

Graner's Laugh: The Conceptual Architecture of a Guantanamo Rape Joke

In the 2008 stoner comedy film *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, the two protagonists, Harold and Kumar, are briefly incarcerated in the American military prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Almost at once they discover that a routine part of life in this imaginary Guantanamo is the “cock meat sandwich” or, rather, that the prisoners are regularly required to fellate the guards. The scene runs as follows: in Guantanamo, Harold and Kumar encounter two prisoners in the adjacent cell who boast about their terrorist activity. After appalling Harold and Kumar by slandering doughnuts, the terrorist prisoners then shift the conversation to prison food, which involves what they call a “cock meat sandwich.” As Harold and Kumar ask what this means, a guard arrives, telling the terrorist prisoners that it’s time for their sandwich. When they discover that they don’t have to deal with a particularly intimidating prison guard character named Big Bob, the other prisoners happily proceed to fellate their guard; Big Bob enters Harold and Kumar’s cell instead and indicates that his fellatio is their responsibility. The interaction is interrupted by an altercation in another cell, and the scene ends when Harold and Kumar use this distraction to embark on the escape for which the film is named. The short, dense scene utilizes a number of generic markers, but overall its tone is comedic: the scene is presented to the audience as a joke, as one of the film’s frequent humorous gross-out sexual situations. In this essay, I unpack how sexual abuse in a war prison can be presented as a comic event; though it may seem transparent, there is a great deal at stake in this joke, including political identity, homophobia, free speech, Americanness, and indeed even a potential critique of the war on terror (if one chooses to read it generously). There is also a great deal that makes this scene interesting to scholars of gender in particular, because it mobilizes many heteropatriarchal discourses concerning hegemonic masculinity, rape humor, homophobia, and the misogynistic ascription of pejorative meaning to sexual receptivity. By inviting us to laugh at this sexual abuse scenario, this film requires its audience (at least those who laugh) to inhabit the distasteful subject position of those who would laugh at the sexual suffering of prisoners in US war prisons. This war on terror *schadenfreude* reveals a great deal about the weaponized gendered discourse of the war on terror.

My critique here is not grounded in an attempt to solicit ethical condemnation of the joke or of the film; indeed, such ground has been ably covered by Amnesty International, which responded to the film's representation of the prison with the succinct rejoinder that "Guantanamo is no joke" (Seja 2011, 233). Indeed, the joke is obviously intentionally ethically indefensible, so my critique in this essay does not rehearse these arguments, persuasive as they may be, by engaging with it in these terms. Neither do I argue that this scene is representative of all rape humor. It is notoriously difficult to state definitively what precisely makes jokes funny, as they are multivalent, chaotic, and available to many kinds of laughter at once; in addition, no effective analysis of humor can be limited simply to textual exegesis because so much of joke-work relies on the joke's relation to interpersonal, contextual, historical, and political factors. Accordingly, rather than making broad remarks about rape humor, I am interested in understanding this scene because the war on terror *schadenfreude* central to it places certain very specific ideological demands on audiences—particularly with regard to the ways in which it articulates a surprisingly dense range of anti-Muslim, homophobic, heteronormative stereotypes in one compact scenario—if they are to find it funny. In a recent reevaluation of Andrea Dworkin's provocative critique of compulsory heterosexuality, *Intercourse*, Jessica Joy Cameron has shown that a critical understanding of the discourse of intercourse-as-violation is valuable for feminist studies because "the social meanings attributed to sexual activities are transferred to the body of their actors in ways that are often productive of gendered difference" (2017, 8). That is, while sexual acts themselves have no innate or predetermined meaning, the meanings given to them through heteronormative discourses reveal a great deal about (and indeed, have implications for) gendered concepts and experiences of embodiment, sexuality, and power and for feminists' understandings of the gendering of specific bodies, beings, and acts. The same is true of this rape joke because it reveals a great deal about the intersections of racialized and gendered representations of embodiment, violent gender-based humor, Islamophobic ethnogender stereotyping, and conservative attitudes toward sexual violence, all of which are prominent in the political and affective economies of the war on terror. Without claiming that I have closed the joke to other interpretations, in this essay I both subject this joke to close textual analysis and examine what might be termed its "conditions of possibility," that is, the ideas, tropes, narratives, and stereotypes that the joke mobilizes in order to be comprehensible and, for its audience, funny—such as Islamophobia and the pleasure of dehumanizing one's enemies in sexualized terms; negotiations of national belonging; homophobia, misogyny, and heteronormativity; and the ongoing debate about free speech, political correctness, and transgressive representations.

This is of interest to feminist scholars and, indeed, anyone who would understand the continuing significance of the gendered nature of war on terror rhetoric, because the use of rape humor to articulate social and cultural meaning is an element of a broader representational strategy in which sexual roles are made to reflect political status. In *The History of Sexuality* (1992), Michel Foucault comments upon what he calls a “principle of isomorphism between sexual relations and social relations” whose origin he identifies in Greek ruminations upon appropriate sexual conduct. “What this means,” he writes: “is that sexual relations—always conceived in terms of the model act of penetration, assuming a polarity that opposed activity and passivity—were seen as being of the same type as the relationship between a superior and a subordinate, an individual who dominates and one who is dominated, one who commands and one who complies, one who vanquishes and one who is vanquished” (215). For the Greeks, Foucault writes, the masculine penetrative role in sexuality was valorized in terms that underscored its analogy to political agency, social esteem, and the status of victor; sexual passivity and physical receptivity were despised because they reflected a subservience and inferiority that was as politically and socially valent as it was sexually meaningful (215–16). The isomorphism between power and sex—the way that sexual roles are understood to have implications for political status, the way that sexual violence is shown as a punishment with a particularly appropriate application and as communicating a specific array of gendered political meanings, including humorous meanings—is a flexible and generative metaphor in which many reactionary ideas, tropes, and narratives intersect, and it is central to the meaning of this joke. Feminist writers have, of course, consistently critiqued the presence of this gendering of power relations, which seeks to legitimize patriarchal authority as a natural extension of a physical, biological reproductive principle; indeed, describing sexual relations as a form of violent domination may have important critical feminist significance, to the extent that it can expose patriarchal power as tyrannical. However, this joke is by no means an example of such feminist resistance, as it underscores the sexual nature of power relations and takes pleasure in it.

Sexual abuse in prison—the conceptual territory of this joke—is a particularly stark example of an arena in which this relationship between gender, violence, and status is visible, since prison rape is, as Ian O’Donnell observes, “an acting out of power roles within an all-male authoritarian environment where strength and dominance are emphasized.” As with much sexual violence, “prison sexual violence is only partly related to sexual gratification and is never about mutual fulfilment. It is a stark demonstration of power.” Sexual attacks demarcate status, as “victims are considered to have forfeited their ‘manhood.’ This is an irreversible humiliation: they have been

converted from ‘men’ into ‘punks’” (2004, 243). As Catharine MacKinnon writes, male-male sexual assault has a particular set of social meanings: “For a man to be sexually attacked, by placing him in a woman’s role, demeans his masculinity; he loses it, so to speak” (1997–98, 20). Much of the violence in war on terror prisons has been sexual in nature, including penetrations and rapes (Danner 2004, 217–40). I am concerned here with the way that cultural texts load sexual violence with cultural and political meaning, and the ways that representations of sexual violence are used to rearticulate this meaning. The choice of a comedic text may seem inappropriate in this context, but in fact an appreciation of the role of humor in violent sexualized discipline sheds important light on the ways in which the acts themselves are justified by their perpetrators and also the ways in which the ideas to which such acts are related are spread throughout much of wider society. The cultural dialogue about the meaning of rape is by no means restricted to texts that are positioned as “serious”; indeed, because humor and ridicule can be particularly potent ways of articulating disapproval, they are an ideal means for inscribing and reinforcing social and political value. The rape joke in *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* is a particularly rich site in which humor is used to articulate ideological—sexist, homophobic, racist—meanings.

Heterosexuality, hegemony, humor

The concept of heteronormativity is central to my reading of *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*. This idea has a rich history in feminist scholarship and can be traced to Adrienne Rich’s notion of compulsory heterosexuality (1980); the term helps feminists critique the way in which heterosexual norms structure experience in an oppressive and disciplinary manner (Berlant and Warner 1998; Jackson 2006). Heterosexuality occupies the position of a compulsory norm that saturates the social fabric with unspoken, intuitive rules, which guide and to an extent determine permissible behaviors and identities. Heterosexuality is not reducible to a set of universally preapproved sexual practices and is nowhere explicitly doctrinally formulated; neither is it unitary, unambiguous, or everywhere the same. It is more accurate, rather, to say that heterosexuality manifests in a heterogeneous range of multiple heterosexualities. These heterosexualities, which may not be compatible (and indeed are often in open competition, as there is considerable anxiety over which is the most acceptable way to be heterosexual), constitute and are constituted by a fluctuating and flexible arrangement of political and ethical attitudes, interpersonal expectations, social and private rituals, and intimate interactional activities, with a range of teleological

goals (procreation, marriage); gendered identities (male, female, some transgender identities); socializing ideologies (homophobia, heteronormativity, monogamy); and group dynamics (homosociality, the family). Through the repetitive omnipresence of heteronormative discourse, heterosexuality is made to seem a natural extension of biological principles in order to naturalize and legitimize its political hegemony. Moya Lloyd writes that the normative standard implied within heteronormativity is that “heterosexuality is a prescribed mode of behavior, a regulatory standard, deviation from which is liable to censure, medical intervention, or worse” (2013, 823), and Darren Lenard Hutchinson adds that “rigid sexuality hierarchies normalize—and render invisible—heterosexuality; they also stigmatize nonheterosexual identities and practices” (2002, 15). Heteronormativity has a disciplinary character, and buttressing the foundations of heterosexuality through the stigmatization of nonheterosexual desires, lifestyles, individuals, and communities as “unnatural” and antiprocreative is chief among its major tasks.

Humor is an informal practice that can enable and enrich the policing of gender roles. As Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak write, “humour is frequently invoked to expose, police and create gender-sexual hierarchies. Humour is a technique for the enactment of masculine identities and can be seen to produce differentiated heterosexualities” (1997, 70). The homophobic humor of *Harold and Kumar* reinforces the boundaries of normative heterosexuality through a potent articulation of disgust at a male-male sex act. This joke, however, reveals the complex interaction and interpenetration of heteronormativity (or rather, the discourse of heterosexuality) with other currents of political meaning. The joke is also concerned with the meaning of Americanness, for example: normative masculine heterosexuality is very often deeply implicated with nationalist patriotic discourse, and in Harold and Kumar’s prison rape joke, ideas about national belonging and the rejection of politically illegitimate violence (the terrorism of which the prisoners boast) are articulated through heterosexual revulsion toward homosexual practices. It is a representation of a forced sex act that articulates ideas about status, power, and normativity. It is a joke about prisoners willingly fellating their victimizers and about how the sympathetic protagonists fear to do so; it is about masculine roles, the expected, “appropriate” response to being required to fellate somebody in power, and the ridiculousness of those who embrace sexual receptivity.

Jokes as political communication

Popular culture is one of the key locations in which debates about torture in the war on terror have been articulated. Popular cultural discursive spaces are particularly powerful because of their informal nature, their potential reach,

and their power to influence, even to decisively shape, national conversations; popular culture is a forum in which political questions are formulated, explored, and critiqued, and comedy plays a vital role in these processes. Elaine Martin writes that comedic responses to the war on terror “represent attempts to cope with, confront, comment on, and even contain the potential danger represented by terrorism” (2011, 233), and indeed it is true that many comedies addressing the war on terror participate in its ideological mission by criticizing and ridiculing the terrorist opponents of the United States. Indeed, comedians have often been on the vanguard of Islamophobic new atheism; one need only think of Bill Maher, for example, whose talk shows regularly fuse comedy performances and Islamophobic secularist rhetoric, or of Jeff Dunham’s puppet character Achmed the Dead Terrorist, for examples of the way that comedy can contribute to the “militarization of visualized culture” (Malvern and Koureas 2014, 3), which has been a feature of so much post-9/11 cultural production.

Although I speak here about the mobilization of humor in processes of heteropatriarchal violence, it is important to underscore that humor has many vital political functions, including resistance to and critique of power, and that I do not intend to produce a reductive account by ignoring the vibrant and multivalent character of comedy and humor. Much American political humor regarding the war on terror plays a vital cultural-political role because it “raises issues and calls attention to matters about which we have trouble speaking in ordinary language” (Brigham 2005, 482); it helps us address uncomfortable issues, manage difficult emotions, and express sentiments that resist the containment of other forms of ordinary discourse—and the ability of popular satire, for example, to confront and ridicule power is particularly valuable in Donald J. Trump’s USA. I do not intend to argue that humor and laughter cannot have a vital, radical, critical, pleasurable importance and enormous subversive potential; comedy is distinctive for its ability to negotiate many simultaneous meanings, many of them of course often positive, engaging, stimulating, creative, and therapeutic. The political potential of comedy in the context of the war on terror is shown by the substantial body of subversive comedic material critiquing American exceptionalism, exemplified by texts such as *Team America: World Police* (2004). The practice and geopolitics of torture have by no means been exempt; novelist Alex Gilvarry (2012) and stand-up comics such as Stewart Lee (2010, 61, 180–86) and the disgraced Louis CK (2015) have satirized the political justifications for US torture.¹ Nonetheless, in order to unpack the schaden-

¹ The revelations of Louis CK’s sexual misconduct came to light while this essay was in the final stages of the editorial process. I have retained this limited reference to a small aspect

freude of this specific rape joke, it is necessary to place emphasis on the ways in which humor can articulate, reinforce, and participate in malice.

Humor is an interactive and spontaneous social practice and is not merely a matter of the production of concrete textual artifacts; as Simon Critchley writes, jokes are forms of “socially embedded philosophizing” (2002, 87). Humor is a form of playful communication that relies for its effect on its shared, social, interpersonal nature, and that accordingly can only take on its full meaning in specific contexts and among specific communities. As Elise Kramer writes, humor “requires a shared set of beliefs in order to be socially meaningful” (2011, 138); Juha Ridanpää also argues that humor, “regardless of its seemingly innocent nature, functions in manifold ways as a cultural institution through which society and space become politicized” (2014, 140–41). Humor and comedy are as saturated with the political as any other form of cultural production or political communication, as they disseminate, develop, and modify meanings through the ways in which affective and political registers are interpenetrated, interleaved, inseparable. Asif Agha writes that “cultural value is not a static property of things or people but a precipitate of sociohistorically locatable practices, including discursive practices, which imbue cultural forms with recognizable sign-values and bring these values into circulation along identifiable trajectories in social space” (2003, 232). Humor constructs, reinforces, and reflects normativity; it establishes, negotiates, and often transgresses the boundaries of what is considered serious, appropriate, and acceptable. The nature of the cultural value that jokes circulate is rarely straightforward, however. Jokes and other comedic productions are dense textual units, at once efficient and anarchic, both directly clear and ambiguously elastic, with the power to spread, reinforce, modify, and negotiate a range of political meanings. Laughter, too, is an opaque, complex, and nuanced affective activity with the potential to be deeply political. To understand, laugh with, or share a joke requires a common set of cultural and political values, meanings, and reference points; crucially, the enjoyment, rather than the simple recognition, of humor requires a consonance between the joke and the beliefs of the hearer or audience (LaFollette and Shanks 1993).

Further, humor inevitably exists in a relation of irretrievable, intimate, and mutually constitutive involvement with the social conditions from which

of one of his shows simply because it supports my point that comedic critique of the war on terror was fairly widespread. Given the argument I am making in the present piece, however, I feel I should underscore that I in no way intend this reference to his work to indicate approval of or sympathy for him, and that I don’t intend to intellectually or politically rehabilitate him in any way.

it arises. This is particularly important with humor that engages controversial or tendentious ideas, as this rape joke does, such as sexuality, violence, or race. Merrie Bergmann (1986) writes that sexist and antifeminist laughter is painful for its objects—women—precisely because the joking cannot be separated from harmful sexist practices: that is, sexist comedy is a product of the sexist beliefs, attitudes, and norms that constitute its material context (see also Ryan and Kanjorski 1998, 750–51). Sexist laughter *is* sexist conduct. Further, in addition to its being “a crucial technique for reproducing inequality and injustice” (Ahmed 2017, 261) more generally, sexist laughter perpetuates rape culture—that is, the misogynist social conditions in which rape is trivialized, normalized, and celebrated (Meier and Medjesky 2017, 3–6). Likewise, Pol Dominic McCann, David Plummer, and Victor Minichiello (2010) found in the course of qualitative empirical research that it was difficult to separate homophobic beliefs from homophobic behavior and that humor is a key practice in the homophobic delineation and reinforcement of the boundaries of socially permissible hegemonic masculinity. Regarding race, Michael Billig (2001, 2009) argues that laughing at a racist joke requires more than simply an appreciation of the joke-work or a recognition of the intellectual labor that has produced it; one has to accept and approve of the racist stereotypes it mobilizes in order to laugh at it (here it is important to again recognize the difference between, on the one hand, identifying a speech act as a joke and, on the other, taking pleasure in it). Likewise, Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering call racist humor “a form of comic malice” (2008, 811), and they credit it with the power to “permit, legitimate and exonerate an insult” (2009, 14). As a form of political communication, racist, homophobic, and sexist humor both requires a preexisting shared racism, homophobia, and sexism in order to work—that is, to be enjoyed as funny—and further, it has the power to reproduce, dignify, and reinforce the racism, homophobia, and sexism on which it is based. To speak again in terms of heteronormativity, humor is a material interpersonal practice that has the potential to produce disciplinary effects and is as such always potentially complicit with the reproduction of hegemonic power. This is because humorous meaning is socially embedded and politically significant—and because it participates in a uniquely vibrant way in the policing of gender roles and the distribution and negotiation of ideological ideas. Its pleasurable affective character makes it particularly adept at this task.

Laughter is one of the major affective dimensions of interpersonal informal discipline, and it is also one of the major ways in which torture is trivialized and made to seem acceptable. However, as laughter can have a multitude of meanings, we must be clear that the laughter that concerns us here is *schadenfreude*—“harm-joy”—which has classically been considered a

form of gloating. Schuyler W. Henderson pithily writes that “the pleasure derived from observing the humiliation of a defiant enemy reduced to conquered ignominy has its roots in the same comic principles as watching an arrogant man slip on a banana peel” (2005, 188). This position has a distinguished philosophical pedigree. Thomas Hobbes writes that laughter is a grimacing expression of sudden glory experienced upon “the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” ([1651] 1985, 125); Jean-Paul Sartre writes that pleasure and racism are intimately connected, because the “joy of hating” makes prejudice “*amusing*” (1948, 21, 39); Friedrich Nietzsche writes that, before the crystallization of the moral universe of which he was so critical, “the opportunity to *inflict* suffering” represented “an actual *festivity*” ([1887] 1996, 47) and that torture, mutilation, and executions were long a source of commonly accepted amusement (47–48); although Sigmund Freud’s theory of laughter focuses more on the psychological relief afforded by opportunities to laugh at taboo subjects, he does also argue in his discussion of tendentious humor that laughing at bawdry—sexual talk directed at women—is “laughing like a spectator at an act of sexual aggression” ([1905] 2002, 95). All of these very different arguments and positions in different ways reveal the fact that the “malevolent enjoyment” (Simon 2017, 251) of *schadenfreude* can be a component of oppression, an act of discrimination, intimidation, or violence that amplifies the attack which solicited the laugh. Its role in the sexual abuse in war on terror prisons is further evidence of this: in the US-run prison at Abu Ghraib, in which thousands of Iraqi prisoners were incarcerated at the height of the Iraq war and which was the site of sexualized torture and other abuses, the presence of female soldiers at the scene of a sexual humiliation was instrumentalized as a “force multiplier”; that is, female laughter at the torture of Arab prisoners was a deliberate, planned component of the violence, incorporated into the disciplinary regime specifically to maximize suffering (Gourevitch and Morris 2008, 113). As the film reviewer J. Hoberman (2008) remarks in his review of *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, the fact “that the filmmakers, Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, imagine the worst form of torture as sexual humiliation . . . would have made perfect sense to Sabrina [Harman] and the gang” at Abu Ghraib. However, the violent nature of laughter is rarely any longer considered a convincing explanation of humor; over thirty years ago, John Morreall (1982) influentially delineated two explanations of laughter that improve upon it, and indeed, Freud’s theory of jokes as relief and the incongruity theory of laughter that Morreall traces through Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer are more often found to be more subtle, complex, and intellectually satisfying explanations of the psychological and philosophical operation of humorous pleasure. I

would like to posit nonetheless that neither incongruity nor relief can explain the cock meat sandwich, which can only be understood as funny through a recourse to a laughter that delights in suffering.

Transgressive comedy, political correctness, free speech

The species of *schadenfreude* that projects prejudice and participates in informal heteronormative discipline is intentionally controversial and transgressive, and is a practice that is both the source of many anxieties and the subject of a particularly emotive debate. Cherished in the West, laughter at harm or vulnerability is increasingly described as endangered by political correctness. “Political correctness,” defined as the attempt to deinstitutionalize and delegitimize entrenched overt racism or, as Edna Andrews writes, the process of “reincorporating into our society those persons who have become increasingly alienated as the parameters of inequality increase and deepen” (1996, 401–2), is often described by critics as an overbearing, censorious, totalitarian apparatus that enforces a narrow normative morality that stifles creativity, individuality, and free expression. However, rather than introducing a new normativity—generating and enforcing new restrictions on permissible speech—it is more accurate to talk of political correctness as a way of redefining existing normativities in speech and action. As established above, a range of interpersonal interactions are always already inflected by invisible conservative and heteronormative parameters in ways that define what it is possible to think, say, or believe; the contribution of political correctness is to attempt to modify these norms in a way that minimizes harm. Nonetheless, through making normativity visible, political correctness is often blamed for introducing normative moral positions into a field that was previously uncontaminated by them. Conservatives frequently use the term as a catchall pejorative for anything to which they object—human rights, feminism, antiracism, postcolonial critique. As long ago as 1992 it was observed that conservatives “conflate serious criticism and intolerant dogmatism under the label of ‘political correctness’ and thereby discredit *all* critical efforts” (Scott 1992, 67). That is, because political correctness is widely, for better or worse, seen as an annoying and gratuitous micromanagement of speech habits, it is convenient for conservatives to dismiss anything more substantial that they disagree with by describing it as excessively politically correct. For one striking example, we could recall that President Trump trivialized and summarily dismissed political or moral oppositions to torture—serious and widely acknowledged ethical and legal concerns—by describing them as political correctness: “The enemy is cutting off the heads of Christians and drowning them in cages,” he wrote for *USA Today* in 2016, “and yet we are too politically correct to respond in kind” (Trump 2016). To re-

turn to laughter, political correctness, as an informal yet socially expected restriction on speech, is often presented as an existential threat to the intentionally provocative and transgressive pleasures of tendentious humor; debates over free speech and comedy are as a consequence particularly rich sites in which can be observed this rhetorical dismissal of antiracist and feminist concerns under the auspices of the “radical” opposition to political correctness.

Offensiveness is not an inherent property or immanent characteristic of speech, writing, or any other performative communicative act but rather a political effect produced by the power relations that underpin every social interaction (Kuipers 2011; Mondal 2014). Publishers, editors, writers, and filmmakers, as mainstream high-profile discursive agents, are in positions of considerable power; aggressive laughter and the leisure to provoke it through intentionally confrontational cultural production are privileges, acts of the powerful. Nonetheless, free speech advocates reinforce their rhetorical positions by positioning intentionally offensive material as an expression of authentic liberalism embattled, threatened, or under siege by the “forces” of politically correct multiculturalism. Sara Ahmed, in a response to Slavoj Žižek’s controversial claim that the hegemonic power of liberal multiculturalism is an empirical fact, writes that free speech advocates deliberately represent liberal multiculturalism as hegemonic and antidemocratic in order to appear counterhegemonic when articulating retrograde or racist positions: “We have articulated a new discourse of freedom: as the freedom to be offensive, in which racism becomes an offence that restores our freedom” and in which “the offendible subject gets in the way of our freedom” (2008). That is, political correctness is positioned as the disciplinary mechanism of a totalitarian thought police in order for racist, homophobic, or antifeminist speech to be positioned as radical, liberating, and antiestablishment; by attempting to return to an (imagined) prelapsarian time before moral norms, opponents of political correctness in fact advocate for a conservative normativity. That is, reactionary normativity is positioned as a truly free, unrestricted, and egalitarian space because its normativity can hide in plain sight, whereas the normativity of political correctness appears artificial and imposed from without because its architects and advocates are vocal and visible.

For example, in the aftermath of the ISIS attacks on Brussels in 2016, the editors of *Charlie Hebdo* released an editorial justifying their intentionally vicious satirical approach. They wrote that political correctness facilitates terrorism because it encourages a climate in which everybody is so sensitive to immigrant religious sensibilities that the dominant culture cannot prohibit cultural practices that create an environment conducive to violence. “The fear of contradiction or objection. The aversion to causing controversy.

The dread of being treated as an Islamophobe or being called racist”; these are the pernicious effects of political correctness, claim *Charlie Hebdo*’s editors, and they represent a way in which terrorist atrocities are made easier and more likely: “It’s not easy to get some proper terrorism going without a preceding atmosphere of mute and general apprehension” (*Charlie Hebdo* 2016). This insinuation that political correctness is complicit with terrorism is so widespread as to be a commonplace. Mick Hume, for example, writes that ISIS-affiliated executioners are merely the “armed extremist wing of a thoroughly modern Western culture of enforced conformism” (2015, 3); that is, that murderous extremism is an inevitable consequence of political correctness—the assassination of artists is, in this astonishing rhetorical contortion, caused by respect for difference. This slippage is found in texts that have only the most tenuous connection to the war on terror, such as Sandra Hill’s paranormal romance comedy *The Angel Wore Fangs*, in which a character explains (diegetically) that ISIS is able to establish training camps in Montana due to the irresponsible permissiveness of political correctness: “This is the land of the free. Terrorists love your country’s political correctness” (2016, 65). Moreover, this rhetorical association of political correctness with extremism is part of a wider strategy conflating the objection to offensive material with antidemocratic political traditions. Robert A. Kahn (2009–10), for example, has critiqued the ways in which Flemming Rose—the editor of Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* responsible for the publication of inflammatory cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad—positioned his critique of radical Islam as a critique of a form of antidemocratic totalitarianism that threatened to overwhelm liberalism from within; this in turn echoes paranoid dystopian fantasies about Islam politically and demographically displacing European republican democracy, such as Michel Houellebecq’s novel *Submission* (2015). Antiracism and feminism are dismissed as irrelevant and overprotective political correctness but also shown, perhaps contradictorily given their supposed irrelevance, as powerful factors, crucial to constructing the enabling environment in which the appetite for murder can grow.

Consequently, transgressive representations and the schadenfreude that they seek to solicit are described as necessary expressions of democratic anti-authoritarianism, a form of nonviolent citizen counterterrorism. The transgressive representation—the inflammatory cartoon, the racist caricature, the direct insult—is positioned as the pinnacle of the absolute, indivisible democratic freedoms that the terrorist wants to destroy, and intentionally offensive speech—with “offensive” understood as interchangeable with “free”—is rhetorically positioned as morally mandatory in order to deny the terrorist his victory. This, I would like to argue, is what is happening in this rape joke scenario. Because the film itself is broadly (as we will see below) antiracist,

because political correctness is positioned as the entrenched discourse of the enemies of democracy, and because the terrorist is positioned as the ultimate indefensible subject, the film is able to articulate homophobic anti-Muslim racism—the precise politics of dominant war on terror discourse that it claims to oppose—through the sexual humiliation of the Muslim terrorist and to present this victimization as consistent with democratic liberalism. That is, terrorists are represented in as retrograde a way as possible—through a rape joke that stigmatizes the pleasure of sexual receptivity through associating it with terrorism, which is itself shown as emblematic of a politically inferior form of masculinity—because it is the filmmakers’ counterterrorist duty to shatter the political correctness that, apparently, emboldens and enables terrorism at the same time as it stifles free speech.

Cock meat sandwich

The Harold and Kumar films do not fit straightforwardly into this category of confrontational humor, however. With their libertarian “anything goes” philosophy, they reveal emphatically that comedy can be at once subversive and conservative, simultaneously progressive and reactionary. There are three entries in the series: *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004); the sequel *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* released in 2008, which specifically concerns us here; and finally *A Very Harold and Kumar Christmas* (2011). All of the films feature the two lead characters going on road trips with initially modest aims that are comedically complicated by various wacky encounters. Most of the detours involve Harold and Kumar expressing disgust or outrage at one thing or another; as an accelerated iteration of the genre that Paul C. Bonilla (2005) calls “Hollywood Lowbrow,” they exhibit the characteristics of the R-rated gross-out genre such as sexual humor, profanity, scatological events, innuendo, and so on. Crucially, they combine this lowbrow spectacle and the “decidedly masculinist orientation” (Sears and Johnston 2010) of the stoner genre with moments of unashamed sentimentality, and at the end of each film there is a more or less explicitly stated moral-political message. For example, Kumar says in the first film that their quest for cheeseburgers has been “about the American dream,” and in the second, George W. Bush explicitly states the take-home lesson of the movie: “You don’t have to believe in your government to be a good American. You just have to believe in your country” (even though the film is critical of the war on terror, it rehabilitates its chief architect). The third film is as conventionally sentimental and family-oriented a Christmas film as you could hope to see. Toilet humor notwithstanding, the films are above all moral fables.

When the movies have been discussed by academics, they have been broadly well received. David Gillota, for example, celebrates the first film for “challenging the reductive ways that American culture often discusses race and ethnicity, and its method of allowing the protagonists to interrogate their ethnic identity in relation to other groups” (2012, 965). This is, of course, because the two protagonists are second-generation immigrants. Harold is of Korean descent, and Kumar is of Indian descent, and the films address the challenges of hybrid identity and expose the racisms that they, and other immigrants, regularly face. Indeed, the way that *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* ridicules the official discourse of the post-9/11 global war on terror has led to it being praised, with perhaps a dash of hyperbole, as “one of the most progressive road movies ever made” (Wright 2016, 3). These progressive credentials are most easily read in the ways in which the majority of the antagonists are icons of mainstream white hegemonic masculinity. The films ridicule corrupt police, a gang of racist boneheads, young Republicans, the Ku Klux Klan, violent prison guards, the CIA, fathers (whether violently over-protective or henpecked and pathetic), and macho gangster henchmen who are comedically revealed to have emotional sensitivity. Nonetheless, the progressive elements of the films are constantly in tension with their transgressive elements, which are intentionally retrograde and anti-political correctness—that is, at the same time as they poke fun at conservatism, they also intentionally transgress the liberal moral norms associated with political correctness. All three films are unrelentingly misogynistic, homophobic, and disablist, and they use deformity and class prejudice as comic cues. The Harold and Kumar films show, and in particular the cock meat sandwich joke shows, that even explicitly antiracist texts that are confrontationally critical of the war on terror—for this is the overall tenor of Harold and Kumar’s irreverent sojourn through indefinite detention—can participate in the normalization of the worst excesses of the political constellations that they appear to critique.

This oscillation between subversive and conservative modes of humor is particularly pronounced in *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*, which is caustic, chaotic, and antiestablishment at the same time as it participates in the recirculation of war on terror ideology. It is startlingly radical in some respects, as it presents an accessible and digestible resistance to many of the tenets of official war on terror rhetoric. For example, the arrest that leads to their incarceration in Guantanamo is the result of the racisms of the occupants of the airplane on which they are traveling innocently to Amsterdam; the CIA officer who spearheads their pursuit is constantly ridiculed for his stupidity and his racism; President George W. Bush is shown, perhaps unsurprisingly, as childish and inept; the prison staff at Guantanamo are aggressive, unintelligent, violent thugs. The film thus has many moments in

which it articulates a fairly clear, if scatologically expressed, critique of power. Judith K. Boyd (2008) argues that, although it may be absurd, the film is valuable for its cathartic power (here she echoes Freud's thesis that laughter is a release of pent-up psychic strain). Nina Seja argues that the film is a particularly strong example of comedy's propensity, as a genre that is not constrained by any requirement to be coherent, reasonable, or subtle, to initiate a frank, openly disrespectful, and bracing conversation about issues relating to the war on terror (2011, 228; see also Martin 2011, 236). Likewise, any reading of *Harold and Kumar* should remember that there is great subversive potential in comedically refashioning images of torture as artifacts of resistance to dominant discourse (Laustsen and Ugilt 2012). Nonetheless, in the rape scene that the film locates in Guantanamo Bay, the radical potential of the film's antiracist and antimilitary trajectory is again in tension with its transgressive and homophobic imperatives. In what follows, I unpack the three central coordinates of the joke-work.

The prison rape joke

Prison rape is frequently the object of transgressive comedy. As inmate scholar Craig Minogue writes, there is "a transnational currency that the crime of rape, happening in prison to a male prisoner, is amusing or may even be a deterrent factor to committing crimes" (2011, 116). In the US context, most prison rape jokes demean the male victim by implying that rape in prison is an inevitable and deserved part of the punishment, a legitimate (if terrifying) aspect of the disciplinary environment; it also requires the audience of the joke to consider male sexual receptivity weak or at least incompatible with acceptable masculine identity, because the joke is often that the victim will forfeit their masculinity and suffer "conversion into a 'bitch'" (Jarvis 2004, 175). In addition, conventional prison rape jokes generally demean the implied perpetrator through the use of racist stereotypes associating black masculinity with exaggerated and violent sexual appetites. That is, because the US prison population consists overwhelmingly of black males, the idea that the victim will be overpowered by at least one but potentially many sexually violent and insatiable black men is structurally embedded into the form of these jokes. Powerfully associating race and rape, this joke form uses ridicule to articulate disgust and revulsion both at the perpetrators, who are represented as animalistic, and the victims, who are represented as feeble. The prison rape joke underscores heteronormative standards: in the iconography of prison rape, "the 'masculine' body (along with the 'masculine' psyche), is viewed as hard, penetrative, and aggressive, in contrast to the soft, vulnerable, and violable 'feminine' sexuality and psyche" (Helliwell 2000, 796–97). Status is rigidly orga-

nized along the contours of a violently penetrative hierarchy, with those who are penetrated occupying the lowest tier. Sexual receptivity, conflated with victimhood, is marked as the worst possible fate for a heterosexual man because it can relegate him to the lowly position of the object of another's pleasure. The terrorist characters in *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* are shown as ridiculous in the scene because they willingly embrace the despised position of sexual receptivity, eagerly lowering themselves in the hierarchy of prison masculinity.

Prison rape jokes are widespread in US culture and are tolerated where other forms of rape humor are not. Nadia Khayrallah (2014) writes that there is "a sizable set of people who condone prison rape jokes, even if they believe that rape in general is a serious issue and would even speak out against other kinds of rape jokes." The reason, Khayrallah writes, that it is possible to laugh at inmates in this way is that they are seen through their criminality to have forfeited any right to sympathy. Such jokes thus have a cautionary purpose: behave, otherwise your misbehavior will make your sexual suffering a legitimate object of amusement. There is thereby a ready analogy with the dehumanization of terrorist suspects, who are deemed, due to their voluntary engagement in terrorist activity, to fall outside of the realm of the sympathetic subject; in the legal-political mechanism of the war on terror, terror suspects are considered the ultimate indefensible subjects, upon whom any violence—extralegal assassination, torture—is legitimate (Butler 2004). It is only a small step to see their suffering as not only legitimate but funny.

This particular joke exceeds the category of the canonical prison rape joke, which is concerned with lateral discipline—prisoners raping prisoners—because the present joke is about vertical discipline—prison guards sexually abusing prisoners. More so than its formal innovations, however, it is the idea of certain people deserving punishments that distinguishes the joke from the wider category of which it remains a member. Specifically, the joke is concerned with the ways in which Harold and Kumar, innocents, are about to be subject to sexual violence that terrorists are shown to deserve. This moral differential is explicitly articulated—the terrorists are skilled at fellatio, whereas Kumar stammers in horror that he has "never sucked a dick before." Before the sexual element is introduced, Harold and Kumar verbally abuse the terrorist characters, underscoring the difference between the two types of non-whiteness in the scene: Harold and Kumar are economically productive, socially integrated, culturally American, and falsely imprisoned—the antithesis of the terrorists, who are shown to deserve their treatment. As well as trivializing sexual abuse in prison, therefore, the scene articulates a potent orientalist stereotyping that sits in sharp contrast to the rest of the series' comparatively nuanced exploration of American hypocrisies around race. The scene draws a

sharp demarcation between good otherness and bad otherness, and uses the bad others as the targets of particularly harsh, violently sexualized humor.

The sexual trivialization of terrorism

We do not see the terrorist prisoners performing the sex act. Instead, we see Harold and Kumar's disgusted expressions as the prisoners engage the task with relish. The films are homophobic throughout, so an event that places men in the position of voluntary sexual receptivity is a privileged moment for particularly intense comic revulsion. The conventions of the gross-out genre are here used to ridicule terrorists by lampooning their masculinity through associating it with homosexuality: the hegemonic alpha masculinity of the rapist prison guards may be repellent in this scene (it is a central component of the prison rape joke that perpetrators are disgusting, as this increases the shame of victimhood), but terrorist masculinity, in eagerly submitting to sexual servitude, is comedically shown as particularly weak. Not only do the terrorists diminish their masculinity; they willingly relinquish it for our amusement and thereby demonstrate their inferiority to the audience. Importantly, this explicitly echoes the "racialized *homosexualizing* of the prisoners" (Mann 2007, 248), which was found throughout the archive of Abu Ghraib torture evidence. This homophobia is another aspect of the joke in which associations between race and rape can be read, as prisoners in war in terror dungeons were sexually humiliated *as Muslims*.

Post-9/11 Islamophobic humor often finds much of its purpose in conflating Muslims and terrorists and in slandering Muslims in sexual terms. Racist humor about Muslims often focuses on the sexual, depicting "Muslims as lacking civility or appearing backward. The embodied racist stereotypes focus on sexual practices, especially bestiality, repression of women and body image, particularly body hair in combination with ugliness" (Weaver 2013, 491). Further, when joking specifically about Muslim terrorists, this tendency becomes more marked. Many rumors about Osama bin Laden focused on his supposedly misshapen penis, for example, and Martin Amis's (2008) satirical story about Mohammad Atta emphasized his sexual puritanism in order to underscore Atta's hypocrisy. Boris Johnson, in *Seventy-Two Virgins*, writes that "there is only one really psychologically satisfying explanation for the suicidal behavior of young men, and it is something to do with sex, or at least self-esteem" (2004, 131). These examples are consonant with the long history of characterizing terrorist enemies as sexual perverts, which is itself part of a broader political gesture in which one's enemies are associated with sexual practices one prohibits. As Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai write, "Sexuality is central to the creation of a certain knowledge of terrorism, [which] has a history that ties the image of the modern terrorist to a much

older figure, the racial and sexual monsters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (2002, 117). This representational tradition, in which we can locate this Guantanamo rape joke, is both a form of political demonization and an intentionally homophobic and homosexualizing strategy, conflating the impulse toward politically illegitimate violence with nonnormative sexuality.

This homosexualizing gesture attaches what Sandesh Sivakumaran calls the “taint of homosexuality” to those that it victimizes—those who are forced to perform the act are blamed for it because the perpetrator redoubles the violence by claiming that the victim likes it, that the victim really wanted it, and that the victim, rather than the perpetrator, is the one who is “really” a homosexual (Sivakumaran 2005, 1293–94). This is shown with great force in the scene: when Kumar asks if the routine nature of the punishment means that all the guards in Guantanamo are gay, Big Bob roars back: “Fuck no! Ain’t nothing gay about getting your dick sucked. You’re the ones that’s gay for sucking my dick. In fact, it creeps me out just being around you fags.” Crucially, the comedy comes from this blatant double standard, in which the rapist displaces homosexual desire onto his victim: in a familiar victim-blaming rhetorical motif, the victim is despised for their receptivity by the one who forces it upon them.

This racism also works by trivializing. This joke could be interpreted as an instance in which someone is exposed as privately harboring the very vices they publicly despise (think of the Marquis de Sade’s scabrous satire of Christian institutions, in which the vilest torturers are revealed to be the most pious priests). That is, though Muslim extremists such as the Taliban and al-Qaeda are famous for their dogmatism in matters of sexuality, vocally claim to be sexually untainted, and execute adulterers and homosexuals, this joke may be intended to reveal them as precisely the sexual deviants that they claim to hate. However, rather than comedically exposing a conservative hypocrisy or speaking truth to power by attacking the ideology or practices of the Taliban or al-Qaeda, the film sneers at homosexual sex acts and uses them to broadly attack Muslims, homosexuals, and prisoners. Rather than satirizing extremists as political hypocrites, the film simply calls them doughnut-hating cocksuckers.

Graner’s laugh

Finally, this joke is an instance of what could be called Abu Ghraib humor: the scene solicits *schadenfreude* by presenting sexual violence in prison as a comic spectacle. Charles Graner, the ringleader of the Abu Ghraib abuse, is quoted as saying that “the Christian in me knows it’s wrong, but the corrections officer in me can’t help but love to make a grown man piss himself” (in

Gourevitch and Morris 2008, 127). Even though it is wrong, or indeed because it is recognized as wrong, the pleasure of the abuse of power—the amusement of the joy of hating—is particularly thrilling. As much as Christianity insists on normative moral standards that prohibit violence, political correctness demands normative moral and political interpersonal obligations; the pleasure of hating and hurting is thereby all the more acute because of its uniquely prohibited character. For transgressive comedy, political correctness has the status of an apparatus of puritanical commandments, and this scene, which intentionally assaults the moral standards of political correctness, utilizes the same principle of pleasure that Graner identifies: that which is morally impermissible is the source of particularly intense enjoyment.

The images of abuse that emerged from Abu Ghraib in 2004, depicting grinning soldiers abusing prisoners during the occupation of Iraq, have generated mountains of commentary. Many of the responses were, of course, critical, arguing that the photographs exposed the sordid truth of the war. For example, Dora Apel argues that the process of exposure transformed the photographs into “blistering anti-American pictures” (2005, 95); John Gray writes that as a result of the photographs “an indelible image of American depravity has been imprinted on the entire Islamic world” (2004, 50). This moral response condemning the pictures and the abuse they documented, while of course justified in many ways, tend to rest on a “natural human response of outrage” (Eisenman 2007, 9) that was widely described as normatively morally appropriate. However, normative moral standards are nowhere natural or innate, as revealed by the many other interpretations of the images, which argue that the images were very often received with anything but outrage. Susan Sontag (2004) contests that they testify to a “admiration for unapologetic brutality” that saturates American culture; Slavoj Žižek claims that the images echo many American initiation rituals and hazing practices, and that accordingly, by suffering a paradigmatically American humiliation, “the Iraqi prisoners were effectively *initiated into American culture*” (2004); Judith Butler argues that they reveal “the *jouissance* of torture” (2009, 129), that is, the pleasure associated both with torturing and with escaping legal accountability for one’s atrocities. This *schadenfreude* provoked by the pleasure of humiliating Muslim prisoners is the Hobbesian laugh in extremis: the torturer’s gloat. And, recalling the requirement for shared values in order for a joke to be received as funny, I argue that this is integral to why the cock meat sandwich joke works for its audience. The scenario requires us to laugh at the sexual suffering of prisoners, prisoners who are represented as both deserving and enjoying their debasement. For all of its critique of the excesses of the American military establishment, enjoyment of the film ultimately requires us to uncritically inhabit the viewpoint of those who find prison rape funny: to

laugh, with Graner, at the spectacle of prisoners undergoing traumatizing sexual violence.

Conclusion: Sex, laughter, discipline

This essay has presented notes toward an anatomy of war on terror schadenfreude. Texts that encourage us to laugh at torture in this way do the political work of normalizing the dehumanization of prisoners and of permitting us to laugh with torturers at their crimes, and they do so by drawing on aspects of mainstream culture that are deeply embedded into ordinary cultural practice, such as heteronormativity, prison rape humor, and the positioning of transgressive representations as defenses of free speech. It may be objected that this would require Graner's laughter not to be confined to the torture chamber but widespread throughout society. This is precisely the conclusion, however, that I want to reach: much war on terror humor does indeed feature—whether explicitly or in a coded way—this aggressive, sexually demeaning, homosexualizing, racist tenor. The relation of this specific schadenfreude both to the torturer's celebration and to many aspects of ordinary mainstream pleasure is precisely why we must object to the homophobic, misogynist, and racist laughter solicited by this specific joke and the tradition of transgressive humor of which it is exemplary.

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