib prison prior to the American military invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a modern prison complex constructed by British contractors in the 1960s and a torture site of political prisoners deemed threatening to Saddam Hussein's regime. The circularity and continuity of the violence to which it was witness is the paradox of this most sordid affair as is the persistent omission of Iraqi experience in these discussions, the only bodies that have been the prison's unremitting tenants. The complex gender analysis eruditely crafted by Caldwell inaugurates what will hopefully become a series of critical analyses of this brutally orchestrated violence.

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