

the courts-martial of the Abu Ghraib abusers, military prosecutors argued that “there are two sets of victims” from the abuses: “the men who’ve had their dignity stripped” and “all the other men stationed in Iraq.”⁴⁰

This gendered term, of course, is telling. It signals the omission from the official narrative of the toll paid by women who have chosen to step through the door that the promise of legal equality first opened.



From their exclusion in Lexington to their inculpation at Abu Ghraib, women in the military have traveled a long way. But assimilation has extracted a heavy price. The U.S. Supreme Court in *United States v. Virginia* held out the prospect of equally noble citizenship, a promise that has been eviscerated for a first generation of assimilated women soldiers. As the number of women in the military grows, the pivotal question will be whether the armed services’ deeply masculine culture proves malleable, or whether echoes of the rat line will continue to resound in the halls of Abu Ghraib and beyond.

Photography/Pornography/Torture: The Politics of Seeing Abu Ghraib

Laura Frost

A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster.

—Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: And the Ideology of Pornography*

Looking at the photographs of Abu Ghraib is like peeping into someone else’s nightmare. The Grand Guignol tableaux evoke the most primal fears and fantasies—incarceration, public nudity, violence, domination, submission. But like dreams, they are also enigmatic. Who are these people? What are they thinking? What does this mean? Most of us were unsure of how to interpret these upsetting images. The photographs are complicated by the way they seem constructed around a number of parodies: of tourism (“wish you were here” postcards), of conquest and trophies (a man as a five-point buck), of national pastimes like sports and cheerleading (the huddle, the pyramid), of macho men of American movies (Lynndie England’s dangling cigarette and mugging, the two-thumbs-up pose), and of America’s gruesome history of lynching. In the weeks and months after the release of the photographs,

another interpretation kept appearing. Both sides of the political spectrum, from Rush Limbaugh to Susan Sontag, read the photographs as pornography. Limbaugh, seeking to minimize the Abu Ghraib abuses, compared the photos to “standard good old American pornography.” Sontag saw the images as reflecting an increasing appetite for putting one’s sex life on film and for sadomasochistic eroticism; *Guardian* editor Katharine Viner wrote, “The Abu Ghraib images have all the hallmarks of contemporary porn.”⁷¹ It’s unclear what porn Viner had in mind, but images of naked, hooded Muslim men forced to masturbate by military soldiers bear little resemblance to mainstream porn. At least Limbaugh conceded that the Abu Ghraib images were not drugstore pornography but a specialized variety: “I’ve seen things like this on American websites. You can find these if you have the passwords to these various porn sites, you can see things like this.”⁷² How did such strange bedfellows as Sontag and Limbaugh come to similar conclusions about these disturbing images?

The Abu Ghraib photographs seem thematically linked to pornography insofar as they show nudity and charged relationships, some of which have a sexual nature. Whether they function as pornography, an erotic turn-on, and whether that charge was experienced by the actors in the photos or the viewers/consumers, is not so clear. For most critics, having called the images pornographic, the discussion is over. That is, to label the photographs as *pornographic* is to assert that they are, on the one hand, banal and typical of, on the other, deviant and isolated. However, Abu Ghraib’s evocation of pornographic style and postures should be the beginning of the discussion rather than the end.

Cultural critic Laura Kipnis eloquently argues that “pornography is revealing. It exposes the culture to itself. Pornography . . . is the royal road to the cultural psyche (as for Freud, dreams were the route to the unconscious).”⁷³ Both dreams and pornography are propelled by fantasies, fears, and projections. There is always more going on beneath their surface imagery. The way in which the Abu Ghraib photographs were constructed around pornographic

citations and, even more so, the way those photographs have been interpreted through the lens of pornography reflect deep-seated confusions that center, in particular, on the camouflaged women in the frame.

Even though women appear in proportionally few of the Abu Ghraib photographs, it is their presence that arguably precipitated the reading of these images (including the ones they weren’t in) as sexualized—as pornography. Megan Ambuhl, Lynnndie England, and Sabrina Harman, a triumvirate quickly dubbed the “torture chicks,” were brought in, one version of the story goes, to break down the Iraqi men since they were susceptible to such humiliation by women. In a *Salon* article with the hackneyed title “How Could Women Do That?” Cathy Hong notes, “[F]or the first time in American history, women are accused of being perpetrators of sexual humiliation against male prisoners of war.”⁷⁴

Most critics viewed the women’s roles in the photographs in relation to a particular kind of pornography: sadomasochism. In a column called “Torture Chicks Gone Wild,” *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd comments, “It’s like a bad porn movie . . . All S and no M.”⁷⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich agrees that the Abu Ghraib women are shocking examples of “female sexual sadism,”⁷⁶ and Sontag contends that “most of the pictures seem part of a larger confluence of torture and pornography: a young woman leading a naked man around on a leash is classic dominatrix imagery.”⁷⁷

There are two points here: One is that the women adopted sadomasochistic postures (of the dominatrix), and the other is that the women exhibited sadomasochistic tendencies (sadism). What’s especially puzzling about the photographs is the disconnection between the two. Despite the confidence with which critics describe the women at Abu Ghraib as actors in sadomasochist porn scenarios, the photographs that have been released to date tell another story.

The prototypical dominatrix (“female sadist”) was born in the work of the Marquis de Sade. His mad genius at the time of the French Revolution was

to imagine a world in which aristocratic libertines threw off the oppressive conventions of society and instead followed the brutal laws of Nature, at the center of which was sexual pleasure and cruelty. Women are cast in two opposing roles in Sade: They are either helpless victims who blindly follow the rules of convention (and pay a high price for it) or daring ladies who seize the reins of sex and power. As Angela Carter remarks, Sade "believed it would only be through the medium of sexual violence that women might heal themselves of their socially inflicted scars." Sade's dominatrices "know how to use their sexuality as an instrument of aggression, [and] use it to extract vengeance for the humiliations they were forced to endure as the passive objects of the sexual energy of others."⁸

Private First Class Lymndie England bears little resemblance to the stock female types of pornography: She is neither a Sadean dominatrix nor an impaled victim nor a nymphomaniac. She appears impassive and almost dissociated (as in the leash photographs), or grinning with foolish—and antierotic—glee (in the pyramid photograph). Her dangling cigarette and thumbs-up pose seem blankly detached from the scenario itself. She seems to be imitating a pose, but the affect is wrong. As Linda Williams points out in *Hard Core*, her study of pornography, one of the cardinal rules of porn is that while the man's "money shot" is the proof of the scenario's reality, there is no physical equivalent for women, and hence the woman's burden is to convince the viewer that she is experiencing orgasm otherwise—usually through her expressions.⁹ In sadomasochistic pornography, the dominatrix does not usually show orgasmic pleasure but rather coldly cruel delight. Neither is true of the Abu Ghraib photographs.

There are no snarls, leers, or postures of intimidation, and none of the slack-jawed ecstasy, eye-narrowing cruelty, or lip-licking excitement of female pornographic types. England's gaze is usually trained on the camera, and when she does look at her victim, it is with complete blankness. Indeed, as Brigadier General Janis Karpinski remarked, "There is little Lymndie

England, looking like some two-bit prison marm with that cigarette dangling out of her throat and her thumbs up. She's looking at Graner."¹⁰ As Karpinski's "two-bit" indicates, England's pose is unconvincing. Her gaze at the camera suggests that we should pay as much attention to what is happening between England and the photographer as between England and the men she is humiliating.

In the photo Sontag singles out, England is holding a prisoner known as Gus on a leash as he crawls out of a cell. There is something forlorn about England's stance and her puffy, passive face registers virtually no affect. The man writhing on the floor is slackly tethered by a limp leash. In all the photos of England, we wonder, who is keeping these men in line? Not England, who is tiny, unarmed, and seems uninterested in expressing dominance. Who is really holding the leash, and who is on the other end?

This questioning of England's "female sadism" began in earnest as soon as the details of her case came to light. Instead of a dominatrix, she was described as a masochistic "woman who loves too much." In early interviews, England shocked many with her cavalier attitude. She reportedly told people, "It was just for fun." She told Brian Maass of CBS, "I was told to stand here, point thumbs up, look at the camera and take the picture. . . . [The photos] were for psy-op reasons, and the reasons worked. I mean, so to us, we were doing our job, which meant we were doing what we were told, and the outcome was what they wanted."¹¹ This stance became modified over the course of the trial, in which England was portrayed as a voluntary mute, a follower, a slow learner, a compliant personality, and, above all, Graner's dupe. England's counsel encouraged this interpretation:

"Did they order you to do it?"

"It was more or less peer pressure."

"Did they force you to do something you didn't want to do?"

"Yes, sir."¹²

This escalation from "order" to "force" versus England's own "more or less peer pressure" encourages the reading of England as a victim. This is hardly the world of the female sadist, but rather the world of the coerced victim, porn's other type, epitomized by Linda Lovelace, who, after achieving pornographic stardom in *Deep Throat*, claimed that her husband had forced her to perform the acts on film: "There was a gun to my head the entire time." England's lawyers were eager to promote this interpretation of events, which would mitigate England's responsibility. Karpinski also echoed this interpretation of England as a love slave: "It was a relationship based on a kind of bizarre excitement with strong sexual undertones. She wanted to please him. She would do anything he asked her or told her to do."¹³

In the world of literary pornography, this woman is less like the dominatrices of Sade and more like the women found in the works of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, from whose name the word "masochism" was derived. His classic novel, *Venus in Furs*, features a male masochist who is ostensibly ruled by a splendid, fur-clad dominatrix; in fact, it turns out that the woman is trying to please the man, to fulfill his fantasies by wielding the whip and playing a role of his creation. The dominatrix here is reluctant and only doing what she is told; her pose of power is just that, a pose. If and when the photographs of England having sex with Graner and other soldiers, reportedly in front of prisoners, emerge, her defense probably will be constructed around this interpretation of her participation.

Throughout the depiction of women at Abu Ghraib, the same polarized terms keep recurring: brutal dominatrix or helpless victim. This dichotomy played out starkly in England's initial court case. The lead prosecutor insisted that she "knew what she was doing. . . . She was laughing and

joking. . . . She is enjoying, she is participating, all for her own sick humor."¹⁴ England's lawyer responded, "She was a follower, she was an individual who was smitten with Graner. . . . She just did whatever he wanted her to do."¹⁵ While response to the photos keeps breaking down into two categories—the dominatrix "leash girl" versus the love slave—what remains constant is England's centrality to the Abu Ghraib scandal. JoAnn Wypijewski argues convincingly in her article "Judgment Days" in *Harper's* magazine, that England's role was emphasized in the press and in court, even in the trials of other defendants, "it was the photo of the tomboy England that prosecutors repeatedly displayed."¹⁶ This suggests scapegoating and raises the question of why England received a disproportionate amount of attention compared to her Abu Ghraib cohorts.

The men in the Abu Ghraib photographs, particularly Graner and Ivan Frederick, whose demeanors are quite different from those of the women and who are shown physically abusing the prisoners, have received far less press than England. The men's sneers, leers, and macho postures are more in keeping with pornography; they play their roles much more convincingly than the women. Graner is frequently described as a sadist, but the word is used less in the eroticized sense of pornography than in the sense of a sociopath. Of the abusive U.S. soldiers in the photographs, only the women have been subject to eroticized, sexualized readings. (The male soldiers' act of forcing the prisoners to simulate homosexual acts was mainly discussed as a strategy of cultural humiliation and rarely discussed in terms of the homophobia and perhaps disavowed homoeroticism it implies.)

Male aggression is taken for granted; it is "natural." Female aggression is aberrant. A woman in the Abu Ghraib scenario—military and aggressive—is doubly perverse. To think of a woman as a torturer seems impossible—hence, the recourse to extreme pornographic types. Moreover, a reading of a woman as sexualized is more accessible than a reading of her as powerful, whether abusively or responsibly. That is, we can imagine a woman with sexual power

(in which case she must be perverse, a dominatrix), but not with military power. As Della Sentilles remarks, "Our idea that female sexuality and power is a form of torture confirms our own fears of female empowerment."¹⁷ This was as true inside Abu Ghraib as out. England seemed to have found it easier to think of herself as a sexual (and in this case, subservient) being than as a figure of authority. The unreleased sex photos will further undermine the notion of these women as figures of authority.

Memoirs from Iraq and other contemporary American military prisons give insight into how the military's assessment of women in power is even more distorted than the civilian view. Kayla Williams's *Love My Rifle More Than You* recounts her time in Iraq as a U.S. Army sergeant in an intelligence company of the 101st Airborne Division. The prologue to the memoir focuses not on what one might expect—e.g., the mission in Iraq or the desire to serve one's country—but on two terms: bitch and slut. "If you're a woman and a soldier, those are the choices you get," she writes, grounding this story of military experience in how she was perceived as a sexual being.¹⁸ The first chapter begins, "Right into it: Sex is key to any woman soldier's experiences in the American military. No one likes to acknowledge it, but there's a strange sexual allure to being a woman and a soldier."¹⁹ A woman, then, is automatically seen (and sees herself) in terms of her sexuality—not in terms of her political mission, her competency at her job, or her position of military authority. In *One Woman's Army*, Janis Karpinski also writes about how femininity and sexuality are a constant concern for women in the military. Erik Saar's *Inside the Wire*, his memoir of serving as a translator at Guantanamo, got considerable attention for its brief account of one female interrogator's tactics of sexually humiliating a prisoner: She wore provocative clothes, rubbed herself against the prisoner, and pretended to wipe menstrual blood on him. After this interrogation, Saar recalls, the interrogator cried. The slide from Sade to Linda Lovelace in a matter of moments suggests the inadequacy of both stereotypes.

Kayla Williams offers one of the most insightful analyses of what is at stake in such interrogations. She recounts an episode in which she screams at and taunts a prisoner:

I don't like to admit it, but I enjoyed having power over this guy.

I was uncomfortable with these feelings of pleasure at his discomfort, but I still had them. It did occur to me that I was seeing a part of myself I would never have seen otherwise.

Not a good part.

For months afterward, I think about this episode, minor though it really was. I wonder if my own creepy sense of pleasure at my power over this man had anything to do with being a woman in this situation—the rarity of that enormous power over the fate of another human being.²⁰

Going beyond the stereotypes and dichotomies of bitch and slut that she sets up at the beginning of her memoir, Williams considers the complex arrangement of power in the scenario of female torturers. For her, these acts of abuse are influenced by a woman's preexisting ideas about her ability to be powerful in the world. The dichotomy of bitch and slut, like the pornographic dichotomy of dominatrix and Linda Lovelace, prevents a realistic assessment of women in power, which would require acknowledging how stereotypes fail to capture complex impulses and investments.

The pornographic interpretation of the Abu Ghraib photos was persistent because it reproduced the simpler, more graspable dichotomy of pornography. The images parody a genre that is already itself largely parodic: Pornography's cartoonish version of sexuality and gender encourages the polarization of roles (dominant men and passive women or dominant women and passive men). The military is constructed around the same kind of polarization: a valorization of masculinity and dominance and a contempt for weakness

connected with femininity. Williams remarks that the army is “one big frat party.” That the insertion of real women into this scenario at Abu Ghraib did not produce a more nuanced reading of women and power but rather reasserted the old polarities demonstrates the tenacity of those stereotypes.

The primacy of the Abu Ghraib photographs themselves, and their ability to subsume the spotlight, is dangerous. The photographs have the effect of anchoring us to the grotesque moments they reference. Their very awfulness suggests that they are isolated and singular, while we know that is not the case. They are by no means as simple as the stark poses we see before us. To view women in positions of authority as pornographic types suggests our failure to accept women as agents of power, for better or for worse. As much as we might want to dismiss Abu Ghraib as a case of a few bad apples or sexual deviants, those photographs make us confront our own limitations. Freud wrote that the dreamer is in every part of the dream; whether we support the policies that led to Abu Ghraib, what we see in those photographs can tell us as much about ourselves and our values at home as it does about what happened in that awful prison a world away.

Gender Trouble at Abu Ghraib?

Timothy Kaufman-Osborn

“It’s not a pretty picture,” conceded Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in assessing the photographs taken by U.S. military personnel at Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib prison complex during the final three months of 2003.¹ Shortly thereafter, en route to Iraq, Rumsfeld contended that “the real problem is not the photographs—the real problems are the actions taken to harm the detainees.”² This claim is problematic insofar as it fails to appreciate the transformation of these images into so many free-floating weapons deployed to secure partisan advantage on various cultural and political battlegrounds within the United States. This was nowhere more evident than in their mobilization to rehash the struggle over the contemporary import of feminism, especially in light of the equality/difference debate that has vexed feminists and their opponents for decades.

The initial purpose of this essay, accordingly, is to explain how the mass media flap regarding the Abu Ghraib photographs indicates that gender, understood as a set of mobile disciplinary practices, can sometimes

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28. Executive Summary of Report of Albert T. Church (2005), 6-7; Independent Panel to Review Department of Defense Detention Operations (August 2004), 37.
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34. JoAnn Wypijewski, "Judgment Days: Lessons from the Abu Ghraib Courts-Martial," *Harper's*, February 2006, 39, 44.
35. Francke, "Women in the Military," 143.
36. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 287-88.
37. Quoted in *United States v. Virginia*, 515 U.S. 518, 602-03 (1996) (Scalia dissenting).
38. Quoting language of Hannah Arendt (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 288), who makes a slightly different point. While not certain Arendt would disagree, I am not invoking her authority for the substantive point.
39. *United States v. Virginia*, 515 U.S. 518, 542 (1996).
40. Wypijewski, "Judgment Days," 39, 41.

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11. Lynndie England in an interview with Brian Maass of Denver's CBS TV station KCNC. Found online at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/05/s2/irag/main16921.shtml.
12. From trial of Lynndie England. LexisNexis Transcript Provider Service, online at www.lexisnexis.com/news/.
13. See note 10 above.
14. From trial of Lynndie England. LexisNexis Transcript Provider Service, www.lexisnexis.com/news/.
15. *Ibid.*

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 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Cathy Hong, "How Could Women Do That?" *Salon*, May 7, 2004, http://archive.salon.com/nw/feature/2004/05/07/abuse_gender/.
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 17. *Ibid.*, 448–49.
 18. *Ibid.*, 1007.
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One of the Guys

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Edited by Tara McKelvey



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