

Tracing the United States' Central Intelligence Agency's Black Sites

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The United States Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) use of black sites exploit subjects by making them supposedly disappear, invisible, in order to negate any rights that would otherwise be given to them.

Defining a CIA black site

A black site (figure 1) refers to a site wherein the United States disavows any visibility given to its official power at a host location. The CIA operates detention facilities at black sites on non-US territory for the incarceration and torture¹ of supposed terrorists.²

Figure 1



A CIA black site in a Salt Pit in Afghanistan using space imaging³

If not all, most of the subjects detained by the CIA at black sites have affiliations with non-Western locations. As such, host nations have given the CIA

¹ In April 2006 more than 100 US law professors stated unequivocally that waterboarding is torture and is a criminal felony punishable under the U.S. federal criminal code in a letter to Attorney General Alberto Gonzales (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_site).

² Some detainees have no history of support for terrorism. Some detainees have supported terrorism, but may have long since stopped prior to their detainment. Some detainees have supported terrorism just prior to their capture.

³ Image from Dana Priest's "CIA Holds Terror Suspects in Secret Prisons," 2 November 2005

power over parts of their sovereign territory. The geography of the CIA's terrain has shifted the paradigms of power once strictly adhered to by the isolation of individual nation-states. For a definition of geography, Irit Rogoff, a professor of visual cultures at Goldsmiths, writes:

Geography as an epistemic category is... grounded in issues of positionality, in questions of who has the power and authority to name, of who has the power and authority to subsume others into its hegemonic identity (as France subsumes North African identities, Israel subsumes Palestinian identities, Anglo-American ideology in the USA has until recently subsumed ethnic minority identities etc.). Critical activity which locates geography as its field therefore pursues an active form of un-naming, renaming and the revising of such power structures in terms of the relations between subjects and places.⁴

How does one name a place which denies its own existence? Critical activity must name such places.

The CIA operates numerous black sites⁵ in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East and hosts mobile black sites. Operation of such sites began after 11 September 2001 and continues despite international laws and responses which include the US Supreme Court ruling of *Hamdan V. Rumsfeld*; the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of articles pertaining to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment enacted in force on 26 June 1987; and a recommendation from it on 19 May 2006 in Geneva that the US end the holding of detainees in secret prisons and the extraordinary rendition of them to nations where they will most likely be tortured. Further responses came in the form of several reports in which Human Rights Watch demands the US end black site operations including extraordinary rendition; a report from Amnesty International giving testimony from former detainees; numerous articles citing the CIA's use of black sites; and the investigations by European nations into the CIA's use of black sites and their subsequent collaboration by hosting these sites.

The opposition of CIA black sites to the *general intelligence of the multitude*

⁴ Rogoff, Irit, "Subjects/Places/Spaces," pp. 21

⁵ It is believed that black sites exist at the Voice of America relay station in Udon Thani in Thailand; in or near Kabul, Jalalabad and Asadabad in Afghanistan; Abu Ghraib, Camp Bucca (near Umm Qasr) and Camp Cropper (near the Baghdad International Airport) in Iraq; Al Jafr prison in Jordan, Alizai, Kohat and Peshāwar in Pakistan; Egypt; Libya; al-Tamara interrogation centre near Rabat in Morocco; Djibouti; the Indian Ocean at the U.S. Naval Base in Diego Garcia; the Czech Republic; Germany; Hungary; Poland; Romania; Armenia; Georgia; Latvia; Bulgaria; Azerbaijan; Ukraine; the Republic of Macedonia; and Kazakhstan in Europe.

Black sites present a problem for a subject of occupation to appear intelligible and, thus, visible at such locations as Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. CIA black sites operate on a premise of institutionalized intelligence in state intelligence agencies which cause perceptions of a certain subject to appear unintelligible, or, almost entirely invisible. State intelligence agencies deny a subject the ability to communicate via the visibility given to their own intelligence even when it proclaims itself as intelligible and, yet, refuses to communicate outside its own agency about its processes. Black sites thus make the subject of the other appear unintelligible. In this capacity, black sites, as part of a state intelligence agency (the CIA), oppose the *general intelligence*.⁶

The *multitude* is the political body assumed by the dissolution of national sovereignty and the recognition of a global system of rules governing behaviors. The *general intelligence* refers to the anonymous signs produced by the *multitude*⁷ for its security against homelessness.

The tracing and, thus, naming of CIA black sites dismisses the premise that only the CIA should know information regarding their processes of locating, interrogating and torturing supposed political dissidents at such sites. The process of tracing black sites and the subsequent re-presentations within the public sphere of these sites makes the operations of the CIA black sites recognizable within a re-public of the *multitude* where subjects have rights and the abuse of those rights becomes an offense to the public. Paolo Virno, philosopher, semiotician and figurehead for the Italian Marxist movement,⁸ writes of the *general intelligence* in connection with the theory of the *multitude* that:

[t]he “life of the mind” is the One which lies beneath the mode of being of the multitude... the most general and abstract linguistic structures are becoming instruments for orienting one’s own conduct—this situation... is one of the conditions which define the contemporary multitude.⁹

Virno further writes that “[t]he general intellect, or public intellect, if it does not become a *republic*, a public sphere, a political community, drastically increases forms of submission.”¹⁰ It becomes necessary, thus, to locate intelligence from state intelligence agencies if desiring a decrease of repression.

Failure to recognize the process by which the CIA conducts its operations within its black sites results in a *carte-blanch* suppression of human rights because of the absence of information regarding its processes made available to

⁶ A notion necessary for the basis of a re-public of the *multitude*

⁷ Much has been theorized of recent on the nature of the *multitude*. I refer to the *multitude* here because such an international power may check the expansion of US hegemony into otherwise sovereign states.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paolo_Virno

⁹ Virno, Paolo, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, pp. 37.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 41

the *general intelligence*. Such conditions allow for the CIA to produce the disturbing imagery coming from its black sites with impunity.

The production of the imperialist US image in the CIA black site

Images produced at black sites reproduce an image of extreme cultural dependency on the part of non-western detainees, one in which the supposed terrorist may recognize their interrogator as their “father” due to the loss of sensory experience. The *general intellect* must contend with this problem of visibility.

The personalization of knowledge by its privatization establishes a hierarchical notion of intelligence by the institutions that must also “counter” intelligence. This countering of intelligence makes intelligence agencies counter to the *general intellect* since its methods seek to make certain intelligence inaccessible to the public. Virno writes that:

[t]he dependency [of the oppressed on the oppressor and *vice versa*] is *personal* in two senses of the word: in the world of labor one depends on this person or on that person, not on rules endowed with anonymous coercive behavior; moreover, it is the whole person who is subdued, the person’s basic communicative and cognitive habits.¹¹

The use of counter-intelligence measures thus seems at odds with the *multitude* because it makes intelligence personal by a myth that seeks only to make itself privy to knowledge of its operations. In order to attempt to make the CIA the only entity privy to its methods of operations, it counters intelligence by making other information outside its domain unintelligible for it to call itself intelligent.

The dissemination of images from detention centers at CIA black sites make visible supposed terrorists to Western imperialism¹² with images that represent them as if they are not human, and, thus, impervious to any rights that may be given to them. The CIA uses two main tactics for representing supposed terrorists by (1) producing an image in which its subject demonstrates a cultural hegemony over the other, and (2) exerting stereotypes which show ambivalence to the differences between the detainee (the colonized) and the CIA (the colonizer).

The first tactic involves an oppression by which the means for self-representation, auto-subjectivity, are removed. Yet, any representation of the other or self is bound to a problem of structure. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, literary and cultural theorist at Columbia University, writes:

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 41

¹² Several states cooperated with the United States in the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. Great Britain supported the United States invasion and occupation more than any other state. In addition, many more states have hosted the CIA’s black sites.

[t]he person who knows has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self... Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complication.¹³

If the images from CIA black sites feature the other, then this makes a problem of the CIA. However, they do not just attempt to imagine the other. They attempt to imagine the non-Western other through an excess of signs. The second tactic fits a description of colonial discourse given by Homi K. Bhabha, post-colonial theorist and professor at Harvard, which describes it as an apparatus of power:

[i]t is an apparatus that turns on the recognition and disavowal of racial/cultural/historical differences. Its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for a 'subject peoples' through the production of knowledges in terms of which surveillance is exercised and a complex form of pleasure/unpleasure is incited.¹⁴

Bhabha continues:

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.¹⁵

Such apparatuses could be used to describe the CIA black sites.

The methods of the interrogators at black sites attempt to destroy the linguistic capabilities of supposed terrorists by altering their ability to reason. Subsequent information gathered from interrogation methods often does not make sense. The methods of the imperialist spectacle via torture (figs. 2 and 3) and interrogation suppresses the potential for *cognition*¹⁶ of an occupied subject by the suppression of their senses and opposes the *general intelligence* due to the CIA's disavowal of the locations of its interrogation and torture programs.

Figure 2

¹³ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, pp. 65

¹⁴ Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, pp. 70

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 70.



An image taken from Abu Ghraib of a hooded and wired Iraqi prisoner, believed to be Satar Jabar, who reportedly was told that he would be electrocuted if he fell off the box ¹⁷

Figure 3

¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abu_Ghraid_torture_and_prisoner_abuse



A detainee forced to stand on boxes

CIA black sites function as a state imperial apparatus to control the image of the US's supposed enemies by ironically making a spectacle of them in the process of denying their own existence and visibility within the sphere of the *general intelligence*, making only themselves and the state privy to their process. They exhibit examples of supposed terrorists in which they appear degenerate in ways that recall how Nazi propaganda imagined Jews according to racial stereotypes. The spectacle of torture and interrogation at black sites appears as an indirect successor to the eugenic projects that appeared throughout Europe in the early twentieth century. Indeed, images from black sites perform racial stereotyping on the bodies of the detainees, attempting to make them conform to Western norms and fears of the other. And so the US uses the bodies of detainees as their medium to show the impossibility of recognizing that these bodies resemble humans. Placing the bodies of supposed terrorists in small,

isolated, hot and cramped boxes called “dog boxes” supposes an inhuman and analogous relationship. Also, detainees often are subjected to blasts of Western rock music for prolonged periods of time or are forced to participate in acts that demonstrate homophobic fantasies.

The purpose of these images is not to equalize the detainees with their spectator. Their point is to present the detainee as quintessentially *other* than the spectator. Who can relate to having feces rubbed over their body, lying naked amongst other naked bodies in a pile of one’s peers, having to masturbate in front of one’s peers or having one’s arms handcuffed behind one’s back to bars blocking a window while standing on a block for hours on end? More importantly, who can relate to the sense of having no sense of future besides what a faceless oppressor offers?

Images of human rights abuses at CIA black sites are no accident. It makes no difference whether or not the US meant for the abuses of detainees held at CIA black sites to disseminate. Although cell phones and the internet increase the speed of dissemination, images need not only come from these media. Images are lived. It does, however, make a difference as to how they occurred and for what reason. The authorizing of these images lies beyond the immature pranks of a few enlisted US soldiers. Nor can the images of abuses find their cause in the ineptitude of the CIA for handling detainees. Instead, the images detail the effect of US imperialism by the handling of its supposed enemies. Thus, the images cannot be disassociated from the practices at CIA black sites and the institution thereof.

There is an aesthetic to operations of interrogation and torture at CIA black sites. Former CIA counterterrorism Chief Robert Grenier said of the CIA interrogators: “they learned the art of interrogation”¹⁸ which, “*is an art*”¹⁹ during the program’s re-institution of torture as an interrogation method. That black sites are sites of CIA operations and are spectacular in nature because US interrogators “who [have] no understanding of Al Qaeda or the Arab World”²⁰ repeatedly dehumanize those they interrogate through acts that are humiliating to the entire Arab world reveals the role the CIA plays in constructing the image of US imperialism. The supposed invisibility of the sites to international law allows for the spectacular production of images meant to dehumanize detainees that would otherwise violate international law.

The impossibility of the CIA black sites as an inquiry

Detention of political dissidents within CIA black sites and the interrogation and torture thereof cannot and, therefore, do not function as inquiries recognizable even to the state. That operations within black sites cannot and,

¹⁸ Mayer, “The Black Sites: A rare look inside the C.I.A.’s secret interrogation program,” pp 9

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 9

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 4

therefore, do not function as inquiries means that their continued operation serves another purpose. This purpose is to control the images of the supposed enemies in order to present them as an enemy and undeserving of recognition within a global community.

The interrogations of supposed enemies to US imperialism at black sites have no basis as investigations because the US cannot accept information from interrogations at black sites as evidence in a court of law. In other words, the US judicial system cannot recognize the methods of inquiry of interrogations at CIA black sites due to, in part, the absence of *habeas corpus* and the use of torture. This results of a process that denies its own process within the *general intelligence*. The almost complete absence of jurisprudence at the black sites means that it opposes the nature of the inquiry. The historian and philosopher Michel Foucault²¹ writes that the inquiry:

was to be the substitute for the flagrant offense procedure: if one managed to assemble persons who could affirm under oath that they had seen, that they knew, that they were well informed—if it was possible to establish through them that something had actually taken place—then one would have, by means of the inquiry via these persons who knew, the indirect equivalent of the flagrant offense.²²

Since the persons interrogated at black sites would have to state their knowledge of offenses planned or committed against the US or other states for there to be a determination by the state of a committed, offensive act, and, since, paradoxically, the state cannot recognize information coming from these persons because it has abandoned jurisprudence, such interrogations cannot constitute an inquiry. Thus, black sites cannot and do not function for the purpose of an inquiry.

If black sites attempt to control the recognition of enemies to US imperialism by the global community via their disappearance, then tracing the paths of their disappearances makes them appear within the global community and subjects of a *general intelligence*. Tracing CIA black sites opposes the privy nature of the process of the CIA's denial of its own operations.

The indeterminacy of subjects incarcerated in CIA black sites

How should one act when faced with torture and enforced disappearance such as that faced by detainees in CIA black sites? I think it would look something like Zhang Huan in *Seeds of Hamburg*, 2002, (fig. 4). It would become necessary to lose all notions of what human *is* in such a case. It would become necessary to assume nothing about the sadistic nature of the oppressor. It would become a practice of locating oneself in an environment meant to

²¹ 15 October 1926 to 25 June 1984

²² Foucault, Michel, *Power*, pp. 47

disassociate all notions of time to a sense of place. For Zhang Huan, who practices “[l]osing [h]imself in his [a]rt”²³ according to the title of a catalog written by Jiae Kim, such a practice becomes feasible.

Figure 4



Zhang Huan
Seeds of Hamburg
 2002
 Performance
 Kunstverein in Hamburg, Germany

The error of state intelligence agencies

The institutionalization of state agencies of supposed “intelligence” in what often are referred to as intelligence agencies view their mission as the *gaining* of intelligence that might be useful in securing the state. Yet, a state intelligence agency must make certain information unintelligible to proclaim itself as knowledgeable via the exploitation of perception. Yet, state intelligence agencies make a critical error: they do not realize that what is put under erasure also leaves a trace. Indeed, Edward Said, post-colonial theorist, writes, “never has there been a nonmaterial form of Orientalism, much less something so innocent as an “idea” of the orient.”²⁴ Visibility given to these sights has caused an

²³ Kim, Jiae, “Losing Himself in his Art,” pp. 51

²⁴ Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, pp. 23

international response. International pressure should cause images from these sights to surface for subsequent address to human rights violations.

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