

(Re)Framing the Muslim Subject: Studying the Artistic Representation of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib Detainees

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Abstract : This paper attempts to conceptualize the (de)humanization of the Muslim subject in Karen J. Greenberg and Janet Hamlin's transmedia Sketching Guantanamo through a close study of the aesthetics and semiotics of the text. The Muslim experience, the paper shall argue, is mediated through a (de)humanization confined and incarcerated within the chains of artistic representation. Hamlin's reliance on the distortions offered by stereotypes is reminiscent of the late Victorian epistemology on criminality, as evidenced most starkly in the sketch of Khalid Sheikh Mohammad. The position of the white artist thus becomes suspect in the enterprise of neo-Victorian ethnography. The visual stories of movement from within Guantanamo become potent; the paper shall argue, especially in juxtaposition with the images of stillness that came out from the detention centers, which portrayed the enactment of violence on individual bodies with a deliberate erasure of faces. So, while art becomes a way for reclaiming subjectivity or humanizing these identifiable bodies, the medium predicates itself on their objectification. The paper shall explore various questions about what it means for the (criminal?) subjects to be rendered into art rather than being photographed. Does art entail a necessary departure from the assumed objectivity of the photographic images? What makes art the preferred medium for (de)humanization of the violated Muslim bodies? What happens when art is produced without a recognition of the 'precariousness' of the life being portrayed? Rendering the detainees into art becomes a slippery task complicated by Hamlin's privileged position outside the glass walls of the court. The paper shall adjourn analysis at the many dichotomies that exist in the text viz. between the White men and the brown, the Muslims and the Christians, Occident and the Orient problematized by Hamlin's politics, that of a 'neutral outsider' which quickly turns on its head and becomes complicity in her deliberate erasure of the violence that shaped and still shapes Guantanamo.

Keywords : Abu Ghraib, Derrida, Guantanamo, graphic journalism, Muslimness, orient, spectrality

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