

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Rush Limbaugh's Club G'itmo and Semiotic Claims to Minority Status

Robin Shoaps

"Waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists," Sarah Palin claimed in her speech to the National Rifle Association in April of 2014. Palin's glibly ironic linkage of born-again Christianity to government-endorsed torture seamlessly weaves together and reduces macabre international policy to religious values and "freedom." Such talk is part of a discursive project that services the American Right's assertion of its embattled minority status. Here I examine how everyday people, those outside of punditry engage in this neoliberal discourse.

After the spring 2004 dissemination of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, there was heightened scrutiny of the legal basis for Guantanamo Bay and its treatment of prisoners. On his radio show, Rush Limbaugh reduced the torture at Abu Ghraib to "frat hazing," and proclaimed (on June 14, 2005) that, "It's time to be absurd to illustrate some. 'We need to shut down this G'itmo prison'—well, don't shut it down, we just need to start an advertising campaign. We need to call it, G'itmo, the Muslim resort... I meant where else can Muslims go in the world to find everything they need? There's no better place than G'itmo." Here Limbaugh modeled a political register that combined irony with an "in your face" demeanor, suggesting that his audience take up his wry, rebellious jingoism as a substitute for stayed reflection on ethical issues. In 2004 he launched a section on his website dedicated to "Club G'itmo." It featured a mock travel brochure that presented Guantanamo Bay as a tropical resort for Islamic terrorists. It also hawked G'itmo Gear—orange T-shirts, mugs and baseball caps—bearing the Club G'itmo insignia and expressions like "Your Tropical Retreat from the Stress of Jihad, www.RushLimbaugh.com" as in the image below from the [website](#). For the first time his website invited listener participation by encouraging people to submit photographs of themselves wearing G'itmo Gear.



Image 1: Sample Club G'itmo tshirt

As of January 2005, there were nearly a hundred images in the G'itmo Gallery and there are now nearly 300. These photos take advantage of multiple semiotic channels. As clothing, G'itmo Gear visually juxtaposed souvenir T-shirts with the orange jumpsuits worn by detainees in the War on Terror, including those photographed in Abu Ghraib. The message: illegal detention is an Islamic terrorist's proper vacation destination. The photos mobilize a trope of middle class Americana (the vacation getaway) to turn the victims of state violence into the punch line of a mean-spirited joke. See [Club G'itmo Photo Gallery Page 9](#), and note the tenth photo in the right column.

Secondly, the photos as photos make claims about the cultural backdrop that gives meaning to right-wing personae. The photos nearly always feature an individual posing in one of the T-shirts, smirking in mock triumph in front of a liberal icon: Democratic headquarters (see below), Hilary Clinton's senatorial office, an anti-war protest, or a car with anti-war bumper stickers. In these photos, iconic liberal spaces are rendered "destinations" by virtue of the vacation trope. The visual lamination of triumphant, victorious (predominantly) white men onto these backdrops evokes a trope of conquest, framing these backdrops as hostile but ultimately weak enough to be subdued. See [Club G'itmo Photo Gallery Page 6](#), and note the third and fourth photos down in the right column, as well as the first photo in the left column on [Club G'itmo Photo Gallery Page 2](#).

Some of the most disturbing photos depicted US soldiers posing with Afghans and Iraqis, clearly reveling in the fact that the locals probably cannot read the T-shirts, though most likely secure in the knowledge that their orange color indexes the threat of incarceration. Many of the photographs featured locations in "Islamic" parts of the US, positioning the T-shirt wearer as bravely venturing further into—and lampooning—"enemy territory."

In the photo (available through the link above) taken outside the local mosque in Teaneck, New Jersey, the G'itmo Gear-wearer gives a thumbs-up, a common gesture in these photos and one that resonates with some of the iconic Abu-Ghraib images of US soldiers smiling over the prostrate corpse of a detainee (as seen [here](#) in to *The Telegraph*, May 23, 2004).

The G'itmo Gallery photos are the product of a multivalent sensibility. The subjects in the photographs are performing, as well as predicating, a defiant political stance, one that aligns them visually and ideologically with torturers at Abu Ghraib. This alignment suggests that the liberal iconography they mock is akin to the slain terrorist on the floor. The ample number of photographs are taken in front of mosques, in the US occupied Middle East. In the picture above and the photo below, of Limbaugh listeners confronting a man in front of a religious kiosk have only their inter-discursive links to the playful "destination" photographs

to distance them from hate speech. Defiant poses in front of “Middle Eastern” backdrops go beyond merely mocking liberals and denying the humanity of prisoners; as they circumscribe a generic “Muslim” space—see the seventh image down on the left side on [Club Gitmo Photo Gallery Page 27](#).

By situating right-wing individuals within liberal or culturally Other institutional settings, Club Gitmo photographs present the right-wing subject as “speaking truth to power.” They coopt a left-wing trope so as to frame Anglo (presumptively Christian) Americans (45% percent of whom admitted to a “negative” opinion toward Muslim-Americans at the time the photos were posted and who supported a then popular president who implemented torture) as beleaguered minorities.

This genre of photography is one of many new semiotic devices that invites people on the Right to recast their endorsement of torture as acts of virtuous defiance. It lets them narrate their assent as rebellion against persecution. The textuality of Limbaugh’s T-shirts encourages engagement in a game of ‘fill in the blank’ with liberal-terrorist-Muslim-government destinations, and thus invites people to imagine as hostile (yet conquerable) as much of their landscape as possible. Placing themselves in these photos lets Limbaugh listeners perform the irreverent individualism so important to right-wing political philosophy. The ironic pleasure Palin’s fans took in her recent remarks relies upon this semiotic project.

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