

Ghost Photography in the War on Terror

Manadel al-Jamadi, Abu Ghraib, and the Shadow of Surveillance

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On November 4, 2003, Manadel al-Jamadi arrived at Abu Ghraib. He was a high-level detainee suspected of being involved in a bombing that killed two Iraqi Red Cross employees. Within forty-five minutes of his arrival, al-Jamadi was murdered during his interrogation by CIA agent Mark Swanner under mysterious circumstances.¹ As a ghost detainee within the United States military's detention apparatus, al-Jamadi and his death only became public knowledge as a result of the presence of his corpse in the infamous Abu Ghraib photos. This paper examines the photograph of al-Jamadi taken with former US Army reservist Sabrina Harman to explore the visual problem of the ghost detainee body for the surveillance apparatus of the US War on Terror. If entrance into the calculus of surveillance within the biopolitical regime confers both personhood and disposability, what then do we make of the ghost detainee whose presence is signaled by perpetual absence and nonrepresentation? The photograph of al-Jamadi's corpse underscores the frenetic character of surveillance in the US biopolitical regime, where surveillant modes of datalogical representation encounter an inability to exercise control over death and representations of the dead.

In the image of Harman and al-Jamadi, Harman crouches over al-Jamadi's dead body giving a thumbs-up, a wide toothy smile spread across her face. Much critical attention has been paid to Harman in this photo,² but this essay shifts attention to the figure of al-Jamadi's corpse. Katherine Verdery identifies the political significance of corpses in their distinct temporal and territorial importance in the context of nationhood and national identity.³ For Verdery, dead bodies animate the past in the present moment and are necessarily territorial entities, which are "worth fighting over, annexing, and resignifying."⁴ Expanding Verdery's argument, I consider the image of al-Jamadi's dead body as a territorial asset within the landscape of surveillance in the War on Terror. At stake in the images of al-Jamadi and their subsequent circulation is the spatio-temporality of the ghost detainee body. The images point to the material presence of al-Jamadi's corpse in the face of the immateriality the US military ascribed to him. Through an appeal to the scopic regime historically associated with surveillance apparatuses and visual personhood,⁵ the visual record of al-Jamadi's corpse and murder evokes what David Lyon has called an "ethic of care."⁶ It does so by negotiating networks of surveillance and looking, and centralizing "embodied personhood" rather than "disembodied abstraction."⁷ The photograph as forensic memorial of al-Jamadi's embodied presence stands in contrast to the ways US military personnel disallowed al-Jamadi's death. The personnel even went so far as to present his dead body as alive for nearly a full day following his murder. Paraded around Abu Ghraib facilities on a gurney with an IV, al-Jamadi's corpse was shuffled between Other Government Agencies (OGA) that refused to be held accountable for the detainee's death.⁸



Figure 1. Photograph by Charles Graner of former US Army reservist Sabrina Harman taken with the corpse of detainee Manadel al-Jamadi

The image of al-Jamadi's corpse becomes evidence of a body that was otherwise relegated to the spectral during life; as a ghost detainee, al-Jamadi's entrance into American custody signals the radical separation of flesh and personhood.⁹ Major General Antonio Taguba of the US Army describes ghost detainees as being held "without accounting for them, knowing their identities, or even the reason for their detention."¹⁰ Were it not for the photographs taken by Harman and Graner, it is entirely possible that no one could have accounted for what had happened to al-Jamadi at Abu Ghraib. The fact that he was entered into the prison logbook at all is even uncharacteristic of ghost detainees.¹¹ This action—entering al-Jamadi into the prison log as "Bernie"¹²—emerges as a paradoxical form of memorialization that underscores the peculiar relationship between detention facilities such as Abu Ghraib and population management within "societies of control" more broadly.¹³ Building on Foucault's formulation of biopolitics, Laleh Khalili identifies carceral spaces in the US war on terror as "bureaucratized" sites where the state's biopolitical practices are honed.¹⁴ With their entry into the counterinsurgency facility, detainees are processed in highly mechanized ways that construct them as sites of data collection rather than personhood.¹⁵ Through matrices of sorting, biometric screening, and intelligence gathering, the detainee is transformed into what Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson have called "a decorporealized body, a data-double of pure virtuality."¹⁶ The processed detainee is introduced as a data point within the population of the other and the broader "surveillant assemblage."¹⁷

However, this formulation does not account for the role of ghost detainees in the framework of biopolitical surveillance. In 2005, of the 65,000 Iraqis screened for detention, only "about 30,000 of those were entered into the system, at least briefly, and assigned internment serial numbers."¹⁸ This indicates that at least 35,000 Iraqis who were taken into custody have no direct record of their detention, be it through processes of omission or commission.¹⁹ The lack of records to account for the experiences of more than half of Iraqi detainees is suggestive of Achille Mbembe's "necropolitics," a logic of disposability whereby "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."²⁰ If, within the War on Terror, a detainee's entry into the matrix of US surveillance and incarceration as a data point constructs his life as distinct from personhood, those detainees whose detentions were never recorded are constructed as entirely

unintelligible within this discourse of life. And if the detainee whose life is accounted for exists as disposable life within US imperialism, detainees unaccounted for accrue an additional degree of disposability. Ghost detainees are specters within the calculus of biopolitical surveillance. They are the shadows of the living dead that Mbembe describes simultaneously haunting *and* informing not only “grievable” but also “ungrievable” life and death.²¹

This begs the question: what about the dead body of the ghost detainee killed by the US military? It is here that the photograph of al-Jamadi’s corpse emerges as a particularly complex site in regard to representations of death in discourses of contemporary US surveillance. What does it mean to provide photographic evidence of the remains of a body never registered as living by the killing state? Roland Barthes noted that photography is inevitably about the relationship between death and the living. For the viewer, photographer, and subject of the photograph, photography always confers the imminence of future death in the present moment.²² The one exception to this formulation occurs when the photographic subject is the dead body. In this case, rather than imparting the specter of death, the photograph conjures the undead. Barthes describes that “the corpse is alive . . . the living image of a dead thing. . . . the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive.”²³ Following Barthes, the photograph of al-Jamadi’s corpse confers vitality to al-Jamadi in death that was arguably denied to him during the last hours of his life. This reading of the image of al-Jamadi’s body posed with Harman flies in contrast to mainstream interpretations that paint Harman as perversely reveling in being photographed with the dead detainee.²⁴ Though I do not wish to argue that Graner and Harman were performing a benevolent act by taking the photographs, I do wish to consider the meaning of the photographic event. Namely, it functions to memorialize al-Jamadi’s having-been-there through an appeal to bureaucratized modes of surveillance and registry. Furthermore, these events not only point to his having-been-there by hijacking the surveillant logic of representation, but also implicitly highlight the insidious and less immediately visible violence of his encounter with the US military apparatus.

In addition to providing a visual record of the violence inflicted upon al-Jamadi’s body during his fatal interrogation, the image provides testimony to al-Jamadi’s former aliveness by animating his dead body for viewers. The photograph insistently amplifies al-Jamadi’s having-been-there as an image

never meant to be captured, let alone circulated. Christopher Pyle notes that Col. Thomas M. Pappas issued a memorandum at the beginning of the Abu Ghraib scandal “that granted guards and interrogators a forty-eight-hour period of amnesty during which ‘without penalty or legal consequence’ they could get rid of photographs, tapes, or computer files ‘containing images of any criminal or security detainee currently or formerly interned’ at the prison.”²⁵ Again, without exceptionalizing the images, I wish to emphasize that the photographs were not destroyed despite all efforts by the US military. Photographs that were never meant to exist provide conclusive evidence of a ghost detainee who was constructed as nonexistent in the registry of the US military. And if it is impossible to murder someone who was never recorded as being there—a key tenet of US necropolitical logics of surveillance—these photographs point to the violence and instabilities of US biopolitical statecraft. The military’s attempts to control the existence and circulation of the photograph of al-Jamadi are an offensive intended to annex the image and the symbolic importance of al-Jamadi’s corpse. Charges later brought against Harman were not only meant to supply a scapegoat for the actions of higher officials at Abu Ghraib.²⁶ They were also tactical measures toward the acquisition of life and death as territorial concerns for the US state, an acquisition that is necessarily linked to the power over their visual and datalogical representations.

Attempts to conceal al-Jamadi’s death are consistent with US biopolitical imperatives that seek to exercise control over death as well as life. However, within biopolitics, death functions as a limit figure for the reaches of sovereign power, operating, “outside the power relationship” and “beyond the reach of power.”²⁷ Images marking al-Jamadi’s concealed death and demarcating the threshold between representation and nonrepresentation point to the instability of the biopolitical machine at its limits. It is left with the predicament of what to do with a body belonging to someone purported to not exist within the matrix of US surveillance. In al-Jamadi’s death, the military’s ability to exercise control over the detainee’s life and mortality in ways that perpetually erase his presence is supplanted by the materiality of the detainee’s corpse and an inability to exercise further power after his death. The images, their circulation, and the inclusion of al-Jamadi as Bernie in the prison log narrativize these trappings of biopolitical management and sorting.

From this point, given the military's anxieties regarding its inability to exercise control over death laid bare, the only recourse for government agencies at Abu Ghraib was to attempt to regulate any evidence of al-Jamadi's having-been-there. Herein lies the radical import of the images and log record of al-Jamadi; their insistence on registering al-Jamadi's embodied presence resignifies the conditions of his status as ghost detainee and his relationship to the US surveillance apparatus. Rather than rendering the violence perpetrated against al-Jamadi invisible and further erasing the conditions of his presence at Abu Ghraib, the photographic and written records of his "embodied personhood" resist the anachronizing narrative of the state that would relegate al-Jamadi to the spectral.²⁸ These records also act as testimony to a moment of crisis in the US surveillance apparatus. While the state presents itself as a smooth and efficient machine operating with utmost precision through modes of sorting, data collection, and abstraction, al-Jamadi's photograph demonstrates the fragility of this narrative. The biopolitical regime stutters and reveals its own anxieties in the face of that register over which it is unable to fully exercise control: death.

Notes

1. See Errol Morris, "The Most Curious Thing," in *Believing is Seeing (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography)* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 97-119. An autopsy conducted on al-Jamadi's corpse indicated that internal injuries sustained through the application of "slow deliberate" force were the cause of al-Jamadi's death. Notably, though al-Jamadi's death was ruled a homicide, no one has ever been charged or tried in the case (110-111).
2. See Morris.
3. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
4. Verdery, 52.
5. The scopic regime is perhaps best exemplified in Foucault's discussion of Bentham's panopticon. Though there still remains a strong recourse to the visual within contemporary surveillance practices, as David Lyon notes, it is necessary to formulate understandings of the surveillance apparatus that move beyond the panoptic gaze. David Lyon, "Surveillance, Power, and Everyday Life," in *Oxford Handbook of Information and Communication Technologies*, eds. Robin Mansell et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 449-467. Also see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the*

Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

6. David Lyon, *Surveillance Society: Monitoring Everyday Life* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001), 153.
7. Ibid.
8. Morris, 109, 107, 104.
9. Here, I understand spectrality in a Derridean sense, where the “logic of haunting” exceeds modern understandings of ontological and teleological surety (10). For Derrida, “[T]he specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some ‘thing’ that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition” (5). Derrida’s “specter” also echoes formulations of abstracted or disembodied subjects within surveillance societies, not unlike Lyon’s “disembodied abstraction” (Lyon 2001, 153) or Deleuze’s “dividual” (Deleuze 1992, 5). Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (1993; New York and London: Routledge, 2006); Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” October 59 (1992): 3-7.
10. Major General Antonio Taguba, “Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade,” 2004, 26, http://www.npr.org/iraq/2004/prison_abuse_report.pdf. I am grateful to Laleh Khalili for pointing me to this source in her book *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). Though this essay considers the spatiality of the image of the detainee and the detainee’s body, see Trevor Paglen’s *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World* for more information on the relationship between US military black sites and detainees in the War on Terror. Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
11. Morris, 104.
12. Entering al-Jamadi into the logbook as Bernie is a reference to *Weekend at Bernie’s* (dir. Ted Kotcheff, 1989). Bernie is the murdered boss of two employees who attempt to make it appear as though he is alive over the course of a weekend at Bernie’s beach house.
13. Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”
14. Khalili, 149.
15. Ibid., 146, 157.
16. Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, “The Surveillant Assemblage,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 4 (2000): 605-622, 611.
17. Ibid., 606.

18. Khalili, 150.
19. Ibid.
20. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40, 40. Emphasis in original.
21. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 14-15.
22. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 14.
23. Ibid., 79.
24. Morris, 111-118.
25. Christopher, H. Pyle, *Getting Away with Torture: Secret Government, War Crimes, and the Rule of Law* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2009), 105.
26. Morris, 111.
27. Foucault, 248.
28. Lyon 2004, 154.

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