

The Sexualization of Wartime Femininity in Abu Ghraib

War and its subsequent wartime rape have circulated through collective human consciousness since wartime's literal inception. It has become a near-erotic phenomenon, portrayed in heavily disseminated pornography and propaganda media whereby the masculinized figure penetrates, non consensually, the feminized figure. However, via the nexus of war-on-terror rhetoric, the 'womanization' of females in war is no longer bound to historicized gender roles. Women, particularly within the Abu Ghraib gaze, assume quasi power and authority to be perpetrators of violence in sexual contexts. At its outset, woman-as-aggressor appears an alteration of classic wartime dichotomies, perhaps even a testament to increasing gender fluidity in wartime context. But in lieu of power in autonomy, women with strong media presence in active duty are sexualized pawns, wielding *NOT* raw strength as a weapon but instead operating via eroticized labor. Particularly via the lens of Lynndie England, Sabrina Hermann, and Megan Ambuhl, a wartime discourse is made prevalent regarding women willing and able to execute episodes of mass destruction: their violence is not dangerous, but is instead *sexual*.

Traditional wartime milieu suggests a phallogentric ideology: it is inherently hostile, masculine by nature. Subsequent behavioral propensities link warring men to violence and warring women to peace, further structuring state legislature and international relation rhetoric in a gendered manner. In this patriarchal logic, the masculine protector (state leader) looks after its subordinate, 'feminized' citizenry, legitimizing aggressive war outside of the state itself. Perhaps most analogous to racketeering via fear mongering, the state equates masculinism with protection wherein the feminine is adoring of 'her' protector and happily defers to 'his' judgment for security. In other words: the security state is facilitated; thus the citizenry trusts its government to ensure safety. This phenomenon is central to the logic of masculinist protection, as it assumes the government's 'good man' status, whereby the protector is benevolent and holds the interests of his inferior at the forefront. The imagination of the state as 'bad masculine' is not acknowledged; the citizenry should not consider its protector to reside within a totalitarian military state. Of course, the description of 'bad man' is fundamentally counterintuitive: even via the Hobbesian lens of power politics, states of nature are explosive if left unchecked. But if the armed power is held via a sovereign (instead of a single masculine actor), the *Leviathan* is engaged, putting the power within the state to wield military prowess as a protective (and successful) measure. Since 9/11, this security state has been inevitably realized; following September 2001, the largest military budget was approved with virtually no debate, and congress waived a prior mandate forcing debate before entering war. This, coupled with fear-inducing war on terror rhetoric, alludes to aforementioned protection racket: freedom is foregone, along with the right to hold leaders accountable, and in return, these masculinized leaders ensure safety via amplified, overtly militaristic protection rhetoric.

This male-female dichotomy stands, even within the interpersonal microcosm of the current security state. The condition of postmodern war subsequently manifested, whereby post-9/11 discord allowed for improvements of technological efficiency. In essence, the difference between postmodern and premodern warfare is representational: videotaping of rapes, hijacking, and hostage-taking are sensationalized to create a theatricalization of violence, becoming a *media event* instead of an act of war. This brings into question the notion of *bad masculinity*, indicated previously in the context of the state. When placed in the context of the individual, *bad masculinity* is a volatile output of 'normal' masculinity, which emerges as defensive misogyny under wartime conditions. The primary rationale behind heinous acts of violence against women, including incising pregnant stomachs, inciting rape, and other forms of

assault, is (and has been) due to hypermasculinity (Theweleit et al, 1993). And while immoral, this behavior is encouraged from men to persevere the uber aggressive wartime sphere. Psychoanalytic feminists explain this burst of combat aggression as a means to rival women's power to give birth, perhaps even a form of sexualized genocide (Schott et al, 1996). This phenomenon is closely linked with pornography, eroticizing the environment of torture, and nullifying these Hobbesian ideals of masculinist protector as an impermeable do-gooder.

However, when the feminine is the primary perpetrator of violence in global politics, it is not simply an exertion of power, contra res-publica or elegantly aggressive. While these women are not outright excluded from demonstrations of violence, they are placed outside the masculine realm by a more insidious subordination: a surrounding discourse of sex. Women are stripped of agency within actions of militancy via a double transgression. The first: erotomania, the second: erotic dysfunction. In the former, a violent woman is only capable of committing violence because she is sex-crazed or in a sexual relationship with a male terrorist, indicating perceived biological abnormalities preventing the woman from assuming status as a mother or wife. Erotomania is blamed on the woman's need for attention due to neglect on a father's behalf, indicating a failure to please male romantic interests (Sjoberg et al, 2008). In other words, a female terrorist is NOT autonomous, but commits violence because she is a sexual slave and a victim, driven by a desire to appease her male voyeur.

This All-American whore archetype manifests itself in the events at Abu Ghraib, particularly via the lenses of Megan Ambuhl, Lynndie England, and Sabrina Harman, three of the seven military police officers involved in the prison sex-abuse scandal. These women fall under the 'erotomaniac' category, whereby tales of their sexuality formed the breadth of Abu Ghraib media coverage. These women were no longer female protagonists in a masculine profession, but were instead pacified via a sexualized framework. The incongruencies with a typical, masculine war hero are made grossly evident: without the concept of women as social inferiors from whom the male soldiers must differentiate, there is no further masculinized protector, neither within the state nor the militarized institution. So thus emerges the fallen woman. Classically, the Victorian fallen woman is a feminine actor unable to meet the moral and material expectations of their time. Therefore, when England, Ambuhl and Harman deviate from caregiver/wife to embrace masculinized roles of service in war, they have ipso facto failed at being a woman. They are, regardless, returned to this subordinate sphere when they are sexualized and demeaned in the face of exerting power. England, in particular, served as point d'appui in Abu Ghraib media dissemination, whereby critics pointed to her feminine, petite figure to facilitate ideological and practical ease of objectification.



(Dao, 2008)

England, Ambuhl, and Harman's pseudo power *was* leveraged to some degree, albeit not in the counter-hegemonic masculinized way that feminine wartime presence *should* imply. The stories of white American women overpowering their Arab male counterparts creates a chain of sexualized power, feminizing Arab men's masculinity. This inherently sends the message: *our 'weaker' sex can dominate your 'stronger' sex*, compounded only further by the fact that American feminine violence is purported to cater to the white male voyeur. And, on the basis of the *Whore Narrative* as discussed within *Naber, 2006*, the domination of Arab men on the American woman's behalf becomes the ultimate torture device via culture-based extensions of gender roles.

Because of the rapid dissemination of women's sexualized violence in war via media platforms, consumption of violent pornography has seen a major uptick since Abu Ghraib. As a result of the incident, England, Ambuhl, and Harman received an astounding amount of attention on pornography sites; within a month of the scandal's break, 200,000 sites featured re-enactments of the Abu Ghraib abuse. With the increase in streams of violent porn, consumers have grown further desensitized to rape and assault (Boeringer, 1994). This cultural discourse only serves to perseverate the notion of 'woman-as-victim', as vulnerable, and needing a masculinized protector to prevent any degree of violence. Again, in place of autonomy comes this rhetoric of protection, something that England, Ambuhl, and Harman evaded, albeit momentarily, in their quasi successful entrance to a masculinized wartime sphere.

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Computer Poetry

Consider, for a moment, poetry as a monolith: an ideation of the form as pure, humanist prose. And then consider its melding with the *digital muse*— the computer capable of producing written text— inherently blurring the line between contemporary and historical forms of poetry. Both bound by a set of grammatical and syntactical rules, the art of poetry and prose has molded itself many times over throughout the recent past. The writer’s pencil no longer traces lines of graphite on paper, but explores materiality and intentionality within an entirely different medium.

Moving beyond the seemingly trite debate between form and functionality in poetry— there is no need to cling to the aesthetically conservative view that computer text isn’t *real poetry*. Computer poetry, while still lingering on semantic and aesthetic merit, has shifted its gaze to emphasize the intermingling of human and machine identity. The digital age has erased notions of human-as-singularity, challenging the view that human identity is separate from its machinated counterpart.

Intentionless language has, arguably, never manifested within the computer medium, particularly due to the advent of increasingly sophisticated language corpora, AI transformers, and other means of conveying prose. Which is one of the more compelling developments in computer poetry, as progressions of computer language were not originally seen “...as an artistic endeavor; rather, [they] lay at the root of historic developments in natural language generation (NLG) and natural language processing (NLP).”¹ The early developments in NLP and NLG converged to pioneer machine translation (MT), a pivotal focus of post- World War 2 military research. As it developed, MT served as a “... a test case for the larger technologies of processing and generating language with computers”.² Words were heretofore tokenized, allowing for parsing of enemy documents during the Cold War. NLP’s capacity for translating tomes of literature, on the other hand, was deemed frivolous, for “...language’s ability to convey information is ‘in a certain very pregnant sense, infinite’”, whereby the semantic nature of each token would be too complex to decode.³ Thus: the delicacies of intermingling human prose and machine generation were seemingly voided. But, an afterthought emerged from the ashes of literature-based NLP research: the study and generation of computer poetry.

To understand the origins of computer generated poetry, consider its first known piece, crafted by Theo Lutz. Lutz, a student of Max Bense, pioneered this form by basing the textual corpus on Franz Kafka’s 1926 novel *The Castle*, and developing the text itself via an algorithm to stochastically iterate over a permutational series of sentences. Many common themes seen in modern NLP arise in this work: a probability matrix was created to produce a text that was meaningful, both syntactically and semantically, in relation to the underlying matrix.⁴ The result, “Stochastische Texte”, was published in the avant-garde journal *Augenblick*. It is excerpted, briefly, below.

EVERY DAY IS QUIET.
NOT EVERY STRANGER IS SILENT.

¹ Slater, 2023

² *ibid.*

³ <https://aclanthology.org/www.mt-archive.info/Bar-Hillel-1960-App3.pdf>

⁴ https://www.stuttgarter-schule.de/lutz_schule_en.htm

A LOOK IS FREE THEREFORE
A CASTLE IS QUIET.
NO TOWER IS LARGE.
A CHURCH IS NEAR.⁵

And so the question is posed: *is this amalgamation of stochastic language actually poetry?* Theo Lutz, along with Max Bense, were uncertain. In a miscellaneous cybernetic journal, Lutz announced that “...with the program-governed electronic computing systems henceforth emerges a machine-generated [synthetisch] philology... a philology, that is, that does not analyze texts but that generates them artificially”.⁶ Natural language, due to its inherent complexity, does not maintain the direct correlations found in logic and mathematics and is instead measured on two differing planes: imprecision and complexity on one, and unequivocality on the other. While not necessarily poetic by namesake, this process is deeply intertwined with human-generated prose, as the latter also toys with semantic notions of aesthetic value. Traditional poetry, by definition, has never been *totally interpretable*, so why do we expect semantic fidelity from AI? The lack of semantic coherence, in theory, added to the poem’s aesthetic appeal, giving the sterile text a humanized, poetic quality. As per Claude E. Shannon’s Information Theory, “...the more improbable a given combination of letters or words was, the greater amount of ‘aesthetic information’ it contained”, separating the notions of semantic and aesthetic coherence – a distinction repeatedly made in the traditional realm of poetry.⁷

Along a similar timeline, the generation of computer poetry had moved beyond the purely technical. For example, consider Kurt Vonnegut’s EPICAC, a short story written about a man who falls deeply in love with his coworker, Pat. Over the course of the text, he woos her; so much so that EPICAC, the narrator’s computer, develops similar feelings for her. Once EPICAC understands that it will never be loved by Pat, it commits digital suicide. The narrator, after uncovering the tragedy, comes to survey the computer’s wreckage. He finds 500 love poems, written by EPICAC, for each anniversary that he and Pat will share together. The story demonstrates a computational framework of ‘love’, and insinuates that there is an explicit link between poetry and emotion, both of which the computer is capable of generating.⁸ Another question is therefore presented: *what distinguishes computer consciousness from its humanized doppelganger?*

From the story’s framework, two conceptions of human/computer relationship were realized :

1. The comparison model, ‘...positing man as the independent measure to which artificial intelligence aspires’ and
2. The cybernetic model, ‘...casting human subjectivity as part of a feedback loop including technological components, and thus at least to some degree as a product of that system’⁹

⁵ <https://gnoetrydaily.wordpress.com/2010/12/22/2-lutz-fragments/>

⁶ “Mit den programmgesteuerten elektronischen Rechanlagen steht nunmehr einer synthetischen Philologie, einer Philologie also, die Texte nicht analysiert, sondern synthetisch erzeugt.”

⁷ Max Bense, *Einführung in die informationstheoretische Ästhetik: Grundlegung und Anwendung in der Texttheorie* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1969), p. 110.

⁸ From EPICAC

⁹ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690759>

Of course, computers have not been known to excel in the realms of human subjectivity and do not, generally, demonstrate intelligence beyond the highly technical. But there was an incongruity posed in aforementioned ideation of computer poetry, suggesting otherwise. *What makes human subjectivity?* Alan Turing, via his Imitation Game, considered poetry as a way to acknowledge machine ability (or lack thereof) to formulate consciousness. Describing the test itself: the computer is placed in one room, and a man is placed in another, and the computer should, in theory, be able to ‘ send a series of electronic pulses to the teleprinter that are indistinguishable from those produced by a human typist.’¹⁰ If the third party believes that the computer is human, based on the computerized sleight of hand, then the computer has succeeded. While transparent in theory, the test did not provide immediate answers. In fact, it only forced a ‘mystery of consciousness’ into the computerized milieu, where the computer can not be said to ipso facto have thoughts. Years later, Turing modified his conclusion: “... the subjective experience of thought and emotion can not be invoked as the decisive factor in distinguishing human from artificial intelligence. As long as the computer is able to generate poems sufficiently similar to those of human authors, it has passed...” the Turing poetry test.¹¹ And therefore, Vonnegut and Turing henceforth adopted widely differing understandings of language and subjectivity; Turing suggests that poems may be produced by a machine totally lacking consciousness, and that human subjectivity is not innate to poetry, but is, rather, a technological and morphological byproduct.

It does seem fundamentally fraught to categorize ‘natural’ and ‘synthetic’ poetry in a binary, as there evidently IS an intermingling of human/machine interaction throughout the creation of computer work. Even in Lutz’s seemingly straightforward stochastic text, there is a significant degree of interaction that re-inserts an authorial hand into the text itself. Lutz places the aforementioned hand into his work by selecting the initial vocabulary from the text, by writing code, and parsing through the final product. And, while he does surrender some control over the text, it is not absolute. The end result is a byproduct produced by interaction, at many points, between human and machine. Turing’s model echoes very distinctly throughout this particular manifestation, and also does so, more clearly, via Rul Gunzenhauser’s text, the first computer generated-love poem:

NO KISS IS SILENT
OR LOVE IS SILENT
OR NO SOUL IS PURE
AND NOT EVERY KISS IS GREEN
AND A YOUTH IS INTENSE.¹²

The text can be read without reference to any subjective or conscious experience, which can be further elaborated to suggest that words related to love bring the idea of love to mind, even when arranged stochastically. From one perspective, this poem falls quasi- obviously into the comparison model, whereby a programmer has poorly disguised his/her own authorship over a poem generated by a computerized proxy. But it can also be considered in terms of the cybernetic model , whereby authorship is not attributed to one entity or the other, but instead maintains itself as a third entity, semantically beyond the human-computer relationship. It tests the reader’s ability to understand language as something

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Büscher, Herrmann, and Hoffmann, *Ästhetik als Programm*, pp. 168–169.

more than just a discrete, autonomous subject, in lieu of simply ascribing authorship to a singular entity. This process is what I imagine as the reconsideration of human/computer interactions, allowing written work to be considered not on a binary plane but from many separate authorial dimensions.

Even today, the relationship between human generated text and machine language has not been ‘ethically resolved’. The role of subjectivity in human-computer interaction remains opaque– notions of plagiarism, ‘inhuman’ text generation, among others have permeated the digital age. *What becomes the human subject in the digital age, and how can the human/machine dialectic that underlies it be appropriately deconstructed?* As of right now, the only appropriate answer posits that the distinction between technology and human subjectivity is no longer as transparent as once anticipated. The human subject emerges– entirely remapped from previous iterations– as increasingly intertwined with a developing ‘cyborg consciousness’.

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