Trauma, as we have seen, plays havoc with time. Haunting the new millennium, the legacy of loss bequeathed by modernity makes an uncanny claim upon the present. Modern genocide, total war, as well as modernism’s unresolved social antagonisms of race, class, and sexual difference remain charged with the traumatic affect of histories that, because they cannot be fully known, are subject to endless repetition. Lacking sufficient representation, the traumatic events of the past century cannot be fixed in history’s knowable archive but persist “out of joint” with conventional understandings of linear temporality. The traumatic edge of modernism—as we find it in the latest human rights violation, in the specter of terrorism, in the “shock and awe” of state reprisal, in the setbacks of continuing economic disparities and discriminations—intrudes upon the present as if from an imaginable future. At the same time, that edgy horizon possesses us, paradoxically enough, as something strangely familiar from the past: an unsettling déjà vu where we encounter exactly what we once pledged would happen “never again.” Increasingly in the postmodern public sphere, such revenants of atrocity, oppression, and political clash have come—in their seemingly ubiquitous recycling—to constitute “information” as such.

The productive task of democratic “nation building”—that belongs to the globalizing agenda of Empire—demands, paradoxically, the regulation and reproduction of everyday information in ways that extend the internal relations of power, law, and order sustaining imperial sovereignty. Yet the rule of Empire, as Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt have argued, always already rests on a relation of exception whose authority suspends the internal juridical order of
common law from a position outside the legal status quo. Increasingly, such political exceptionalism has itself become the rule of the day sustained under the guises of perpetual war, police and security actions, and other, more contingent civil emergencies. The spectacular shock and awe belonging to martial forms of imperial exceptionalism find their counterpart in the obscure, covert, and—it must be said—criminal arts of persuasion and torture that involve certain long-standing communicative techniques of psychological warfare. As Agamben has shown, the regime of modern exceptionalism parts company with the "juridicopolitical foundation of classical politics" even as it produces the biopoliticization of "bare life." For Agamben, the biopolitical exceptionalism that increasingly defines modernism's extrinsic relation to the law leads to Auschwitz. The "camp," he writes, "is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule." Arguably, America's own relation of exception to international law has witnessed the spectral return of the camp environment in U.S. detention centers at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison. While no one would compare the scale of torture of Abu Ghraib to the genocidal novum of the Holocaust, the persistent iconicity of atrocity that otherwise links Auschwitz to Abu Ghraib nevertheless makes for an uncanny repetition of the traumatic past. Abu Ghraib prison, in particular, discloses an analogous locale at the heart of Empire: one whose psychological operations, or psyops, record a uniquely intimate witnessing to the arresting biopolitics of imperial exceptionalism as it assumes the status of the global norm.

As we have seen since 9/11, managing the ongoing crises of Empire entails a certain routinization of violence: one that also involves techniques for easing the latent side effects of considerable social trauma. Extending the reach of American Empire into the electromagnetic spectrum of broadcast news, the "embedded" media practices that link the frontline to the headline would regulate the "live feed" of the moment through networks of normalized sign exchange. That attempt to manage trauma in the public sphere involves not just repression and censorship but also the artful screening of images that buffer horror through propaganda, spectacle, and entertainment. Yet "it would be a mistake," as Judith Butler has argued, "to think that we only need to find the right and true images, and that a certain reality will then be conveyed. The reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers." Reversing the claim of state representation to "capture" through prosopopoeia the readable faces of patriot and terrorist, victim and perpetrator, Butler argues that the regard of the Other beheld in the face demands another kind of witnessing: one sensitive to what Emmanuel Levinas has described in terms of the "extreme precariousness of the other." It is such "precarious life," Butler argues, that is effaced...
by the media’s “occlusions,” particularly in its ideological representation of the
other by means of figurative personification. Supplementing Butler’s salutary read-
ing of Levinas, we may also discern via a return to Freud certain specters and
revenants of modernism that haunt the contemporary representation of violence
with the violence of representation. Just as the media coverage of Vietnam was
ghosted by unauthorized images of atrocity, torture, and other violations of the hu-
man—most notably, in the indelible scenes of the My Lai massacre—similar, boot-
legged photos have come to complicate the official state “picture” of the American
presence in Iraq. In particular, what are we to make of the photographed psyops of
Abu Ghraib prison? And more to the point, how does the psychic life of the digitally
mediated photograph exceed the conscious communicative intent of its ideological
production to engage and disseminate the more overdetermined political uncon-
scious of Empire as such?

Not insignificantly, shortly after the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib cir-
culated in the global media, a New York Times editorial concluded that “[t]he inva-
sion of Iraq, which has already begun to seem like a bad dream in so many ways,
cannot get much more nightmarish than this.”5 That the photographic record of
the Abu Ghraib interrogations should invoke the figure of nightmare and bad
dream should come as no surprise. The power of these unregulated photographs
communicates in analogous ways to what Freud theorized as the dreamwork’s pict-
orial force: its reliance on the uncanny image to express wishes and thoughts that
would otherwise be repressed by rational discourse. Unlike conceptual thought,
“dreams,” Freud wrote, “think essentially in images.”6 Similarly, Freud’s “explana-
tion of hallucinations in hysteria and paranoia and of visions in mentally normal
subjects is that they are in fact regressions—that is, thoughts transformed into im-
ages” (ID, 583). Regression of thought into image, whether in the dream or halluci-
nation, marks a return to the “psychical locality” of the unconscious: a locality
shaped by impulses, wishes, fantasies and “thoughts cut off from consciousness and
struggling to find expression” (ID, 585). Not insignificantly, Freud described the
“mental apparatus” of regression by way of a figure “resembling a compound mi-
croscope or a photographic apparatus . . . [whose] psychic locality will correspond
to a point inside the apparatus at which one of the preliminary stages of an image
comes into being” (ID, 574). Curiously enough, the American interrogation center
at Abu Ghraib served as a military special-access program (SAP) not just for gath-
ering valued intelligence information. More provocatively, this “black” program—
rung by what Brigadier General Janis Karpinski described as the “disappearing
ghosts” of CIA officers and anonymous contract intelligence operatives—became a
kind of psychical locality in Freud’s sense: one that—through digital photography—
literally brought into focus the repressed truth of American foreign policy otherwise “cut off from consciousness and struggling to find expression.”

Belying America’s altruistic mission of liberating Iraqi citizens from Saddam Hussein’s tyranny, Abu Ghraib disclosed another more profoundly repressed counter-narrative. Tier 1-A—the hard-site, high-security zone of Abu Ghraib prison—revealed a fantasy of imperial domination that went to the heart of America’s political unconscious: one that found expression not in reasoned discourse but in visceral images of atrocity. Such psychological operations acted out a profound regression, in Freud’s sense, to primal scenes of classic sadomasochism, bondage, and domination as in Pfc. Lynndie England’s photographed pose of walking a naked Iraqi detainee on a dog leash. “I was instructed,” said England, “by persons in higher rank to stand there and hold this leash and look at the camera. . . . We thought that’s how they did it. . . . We’re not trained as MI or CIA—mind games, intimidation, it sounded pretty typical to us. . . . Well, I mean, they [the photos] were for psy-op reasons.”

As Seymour M. Hersh has convincingly demonstrated, Abu Ghraib represents the Defense Department’s policy disaster of mixing the covert psyops of military intelligence and CIA information gathering with the ordinary military policing of Iraqi prisoners of war. Psyops have constituted a typical weapon in the arsenal of psychological warfare whose institutional base reaches back as far as World War I, when in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed George Creel to lead the Committee of Public Information made up of the U.S. secretaries of War, Navy, and State. The rubric of psychological warfare actually derives from the German coinage of Weltanshauungskrieg (literally, worldview warfare) referring to new techniques of propaganda and covert acts of terror employed to secure ideological consensus during the Second World War. In America, Wild Bill Donovan was an early practitioner of psychological warfare within the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—a forerunner program to the Central Intelligence Agency, whose Office of Policy Coordination was charged in 1948 with the covert tasks of “propaganda, economic warfare; preventative direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states,” and so on.

The conjuncture of mass communication, persuasion, and terror that come together by degrees in military psyops runs the gamut from overt or “white” propaganda through “gray” acts of media subversion to the “black” arts of covert terrorism and torture. Photography, of course, has a long history of mass persuasion reaching back to the Constructivist era of the former Soviet Union, and psyops that rely on the photographic image had tactical pertinence in the Iraq war. Major Harry Taylor, head of the 42nd Commando Royal Marines’ Psyops offers an apt
summary of the uses of photographic propaganda: “We use tactical and strategic methods. Tactically, on the first stage, we target the military by dropping leaflets stating the inevitability of their defeat, telling them they will not be destroyed if they play our game and exactly how they can surrender. On the second wave we show them pictures of Iraqi officers who complied. On the third wave we show them pictures of those people who did not.”9 It is the third category of retributive photography that, arguably, Lynndie England was “instructed” to produce in the black psyops of Abu Ghraib.

Yet, in performing imperial mastery, England’s fantasy of domination goes beyond the Orientalist stereotypes that otherwise script Abu Ghraib’s scenes of sexual humiliation, derived as they were from Raphael Patai’s 1973 The Arab Mind: what Seymour Hersh cites as the “bible of the neocons on Arab behavior.”10 In this fantasy of imperial power, the abject Iraqi subdued at the end of England’s leash counterbalances the regressive oral-sadism literally unleashed in the attack dogs that otherwise mutilated the bodies of Iraqi prisoners inside Abu Ghraib. Significantly, the psychic fantasy of the man/dog is not unlike the “loup garou” or werewolf that, as Agamben explains, is a figure for both the exilic status of Homo sacer and the sovereign’s relation of exception to the juridicopolitical order.11 Whether on or off the leash, the loup garou can be read here as a condensation for the mutual constitution of imperial subject and Homo sacer in extrinsic relation to the law. Similarly, the other definitive image of Abu Ghraib—the infamous thumbs-up sign—became a definitive marker of phallic posturing: one that instantiates imperial sovereignty precisely from the production of the Iraqi as Homo sacer.

The imperial aim of giving the thumbs-up to what George Bush and other neoconservatives hail as the “Iraqi people” nevertheless confronts the trauma of, in Agamben’s phrase, a “biopolitical fracture” whose excess always already inhabits the civic populus in the bare life of Homo sacer. Indeed, it is only Homo sacer’s abjection that instantiates Empire’s idealized imagined community. Thus, Agamben writes, “Paraphrasing the Freudian postulate on the relation between Es and Ich, one could say that modern biopolitics is supported by the principle according to which ‘where there is bare life, there will have to be a People’—on the condition that one immediately adds that the principle also holds in its reverse formulation, which has it that ‘where there is a People, there will be bare life.’”12 The digitally recorded psyops of Abu Ghraib were intended to manipulate the thinking, the psychology, and the aims of suspected and would-be terrorists, but perversely they actually came to shed more light on America and its disturbing production of Homo sacer.

Such arresting images of “bare life” broadcast an ironic “blowback” to the Defense Department’s “shock and awe” war plans. “You read it,” Secretary of Defense
Donald Rumsfeld stated in his Senate Armed Services Committee testimony, “as I say, it’s one thing. You see these photographs and it’s just unbelievable. . . . It wasn’t three-dimensional. It wasn’t video. It wasn’t color. It was quite a different thing.” Symptomatic perhaps in the pattern of repetition marking Rumsfeld’s perplexed attempt to account for what “it was” there in the image—and, equally important, what “wasn’t” there in the readable report—is not just an unconscious truth “struggling to find expression” but, more to the point, the traumatic force of precarious life sacrificed to imperial fantasy. Indeed, the photographs of Abu Ghraib capture not just the psyops’ scripted scenarios of humiliation, cruelty, and dehumanization. They not only frame what Roland Barthes describes as the photograph’s studium: the cultural and ideological codes by which “the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions” take on a readable historical meaning. Neither can they be fully grasped as sociological documents in the manner of what Pierre Bourdieu defines as the “middle-brow art” of family portraiture and tourist snapshots: the photograph’s “means of solemnizing those climactic moments of social life in which the group solemnly reaffirms its unity.” Certainly, the conventions of posing that belong to the family photo and tourist shot underwrite England’s and Spc. Charles Graner’s posturing as a couple for the camera. Graner and England oddly enough became lovers and even parents together at Abu Ghraib. Beyond any of these readable narratives, however, the photos of Abu Ghraib communicate what Roland Barthes describes as the punctum, whose force punctuates, pricks, and wounds the scene of its studium with the trauma of “what Lacan calls the Tuché, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real in its indefatigable expression. . . . [P]hotographs are signs which don’t take, which turn, as milk does. . . . In short, the referent adheres” (CL, 4, 6). If photography is spectral in its arrest of time and its punctuation of the referent, then the images produced at Abu Ghraib are doubly possessed by the punctum of the Real.

For it is the death imprint as such that shadows the infamous thumbs-up photos of Graner and Spc. Sabrina Harman taken beside an iced Iraqi corpse, subsequently identified by the Guardian magazine as Manadel al-Jamadi, otherwise inventoried as body E63 for months in the cold storage of a Baghdad mortuary. Al-Jamadi was allegedly brought to Abu Ghraib in healthy condition only to die shortly thereafter under brutal CIA torture. The horror of this crime against humanity was psychically redoubled after his death in the grotesque photo taken of Graner and Harman giving the thumbs-up beside al-Jamadi’s ice-packed corpse. Not insignificantly, the thumbs-up sign accompanies virtually every act of corporeal violation photographed at Abu Ghraib. “Two Thumbs Up” serves as a metonym for the imagined self-possession of the imperial subject produced out of its relational dif-
ference from *Homo sacer*’s lack of being. This defining fetish of American identity, more than any of the other images of Abu Ghraib, signifies Empire’s biopolitical fracture and its symptomatic disavowal. It points redundantly and thus uncannily to what Barthes describes as the “pure deictic language” of the photo’s invitation to the viewer to “‘Look,’ ‘See,’ ‘Here it is’” (CL, 5). As an indexical sign, it both gestures to and disavows its grounding in the Real. The thumbs-up flashed at Abu Ghraib solely in proximity to prostrate Iraqi bodies and corpses instantiates the imperial subject through the symptomatic logic of the fetish. That is, its indexical sign of victory always already encrypts a reference rooted in the traumatic Real whose powers of abjection, annihilation, and death, paradoxically enough, it at once invokes and magically dispels.

What makes these photographs such a “different thing”—as Rumsfeld’s testimony has it—is, arguably, not just the impact of such literal images of death and bodily violation but also the return of a certain specter of modernism haunting the photographic archive of American foreign policy. The gleeful and thoroughly banal sadism captured in the thumbs-up sign that Graner and Harman flash beside a desecrated and unburied corpse—the same thumbs-up that they sport in back of a human pyramid of naked and anonymous Iraqi bodies—surely conjures the phantoms of atrocity witnessed in the pictorial record and survivor accounts of the Holocaust and other modern genocides. For while Abu Ghraib’s human pyramid of stripped prisoners invokes what former Defense Secretary James Schlesinger characterized as a “kind of ‘Animal House’ on the night shift,” its image does not merely gloss fraternity hazing rituals. Such piles of nude prisoners also recall the heaps of naked bodies stacked like cordwood at the killing centers of Auschwitz and Treblinka. Again, while the event of Abu Ghraib would surely not appear on any scale or continuum with the Holocaust, its iconicity nevertheless signifies on the conventional representations of what has come to define the modern biopolitics of bare life in the camps.

Yet in the photographs, what Hannah Arendt would define as Abu Ghraib’s “crime[s] against the human status” seem strangely invisible to their American perpetrators. Atrocities otherwise captured by the camera’s lens inside Abu Ghraib elude the knowing eye and recede into what Walter Benjamin would characterize as the photograph’s “optical unconscious.” Given the fact that Abu Ghraib’s widely broadcast images seemingly had little impact on the American electorate, one might well question whether “ordinary Americans” can bear witness to their government’s psychological operations. Here again, Freud’s photographic figure for time as deferred action (*nachträglichkeit*) remains salutary: latency “seems so strange that we might try to make it easier to understand by a simile; the process
may be compared to a photograph, which can be developed and made into a picture after a short or long interval.”20 Perhaps ordinary Americans are not unlike ordinary Germans, who similarly turned a blind eye on the production of bare life precisely because the imperial Ich only emerges where Homo sacer’s Es has been.

Like the overdetermined associations that ramify the dreamwork, digitized photographic representation is susceptible to iteration: to multiple citation beyond the psyops’ performative intent. Such powers of symbolic articulation may well baffle the imperial chain of command so as to call in question Empire’s fiction of the bellum justum. Mediated by the latency of time, such images of atrocity will perhaps prove susceptible to alternative counternarratives capable of a “just” witnessing to Empire’s traumatic historicity. Such testimony will, no doubt, call for new modes of poetic expression, for the high modernists’ aim of writing poems capable, as Pound had it, of “containing history” is complicated in the postmodern era by the return of modern traumas that remain—as Toni Morrison described them—“uncontained and uncontainable.”21 Indeed, such traumatic historicities can no longer be considered as somehow external to the verse medium but “first and foremost,” as Marjorie Perloff has observed, “a condition of language.”22 Anticipating, perhaps, that postmodern horizon of poetic testimony, William Carlos Williams avowed late in his career that

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.23

Set off in Williams’s formal pattern of enjambment is the poet’s passionate attention precisely to what much of contemporary verse has come to inscribe in its special field of discourse as a signifying “lack.” Composed in the wake of the extreme event, poetry offers a “difficult” and necessarily belated linguistic response to what otherwise goes missing from the conventional regimes of representation regulating the breaking “news” of the day. That lack of authorized, consumable, and often coerced information—afforded by the poetry of traumatic witness—speaks to the heart of “what is found there,” long deferred even now at the edge of modernism.