

Grave Misgivings: Allegory, Catharsis, Composition

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2006

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‘There is nothing to conceal or apologize for in the Wounded Knee Battle – beyond the killing of a wounded buck by a hysterical recruit. The firing was begun by the Indians and continued until they stopped – with the one exception noted above.’

General E.D. Scott, US Congressional Investigation into the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre

‘The criminal acts of a few stand in stark contrast to the high professionalism, competence and moral integrity of countless active, Guard and Army Reserve soldiers that we encountered in this investigation.’

Major General Antonio M. Taguba, US Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on abuse at Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib Prison, 2004

‘Most photographers are aware of the phenomenon of the ‘third effect’: two images side by side tend to generate meanings not produced by either image on its own.’

Victor Burgin, *Camerawork*, 1976

Introduction

On 3 January 1891 commercial photographer George E. Trager captured images of the aftermath of a massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Six days after the US Army’s Seventh Cavalry had opened fire on more than 300 Lakota refugees encamped along Wounded Knee Creek, Trager photographed the frozen Lakota corpses where they fell and, later, had the Army’s burial detail pose as they completed the work of interring them in a mass grave. Widely circulated and collected in the manner of contemporary trading cards, the Wounded Knee photographs expressed an epic confrontation between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’ shot through with constructions of a valorized moral Self as against a dangerous, fearsome, and depraved Other. Without readily betraying Trager’s deliberate acts of composition, they (re)confirmed the assignment of particular kinds of people to their apposite places, containing the chaos of the massacre (embodied in the figures of corpses frozen into grotesque poses) within the rigid confines of the mass grave and juxtaposing it to the orderliness of the soldiers posing alongside.

Coming at the close of the so-called ‘Indian Wars,’ Trager’s photographs described the outcome of civilization’s confrontation with savagery in allegorical and cathartic terms. In this sense, they enacted a heroic narrative to which Euro-American society could lay claim and with which it could triumphantly identify. More than a century later, widely disseminated photos of US soldiers engaged in the arrangement of bodies in Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib Prison has had the opposite effect, giving rise to crisis in their disruption of prevailing moral encodings. Whereas

Trager's photographs worked to sustain stable definitions of moral 'civilization' and 'savage' depravity, the images from Abu Ghraib have had a profoundly destabilizing effect that has necessitated their reduction to 'the acts of a few individuals.' In what follows, I consider these differing effects with reference to the popular functions of allegory and catharsis and, in particular, through an exploration of the details of photographic composition and how, read in different contexts, it variously affects pronouncements upon danger and heroism, control and victimization. Critically at stake in these readings is the moral legitimacy not only of the events captured by the camera, but of the broader interplays of domination and resistance of which they are, by dint of their notoriety, made to be crucial moments. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to sketch something more of the context of the Wounded Knee photographs.

Selling Wounded Knee

When George (Gustave) Trager arrived at the site of the Wounded Knee massacre he was already well acquainted with life at and around Pine Ridge Agency, the US Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) administrative seat on the reservation of the Oglala Lakota people.¹ Born in Gefell, Germany in 1861, he had emigrated to the United States with his family and settled in Wisconsin where he studied photography in the early-1880s and later met Fred Kuhn, also a photographer and eventually Trager's business partner (Carter, 1991: 40). Trager arrived in Chadron, Nebraska in late-1889, purchased a failed art gallery and, together with Kuhn, opened a photographic studio. Unfortunately for the two entrepreneurs, portraiture was a luxury few locals could afford as a combination of high interest rates, low crop prices, and poor rainfall wrought economic depression throughout the region (Carter, 1991: 43). And so, taking advantage of popular fascination with the 'Frontier', Trager and Kuhn expanded their business to include landscape photographs with quintessentially 'Western' content for which a much wider market could be had. Nearby Pine Ridge Agency offered all that had appealed to popular imaginaries about drama and adventure on the Northern Plains at least since the 1876 destruction of George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry in an abortive attack on a sprawling Lakota and Cheyenne encampment at the storied Battle of the Little Big Horn. Through the autumn of 1890 Trager made numerous trips to Pine Ridge, capturing images of the landscape, soldiers, and, of course, Lakota people (Mitchell, 1989: 303).

Given his reasons for going to Pine Ridge, Trager's timing could not have been more auspicious as growing anxiety over a new Plains phenomenon, the Ghost Dance, was increasingly finding its way into newspaper headlines as far away as New York City. The central rite of a new hybrid faith combining Indigenous traditions with eschatological aspects of Christianity, the Ghost Dance was performed in the belief that a Messiah would soon appear to bring back the buffalo herds decimated by Euro-American hunters and restore the continent to its original human inhabitants. Seizing on the promise of a sensational story, Eastern newspapers read ominous portent into the Ghost Dance and fed hysteria about an immanent 'outbreak' (Ostler, 1996; Klein, 1994: 50-54) from the shrinking reservations on which the Army kept the Plains peoples confined and, consequently, dependent for their survival on meager government rations that were the ostensible quid pro quo. For the Army and the BIA, stamping out any

¹ Comprised of seven distinct groups (Hunkpapa, Itazipacola, Miniconjou, Oglala, Oohenonpa, Sichangu, Sicasapa), the Lakota people of the Northern Great Plains of North America are the Teton division of the Sioux Nation, an aggregate of the related Dakota, Lakota, and Nakota peoples.

vestiges of traditional itinerant lifeways was an essential prerequisite of effective social control (see Hannah, 1993; Biolsi, 1995), with the result that any groups that defied containment were understood to be resistant to assimilation and, by definition, ‘hostile’ (Klein, 1994: 47). Thus, when the new and inexperienced BIA Agent at Pine Ridge added his voice to the mounting chorus of alarmism about an outbreak, the Army was quick to respond with the commitment of troops in what, by early-December 1890, became the largest concentration of US forces since the Civil War (Ostler, 1996: 217). The tenor of national discourse notwithstanding, however, local interests in this turned on considerations other than security (Ostler, 1996; Mitchell 1989: 305): an increased military presence would in itself be a boon for the flagging local economy (Klein, 1994: 51) and would also reassure prospective settlers and investors made apprehensive by the disproportionately dire tone of national press coverage (Carter, 1991: 47).

Government efforts to suppress the Ghost Dance through December 1890 saw the Army surround the Pine Ridge and Standing Rock reservations, with substantial troop contingents dispatched to place specific bands under direct surveillance; one such contingent, under the command of Colonel E.V. Sumner, had Chief Spotted Elk’s Miniconjou Lakota band – many Ghost Dancers among them – under watch at an encampment on the Cheyenne River. As tensions grew, so too did the fortunes of Trager and a handful of other photographers who did a brisk business selling pictures of Ghost Dancers and soldiers alike to eager buyers in Chadron and beyond.

Though he was not a part of the Ghost Dance movement, Hunkpapa Lakota Chief Sitting Bull nevertheless figured prominently enough in Euro-American imaginaries to have been convincingly portrayed as a principal instigator² and, on 15 December, BIA police arrived at his home on the Standing Rock reservation to arrest him. When members of his band attempted to intervene, a struggle ensued in the course of which Sitting Bull and several others were killed. Surviving members of the band fled in fear of further violence, some of them seeking refuge with Spotted Elk’s band on the Cheyenne River (Ostler, 1996: 245). No doubt fuelled by the news brought by these new arrivals from Standing Rock, concern that an Army attack was immanent spread rapidly through the village until, on 23 December, Spotted Elk and his band managed to slip away unnoticed in the direction of Pine Ridge Agency where they hoped to find safety with the Oglala Chief Red Cloud. But on 28 December they were intercepted by the Seventh Cavalry – the unit once commanded by Custer – and forced to make camp near Wounded Knee as soldiers with Hotchkiss guns³ stood watch on the hill above them. The band was in no condition to resist: short on food and supplies, their number was made up mostly of women, children, and the elderly; Spotted Elk himself was gravely ill with pneumonia. The following morning, as soldiers attempted to seize the weapons of the small number of armed men in the camp, what was apparently interpreted as a menacing gesture by one of the Ghost Dancers brought down a rain of fire from the troops on the hill. The fleeing unarmed Lakotas were shot down en masse; those who sought shelter in a ravine were overrun there and massacred.

Imag(in)ing Legitimacy

² An October 1890 editorial in *Harper’s Weekly* was typical of this in its own unreflexive indictment: ‘In the present state of affairs the noted Sioux chief Sitting Bull, who has already been the source of so much trouble in the course of Indian affairs, appears once more as a prominent figure’ (Anonymous 1890: 995).

³ Light mounted guns that fired exploding shells at relatively close ranges.

More than a century after the terrible events of 29 December 1890, attentive travelers along BIA Highway 27 through Pine Ridge Reservation might notice a bullet-ridden and defaced historical marker standing solemnly at the edge of the roadway. Under the heading 'Big Foot Surrenders' is the following caption:

East 1/2 mile from this point, on the old Cherry Creek-Pine Ridge Trail, Chief Big Foot (Spotted Elk) and his Minneconjou, wagon horse band, with some forty braves of Sitting Bull's Hunkpapa band was intercepted and surrendered on December 28, 1890 to Major Samuel M. Whiteside, 7th US Cavalry. The band was escorted to Wounded Knee, where they camped for the night under guard. Big Foot who was ill was attended by the army physician that night.

No mention is made of the fate that befell Spotted Elk and his band the next morning. If this seems to bespeak a certain ignominy consistent with the clear (if belated) 1990 Congressional apology and formal recognition that the 'Battle of Wounded Knee' was in fact a massacre,⁴ there was little inclination toward such sentiments as Trager's photographs of the carnage were offered for sale and began to circulate. Much to the contrary, the conduct of the Seventh Cavalry was widely regarded as wholly legitimate, even valorous to the point that no less than twenty Congressional Medals of Honor were conferred on soldiers who took part in the killing.

With word of what had happened spreading quickly, Trager hurried to Pine Ridge Agency in the company of Army reinforcements late on the night of 30 December, but a severe blizzard and safety concerns prevented his traveling to the massacre site until a civilian burial detail in the pay of the Army made the trip with a troop of soldiers three and a half days later (Carter, 1991: 48-49). Once on the scene, he set to work making photographs of the corpses strewn about the remnants of Spotted Elk's camp. These included close-ups of Spotted Elk himself as well as of another of the victims, identified simply as 'The Medicine Man' in the inscription Trager later made on the negative. Other images show scores of dead across the fields and in the ravine, huddled together in some places and scattered in others. As the day progressed, he also captured images of the dead being heaped on a wagon, the digging of a large common grave atop the hill where the Hotchkiss guns had been positioned, and the final unceremonious interment of a mass of awkwardly frozen bodies, Spotted Elk's among them. Upon his return to Chadron, arrangements were made for the large-scale printing and sale of the photographs and, on 15 January, a news article in the *Chadron Democrat* announcing their commercial availability offered the opinion that 'There are a number of beauties among them, and are just the thing to send to your friends back east' (Carter, 1991: 50). An advertisement in the *Chadron Advocate* the following day promised views of 'The Greatest Historical Value', including from 'the Ravine from which None escaped Alive' (Carter, 1991: 51).

Presaging the digital masking of the prisoners' nakedness in the officially-released Abu Ghraib photos, Trager inked over the exposed genitals on the corpse of 'the Medicine Man' (Klein, 1994: 58; Carter, 1991: 110). This deference to Victorian sensibilities concerning good taste – something requisite to the commercial viability of the 'Medicine Man' photo – betrays

⁴ See S.Con.Res.153 (introduced in the Senate on 15 October 1990 with bipartisan sponsorship and passed without objection ten days later) which refers to the 'Wounded Knee Massacre'. See also the related House resolution, H.Con.Res.386 (19 October 1990).

prevailing community standards as otherwise amenable to the gruesome content of the images Trager captured. Far from provoking offense, the Wounded Knee photographs merged unproblematically with a wider popular culture and Euro-American sense of self whence they could be celebrated and fetishized. The intelligibility of this inheres in imaginaries more certain of moral righteousness than that which produced the startling omission on the aforementioned roadside marker. More specifically, the popular response to Wounded Knee must be read within then-dominant framings of legitimacy in respect of the ‘Indian Wars’ more broadly.

Put simply, for evincing determined fidelity to their traditional lifeways the Wounded Knee victims were denied a legitimate subject position from the dominant Euro-American perspective. Indeed, US government policy, faithfully and forcefully implemented by the Army and the BIA, was to extinguish the particular subjectivities rooted in traditional Lakota ways of being. This left but two possibilities: assimilation or annihilation. Either of these was easily imbued with legitimacy and popular approbation in light of the deeply held Euro-American ‘common sense’ notions of the superiority of ‘civilization’ and the depravity of ‘savagery’ which found ample expression in the popular culture and everyday knowledges of the time. Dime store novels, lantern slides, and other media vividly portrayed the ascribed ‘savage’ traits of treachery, cruelty, immoderation, and blood lust for audiences eager to find some vicarious experience of the adventure associated with life on the Frontier. The essentialized ‘savage’ was, of course, set in stark contrast with the exaggerated heroics and moral strength imputed to the soldiers and settlers who figured in these portrayals. This gave no ground to the possibility of a legitimate traditionalism, cast as it was as inherently dangerous and entirely beyond reason. So it was that just a few years after the massacre at Wounded Knee even a future president of the United States – Theodore Roosevelt – could publicly declare that, at least in ‘nine out of every ten’ cases, ‘the only good Indians are the dead Indians’ (Hagedorn, 1930: 355), without raising any general offense.

But more than just sitting well with these attitudes, Trager’s photographs worked through the very scripts that underwrote and animated them. Typical of these was the particular version performed into popular consciousness by the traveling ‘Sioux War Panorama’ that visited communities throughout the American Midwest during the 1860s and 1870s. On offer to the paying public on a 222 foot mechanically-operated scroll was a series of paintings, sequentially revealed while narrated by their creator, John Stevens. Stevens’ creation, promotionally billed as ‘The Great Moral Exhibition of the Age’ (Bell, 1996: 279), portrayed the dominant account – with which most audiences would already have been familiar – of a violent 1862 Santee uprising in Minnesota. Omitted by Stevens was any mention of the lesser known circumstances by which the Santee, on the verge of starvation and faced with government indifference to their plight, had been driven to desperation (Bell, 1996: 285-286). Opening the performance, a series of images saw idyllic Minnesota landscapes husbanded by palpably innocent Euro-Americans until the calm was shattered by the unexplained – and, therefore, inexplicable – appearance of the Santee, utterly unrestrained in the commission of all manner of atrocities. As the story progressed, the orgy of savage violence gave way to depictions of order restored and retribution meted out by the Army. In the final scenes, a portrayal of the mass hanging of 38 Santee men framed by uniform columns of soldiers was followed by the soothing rendering of a pastoral countryside, apparently providing in abundance and populated by carefree Euro-American women. In the broad strokes of the script to which it adhered, the Sioux War Panorama was of a piece with popular imaginaries about the ‘winning of the West’ that are critical to readings of Trager’s photographs.

At the time of the massacre at Wounded Knee, William (Buffalo Bill) Cody's traveling Wild West Show was perhaps the best known – if most ostentatious – but certainly not the only vehicle for the continued performance of the scripts of the dominating society. In mock battles staged for throngs of excited spectators the Indian performers exhibited all the terrifyingly loathsome ferocity expected of them, but always succumbed in the end to the heroic charges of the well-disciplined Cavalry, confirming once more the moral superiority of the Euro-American soldiers and, through unwavering conformity to the script, providing a certain reassurance of the inevitable outcome of the larger (and ongoing) struggle. Absent was any connection to domestic contexts and everyday lifeways, the mounted gun-toting warrior serving therefore as the aggregate signifier for whole peoples. Moreover, introduced to the scene in an apparently pre-given state of belligerence, the warriors themselves were reduced to one dimensional caricatures for want of any visible incitement to violence. Thus portrayed, the Indigenous peoples of the Northern Plains were rendered inherently dangerous and consequently beyond the pale of any peaceful accommodation. The script thus dictated only one reasonable response to those unlucky enough to have been branded 'hostile', and by prevailing accounts the Seventh Cavalry had performed it admirably.

Trager, then, was not the inventor of these notions. Nor did they issue first from anything he photographed. But there is also no reason to suspect that he was any less predisposed to see the monumental events of his time and place very much differently from the majority of his contemporaries. Certainly, nothing in the brief descriptions he inscribed on his negatives would indicate otherwise: several are marked 'Battle of Wounded Knee', thus reaffirming the idea that what took place on 29 December had been a legitimate military engagement against 'hostile Indians.' But perhaps most telling is a photograph of a Ghost Dance bearing the incendiary caption, 'War Dance'. This even more explicitly picks up the dominant casting of any will to resist assimilation as deserving of the inscription 'hostile' and, therefore, immutably synonymous with danger. 'War Dance' aligns itself with the bases upon which the possibility of legitimate subjectivity was denied. It also contributes to the sense that the Miniconjous of Spotted Elk's band got, if not what they deserved, then at least what they had invited upon themselves. They were, after all, unlawfully at large, having met the criteria to be branded 'hostile', since mobility was a privilege reserved to the assimilated (Hannah, 1993: 428). And equating the Ghost Dance with belligerent intent finds Trager directly implicated in the underlying conflation of adherence to tradition and dangerousness.

If the inscriptions Trager added to his photographs of the massacre site join directly in claiming legitimacy for the Army's conduct at Wounded Knee, the aesthetic composition of those photographs underwrites it even more forcefully. As if allied to the dominant narrative, the frozen corpses of the dead appear menacing in the ghastly rigor of their death poses. Spotted Elk and the 'Medicine Man' seem to grimace, while the bodies heaped on the wagon and in the mass grave resist any dignified arrangement, their rigid limbs and unnatural postures contributing to the impression of chaos, as if some urge to melee infected them even in death. Only the clean, symmetrical lines of the wagon and the grave sketch containing boundaries against the bedlam that stands in marked contradistinction to the solemn dignity of the burial detail and the disciplined order of the uniformed soldiers lined up neatly alongside (Klein, 1994: 56). Like the juxtapositions in the final scenes of the Sioux War Panorama, the effect is as much as to claim the moral superiority of 'civilization' over 'savagery' whilst underscoring that the danger posed by the latter is no trifling matter. And joining Stevens in speaking the liberation of America itself, the burial detail appear almost as the custodians of the land, clearing it of the

unsightly remnants of the delegitimized will of at least some Lakotas to preserve something of their erstwhile lifeways.

Ambivalent Encodings

Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (2003) tells of a dream in which she saw Spotted Elk's frozen corpse just as it appeared in Trager's photographs. Having at first found herself overcome with grief at the tragic sight before her, she goes on to describe how her mourning was unexpectedly interrupted by the sudden appearance of a young girl about six years of age:

She walked about the carnage, looking into the faces of those lying dead in the snow. She was searching for someone. Her small moccasin footprints imprinted the snow as she walked over to Big Foot, looking into his face. She shakes his shoulders, takes his frozen hand into her small, warm hand, and helps him to his feet. He then brushes the snow off his clothes. She waits patiently with her hand extended, he then takes her hand and they walk out of the photograph (Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003: 45-46).

For Tsinhnahjinnie, the dream's significance is rather more than a mere metaphoric allusion in itself to elements of some exterior and self-contained reality. It has, in fact, transformed the 'real' experience of confronting Trager's photographs in such a way as to recast their metaphoric significance: 'This,' she says of her encounter with Spotted Elk and the young girl, 'is the dream I recall when I look upon this image of supposed hopelessness' (Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003: 46). What this suggests is a broader range of possibilities than might otherwise be read from these disturbing photographs. Taking place beyond the (advanced) colonial scripts that framed their content as fetishized artifacts of the 'winning of the West', an alternative reading finds that they lend as fully to the articulation of survival as annihilation.

If there is any doubt about how Trager might have read his own photographs, it would seem to be resolved in the explicit linguistic messages he inscribed on his negatives in order that they be reproduced on all the prints made from them: 'Battle of Wounded Knee', 'War Dance'. These are the bare ideological messages of their author. Fulfilling the function of what Roland Barthes calls 'anchorage', Trager's inscriptions attempt to direct the viewer 'through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others' (Barthes, 1977: 40). In this way, Trager advised the viewer on what to make of what are otherwise just pictures of frozen corpses, his inscriptions directing that they be recognized not as victims of aggression but as illegitimate combatants legitimately killed by the Army. Less amenable to explicit direction, however, are the encoded messages borne along in the images. Though the composition of the photos – markers of order set against expressions of chaos – lends clear support to the content of Trager's inscriptions, the messages they encode nevertheless require certain cultural and other competencies that are contingent upon a particular context in time and space. Absent the context to which this intelligibility owes, the message may be muted; read in contexts not anticipated, other messages may emerge. Decoded through different contexts today, the Wounded Knee photos that were once collected and celebrated in consonance with the enabling imaginaries of colonial conquest are now as readily deployed in activist causes seeking redress of enduring advanced colonial violences.

Neither this inherent ambivalence nor the insufficiency of anchorage as a guarantor of a particular reading is at all specific to the Trager photos. Among the victims seen in the now-infamous Abu Ghraib abuse photos is a naked prisoner with the word ‘Rapeist’ [sic] written on his leg in large letters. The inscription was reportedly made by US Army Spc. Sabrina Harman, most notorious for her role in what has become the iconic symbol of torture at Abu Ghraib: the November 2003 photograph of hooded prisoner Abdou Hussain Saad Faleh, threatened with electrocution as he was made to stand on a box with wires connected to his body. This photograph, like the others, has been reproduced countless times in company with linguistic messages that the Abu Ghraib guards and the larger in-group within which it was at first circulated no doubt never intended. The photograph of the prisoner with the inscribed leg is somewhat unique in this sense, bearing a comment intentionally made by one guard and apparently endorsed by others. ‘Rapeist’ here serves as linguistic anchorage that seems to have had at least symbolic resonance in the shared context of the in-group, but outside of this context the viewer has been more inclined to read ‘rape victim’ from the totality of the image and its encodings.

This property of photographs that is defiance of stable meanings and definitions, this recalcitrance to being bound by the ideas and intentions of their makers, allows them to move from complicity with domination to the designs of resistance as quickly as the contexts within which they are read can change. Long before Abu Ghraib, this phenomenon was seen with American lynching photos. As both public occasions (Campbell, 2004: 57) and overtly political acts (Apel, 2005: 89), lynchings were photographed as a way of preserving the moment of the act for the participants and, in a manner reminiscent of the Wounded Knee photos, to extend its potent political message to others – in another echo of Wounded Knee, lynching photos became postcards sent to family and friends prevented by distance from attending in person (Apel, 2005: 92). Importantly, the casual self-righteousness with which perpetrators and onlookers (including children) happily posed with the brutalized corpses of the victims in so many of these photographs gives them the power to normalize the violence to which they are testament.⁵ The faces smiling back at us betray no sense that a terrible crime has been committed. Various encoding messages of ‘justice’ (the victim ‘got what he deserved’) and impunity (the killers will not be made to answer for their deeds), these images could respectively invigorate White supremacist pretensions to superiority and an African American sense of vulnerability requisite to sustain repressive social control. Like Trager’s photos, then, they could function as warnings as much trophies (Campbell, 2004: 57; Apel, 2005: 90), revealing that making and distributing lynching photos (or massacre photos) was as political an act as the lynching itself. But deployed and viewed outside of the specific social contexts imagined by their makers, they too became potent vehicles of an oppositional politics that worked to great effect in mobilizing young African-Americans at the dawn of the civil rights movement (Campbell, 2004: 57).

The making of the Abu Ghraib photographs was no less political and no less amenable to an oppositional purpose. Certainly, the degrading images captured by the guards affected a means of asserting ultimate control over the prisoners – perhaps as potential instruments of blackmail by which cooperation might later be induced (Apel, 2005: 90) – even as they reassured those in the guards’ in-group of their own superiority. But their historic significance will endure

⁵ This speaks to the aesthetic effect for the viewer decoding meaning from the smiles and the apparent ease with which those pictured posed for the camera. For a more nuanced consideration of the possible sources and determinants of such comportment, see Philpott (2005).

more in the iconic force they have lent to resistance, not just against the treatment of detainees by US forces but against the War on Terror and even US global hegemony more broadly.⁶ Efforts by the Army along with the Bush Administration and its supporters to wrest control of the narrative from their opponents have seen readings of the photos that make them less about the victims than their guards – that is, they have become, among other things, evidence of ‘misconduct’ (Dick Cheney), ‘dereliction of duty’ (one of the charges brought against Spc. Harman), and ‘blow[ing] some steam off’ (Rush Limbaugh). Admittedly, these are among the most trivializing of the assessments of what is captured in the photos, but even the harshest of the charges on which the perpetrators have since been convicted explicitly limit what took place to the transgressions of a few individuals. And with this, a second set of meanings comes to defy those presumably derived by the original in-group. Though the Abu Ghraib photos were composed purposefully both as product and producer of a script playing through domination and submission, the particulars of how this script was to be read turned vitally on a particular context.

At the same time, following Homi Bhabha (1983), a straight functionalist account of the in-group meanings of photographs misses something more of their inherent ambivalence. Acknowledging that the Other is simultaneously an object of derision and desire bids us take note of, for example, the idea of the ‘Noble Savage’ so prominently a part of the very imaginaries according to which audiences could decode the Sioux War Panorama, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, and Trager’s Wounded Knee photographs. Indeed, little more than a week before the massacre of Spotted Elk’s band, the editor of the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* – L. Frank Baum, who would later author *The Wizard of Oz* – lamented that Sitting Bull had been the last noble Indian and, in light of his death, called for the extermination of all those who remained (see Venables 1990). Wounded Knee could thus be seen as desirable and lamentable at one and the same time, just as the natural freedom of Spotted Elk’s band fit the solicitous desire bound up in America’s view of itself⁷ whilst signaling danger by reason of that very freedom. It is also important to note that the reaffirmation of dominant scripts need not be born of any sinister purpose. As Tsinhnahjinnie’s dream reveals, even the horrified onlooker’s revulsion can work within these scripts by eulogizing without seeking to find again what appears to have been destroyed. But once it is allowed that the widely circulated Wounded Knee photos only served *metaphorically* to pronounce upon the death of the Lakota, different possibilities are enabled. Remembering those who survive(d), foregrounding their subjectivity, and making them central to the content-giving context in which the Wounded Knee photographs are read has the potential to bespeak resilience and hope in place of annihilation and despair.

Composing Allegory, Delivering Catharsis

Reflecting on the lynching photos and those from Abu Ghraib, Dora Apel (2005: 89) suggests that more shocking than the torture itself are the gloating perpetrators who expect us to applaud and identify with them. Certainly, in the case of the Abu Ghraib photographs this reaction could only have been elicited within the confines of the in-group since they have virtually everywhere else egregiously violated prevailing standards of acceptable conduct. But the same cannot be

⁶ Perhaps not so fully within the reach of the ‘CNN effect’, but certainly among Al Jazeera’s core audiences.

⁷ Something signaled in the many historic and ongoing Euro-American deployments of the ‘Noble Savage’ in various forms as important collective identity markers.

said of the lynching photos, at least up until the broader social context changed sufficiently in the mid-twentieth century. To be sure, they were not everywhere well received, but neither did they draw widespread condemnation with immediate oppositional political effect. In their time and place, they circulated through an ‘in-group’ with considerable social breadth and depth so that they did often tend to elicit precisely the response read by Apel from the faces of the perpetrators, even beyond their immediate circles. Like the Wounded Knee photographs, images of lynchings were widely distributed as postcards, whereas the Abu Ghraib photos were intentionally confined to more discrete circuits, even if somewhat naively or carelessly so. How, then, do we account for the failure of the Abu Ghraib photographs to find a broader resonance after the manner of their historical antecedents? While it may be tempting to attribute the discrepancy to a progressive enlightenment, consigning popular tolerance of atrocity to the ‘bad old days’, still other details of the various scripts in play suggest a more complicated story.

Critically at issue here are questions of legitimacy and how it is conferred or denied. To understand the popular acceptance of the horrific scenes depicted in the Wounded Knee and lynching photographs they must be read together with and as exemplary – even if sometimes poignant – expressions of much larger allegorical tales punctuated with cathartic resolution. In the case of Wounded Knee, the script in play was explicitly laid out and rehearsed by way of vehicles like the Sioux War Panorama and the Wild West Show. Here, as elsewhere, ‘hostile Indians’ unlawfully at large were depicted as posing an inherent, irrational, and pre-political threat to innocent Euro-American settlers. In this construction and through the discursive denial of any legitimate subjectivity, the possibility of reaching an accommodation was a priori ruled out so that the stage was set for an epic confrontation on existential terms. Whether in the final decisive charge of the Cavalry or the mass hanging of Santee men, catharsis was delivered in an outcome which, according to the script’s opposed renderings of moral civilization and savage depravity, was never seriously in question. As allegory, these performances confirmed for their audiences the inevitability and righteousness of the colonial conquest. Moreover, they provided reassurances about the moral legitimacy of the violences of that conquest, plausibly assigning blame to the victims whose ascribed savage irrationality precluded any appeal to reason.

Trager’s Wounded Knee photos worked through and respoke this selfsame script in sketching their own allegorical tale. Set in contrast with a military aesthetic of disciplined order, the iconographic impact of corpses that seemed still to be fearsome and dangerous even in death allied with the anchorage of ‘battle’ as opposed to ‘massacre’. More than faithful documentary reportage, Trager’s photographs are products of a particular perspective. According to Victor Burgin (1976), ‘manipulation is the essence of photography’. That this might stand in marked defiance of the photograph’s apparent correspondence to all that was at once observed and observable at a given point and a particular moment signals that attention is due the vagaries of photographic composition. The conspicuous absence in Trager’s photos of bodies identifiably those of the many women and children killed is particularly noteworthy. But even beyond the deliberate choice of framing, timing, and everything else that underwrites, for example, the powerful juxtaposition of a troop of soldiers standing smartly and commandingly above the frightening chaos contained by the mass grave at Wounded Knee, there is the effect of deliberate posing as subjects play to the camera or are made to do so. The forced posing that took place at Abu Ghraib and its intended effect are readily apparent to the viewer, but Trager too manipulated the bodies he photographed. The menacing appearance of ‘the Medicine Man’, for instance, owed to his having first overturned the frozen body (Klein, 1994: 58) with the result that it seemed in its unnatural pose to be in the midst of rejoining the ‘battle’; the rifle leaning atop one

raised arm must therefore have been deliberately placed for added dramatic effect (Jensen, Paul, and Carter, 1991: 110).

The denial of a legitimate subject position in war was key to the functions of both allegory and catharsis in these various renderings to the extent that it banished all ambivalence about the atrocities pictured, authorizing the killing of the Miniconjous as the only possible resolution to what was constructed as an intransigent will to hostility. For their implication in the Ghost Dance – Trager's 'War Dance' – and for fleeing the Army, Spotted Elk and his band were marked as 'hostile' and therefore as combatants, though without any possibility of legitimacy in this ascribed role. They were thus made to invoke a label now well implanted in the popular lexicon, 'unlawful combatants'. In similar ways the importance of contemporary articulations of the idea of the 'unlawful combatant' resides more in popular imaginaries than in international law and reflects laboriously constructed claims to a US monopoly on legitimacy throughout the varied violences of the War on Terror. Something analogous is also central to the self-styled legitimacy of lynchings inasmuch as they too were typically tied to some alleged 'transgression' by the victim, however tenuous. In all these instances, then, the terrible violences so much in evidence are made legitimate, even laudable, by means of constructing the victims as irredeemably dangerous. The only thing to do, it is made to seem, the only thing that can be done, is to kill or otherwise forcibly subdue them.

Failed and problematic sitings of danger contribute to a more nuanced account of the crisis generated by the Abu Ghraib photos. The brutalized and humiliated figures we see in these images cannot be made to sustain an allegory on the righteousness of US conduct in Iraq. Far from furnishing a desirable metaphoric expression of 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' and its legacies, the acts depicted had to be reduced to the misconduct of the particular US soldiers involved. As at Wounded Knee, workable allegory would here insist upon the irrational and immutable hostility of the 'dangerous' Other – a rendering of real and suspected enemies in the War on Terror as dangerous fanatics driven to kill by no motive other than hate. Without downplaying or excusing in any way the atrocities committed by some enemies of the US in Iraq and elsewhere, we may nevertheless recognize this as a rhetoric designed to secure a US monopoly on legitimacy in killing. This recognition is precisely what the Abu Ghraib photographs invite. Their helplessness and vulnerability revealed, the prisoners appear as other than the dangerous Other that the dominant war narrative needs them to be. They are, in fact, Other to that Other, danger having been inscribed not on their submissive bodies but on the bodies of their tormentors. Ascriptions of danger, it seems, can survive the image of the Other as corpse, but not as acquiescent since the war narrative insists that they can be subdued only in death.

This raises the disturbing question of whether the same degree of outrage would have met photos of US soldiers posing with dead Iraqis, as they once did at Wounded Knee. Fittingly composed and narrated, photos of the dead need not effect an interruption of claims about the danger they lately posed. But the same is not true in the case of an obviously submissive victim of abuse. It is telling, then, that the Abu Ghraib photos depicting sexualized degradation seem to elicit louder and more frequent expressions of outrage than those in which US soldiers did pose with corpses. One may therefore suspect that it is not the violence of the sexual assault that is registered as appalling so much as it is a matter of widespread homophobia that aligns the moral revulsion of the viewer with that of the victim. Though intended, at least in part, to mark the prisoners as depraved, their forced transgressions of heterosexist moral boundaries have ultimately had the opposite effect. The helplessness and humiliation of the naked forms in the

photographs, obvious to the viewer, denies their agency in those terrible moments and thus comes to inscribe their tormentors instead. (Con)textualized outside the in-group, all that might be read as depravity is seen to issue from the autonomous subjectivities of the guards. Indeed, the solemn figures of the victims are, by way of contrast, imbued with a certain moral superiority inasmuch as their revulsion is palpable. Here, then, the same images that within the confines of the in-group clearly articulated seemingly immutable sites of domination and submission, and which might even have become instruments of coercion themselves, lend instead to the designs of resistance.

Besides disrupting allegory, the Abu Ghraib photos work at cross-purposes to a demand for catharsis that grows with the war weariness increasingly evidenced by declining American popular support for Bush Administration foreign policy in Iraq. In contrast, Trager's Wounded Knee photographs not only did not offend, but fit neatly and supportively with the sense of self and prevailing moral code that defined community standards in the areas of circulation. In so doing, they reaffirmed the legitimacy of government policy on the Northern Plains and, with it, the violent implementation of that policy by the Seventh Cavalry. Trager's acts of composition as much as the textual anchorage he gave his photos amply answered the requisite sense of a dangerous enemy amenable to no response short of the one so definitively dealt. But this also turns out to be an ascription very much contingent on the mass grave to the extent that any submission other than death might not have sustained the impression of danger quite so well. Similarly, the world narrated into being in consonance with the core scripts of the War on Terror casts the undifferentiated mass of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and untold scores of other places as guileful, sinister, and above all dangerous. This is a world made to feel safer by their dis-appearance, and one that is profoundly unsettled by their sudden and unexpected exposition as piteous victims whose palpable shame is entirely our own.

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