

## Introduction

### *Sex, Drugs, and Rock 'n' Roll*

Because this war is unlike others in that there is no front line, women are engaged in combat along with men. Women soldiers, not technically allowed on the front lines, continue to see action, to kill and be killed. A shortage of military personnel leads to stretching of the rules regarding women in ground combat forces. But reportedly the American public is no longer shocked at the idea of women dying in war; there is no more attention paid to fallen women than to fallen men.<sup>1</sup> Women's participation in integrated units for the most part goes unnoticed. The women in these units find ways to adapt their bodies to male standards of war—by taking newer forms of birth control to make their periods less frequent or to eliminate them altogether, and by using a portable urination device disbursed by the military for long road trips (which women soldiers call a “weenus”). Women are serving and dying, but, in the words of retired Navy captain Lory Manning, “A lot of social conservatives have powerful feelings about training mothers to kill.”<sup>2</sup> And some military policy-makers foresee reopening debates about women's participation in combat once the war is over.

It is telling that although women's deaths in Iraq get little attention in the media or from the American public, women's involvement in abusive treatment of “detainees” at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and at Guantánamo

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Bay prison in Cuba continues to haunt debates over acceptable interrogation techniques and American sentiments toward the war. In addition, the sexual nature of the abuse is used by some to argue that women shouldn't be in the military, that their very presence unleashed sexual violence. Although the deaths of women soldiers receive little attention, the reports of women soldiers' violence and abuse captured the public imagination. Why? Why did the images of women abusers from Abu Ghraib generate so much press and media speculation?

This book is an attempt to answer this question by analyzing both the media coverage and the events themselves within the context of a pornographic way of looking at sex and violence that is normalized through popular media. The pornographic way of looking or seeing takes the object of its gaze for its own pleasure or as a spectacle for its own enjoyment without regard for the subjectivity or subject position of those looked at. The pornographic way of looking reinforces the power and agency of the looker while erasing or debasing the power and agency of the looked-at.<sup>3</sup> This way of looking operates on both the literal and the figural level: sex and violence literally have become spectacles to be looked at; and sex and violence figuratively have become linked within our cultural imaginary, as evidenced by the fact that the phrase "sex and violence" has become part of our everyday vocabulary—in terms of Hollywood films, it is difficult to think of one without the other.

In a general sense, then, this book is about the connection between sex and violence in contemporary culture. More specifically, it is about how this imagined connection plays itself out in the theatre of war currently staged in the Middle East. Furthermore, it is about how this pornographic way of looking plays an essential role in waging war; and how historically it has been used, even developed, within the context of colonial and imperialist violence. In this regard, as we will see, the American occupation of Iraq follows in a long line of colonial and imperialist ventures executed by the "West" in the "East."

Placing the events at Abu Ghraib and their media coverage within the historical context of Western colonial violence allows us to see how they are a continuation of military practices that normalize violence, particularly in relation to women and sex. When the photographs first became public, there was a flurry of outrage and accusation. The photographs were considered "shocking" and mind-boggling; some considered the photographs themselves to be the real problem. Yet at the same time there was

something strangely familiar about these photos. It is that combination of shock and familiarity that I seek to understand in this book. The faces of the perpetrators suggest that they could be the subjects of photographs in a high school yearbook. Judged by the gestures and facial expressions, they are photographs of triumph and victory, all smiles and thumbs-up. In this regard, the photographs are trophies that suggest that within the war of us versus them, we are winning. The trophy-viewing or trophy-seeing inherent in these photographs is just one aspect of pornographic looking. The objects of the photographs are abused, debased, humiliated, naked; and when these trembling and vulnerable bodies are photographed next to triumphant American military personnel, the clear message is that we can do whatever we want to these foreigners, these enemy combatants. We are in the driver's seat, while they are just along for the ride, in this case apparently a joy-ride at their expense.

In this book I argue that these “shocking” images are familiar to us not only from a history of colonial violence associated with sex, but also from a history of associations involving women, sex, and violence. Indeed, the association between sex and violence trades on stereotypical images and myths of dangerous or threatening women upon which our culture was, and continues to be, built. Women have been associated with the downfall of man since Eve supposedly tempted Adam with forbidden fruit. In this regard, I analyze literal and conceptual images of women from war in the Middle East, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, in terms of both the legacy of colonial imperialism and the legacy of patriarchal associations of women, sex, and death.

In the chapters that follow I peel away layers of visual and rhetorical meaning in an attempt to understand the deeper significance of various aspects of this “war on terror”—the use of women by the military to “soften up” prisoners, images of burka-clad women shopping in Afghanistan, the defense that the Abu Ghraib perpetrators were just “having fun,” techniques of war reporting such as embedded journalism—along with the connection between sex and violence in recent Hollywood films. By interpreting these events and images as they function within the larger context of a culture whose primary forms of entertainment revolve around sex and violence, we learn more about the function of women in this economy of violence. Moreover, by interpreting these events and images within the context of a cultural imaginary captivated by sex and violence, we can begin to understand our own investments in violence. My hope is that by

understanding our own investments in violence we can short-circuit violent urges and stop making our violent fantasies into reality.

My multifaceted approach is intended to address some of the interrelationships between our fantasies, desires, fears, and phobias, on the one hand, and media rhetoric (visual and narrative), along with public policies, on the other. In other words, one of the questions motivating this analysis is: What is the relationship between our psychic, or emotional, lives and our actions, or public lives? I intentionally avoid the language of private and public because my working hypothesis is that these two realms are thoroughly and intimately related to a degree that makes any such distinction deceptive. In fact, in some ways the oppositions between private and public, between emotions and politics, between bodies and society, between nature and culture, feed into and off of the rhetoric of war. The oppositional thinking of us versus them, which erases any ambiguities between the two, also operates in these other areas. And, as we will see, it is the disavowal of ambiguities—those gray areas where one pole cannot be easily separated from the other—that contributes to a culture of violence.

In the chapters that follow I attempt to identify a deeper meaning in the visual and narrative rhetoric of the war against terror. The main focus of my analysis is how the war is perceived and represented; another operative hypothesis is that working to interpret representations of events in the popular media can tell us something about how we see ourselves and how we see others; critically reading the media can teach us about the deep-seated fears and desires that motivate our thinking and our behavior. We may not be aware of the fears and desires that lie behind our conceptions of ourselves and others and our actions toward ourselves and them. Using theoretical tools from philosophy, psychoanalysis, and sociology, I attempt to tease out the psychic and political stakes in our war on terror by combing through media representations of women involved in violence; by comparing discussions of women's liberation here and elsewhere; by examining the role of visual recording technologies in the enterprise of war; and by identifying the ways in which we justify our own (high-tech) violence and condemn the (low-tech) violence of others, including imagining that women's involvement somehow "softens the blow."

In the case of Abu Ghraib, the fact that women seemingly forced men into sexual postures confused even human rights organizations as they tried to classify, or simply identify, these actions as abuse. The sexual nature of the photos makes us uneasy. On the one hand, the "perky grins"

and “cheerleaders’ smiles” on the faces of these teenage girls seem out of place in the theatre of war. But, as I argue in chapter 1, the very idea that women can be interrogation tools plays on age-old fears of women and the fantasy of female sexuality as a threatening weapon. The familiarity of this connection between women, sex, and weapon makes the images uncanny—as strange as they are mundane. If in the past women were figured as “bombshells” and their sex imagined as a deadly weapon, the literal explosion of women onto the scene of war now should not be a surprise. From the women involved in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay prisons, to rescued Pfc. Jessica Lynch, to Palestinian women suicide bombers, recent media coverage has turned them into “weapons” of war. As we will see, in each of these cases metaphors of “weapons” are used repeatedly to describe women and female sexuality. In chapter 1, I analyze our fascination with what we imagine as the deadly power of these women.

In the first two chapters I also examine the rhetoric surrounding “feminism” and women’s “liberation” as it has been used in relation to war in the Middle East. On the one hand, feminism has been blamed for women’s violence against men; it has supposedly given women equal access to killing and abusing. On the other hand, feminism’s concern for the liberation of women has been used to justify military action in the Middle East, Afghanistan in particular.

In chapter 2 I show how the Bush administration’s rhetoric of liberating “women of cover” elsewhere shores up images of freedom and privilege for women here. Furthermore, it obscures the fact that this freedom brings with it new forms of discipline both here and abroad. One example of the new disciplinary constraints placed on women in the United States is the increasingly high standards of “professional motherhood”: mothers are expected to have it all, family and careers, even if this means medicating themselves with Prozac, caffeine, or sleeping pills to maintain their busy schedules. In this chapter I link the recent rhetoric of liberating women in the Middle East with similar rhetoric used in earlier imperialist colonial enterprises to justify military action abroad even while denying women rights at home. Moreover, I show how the freedom that we are bringing to these women is figured as the freedom to shop, which suggests that the notion of American freedom offered to the rest of the world through war can be reduced to the freedom of the market. Within this rhetoric, women’s right to shop and dress as they please becomes the watermark for global freedom. Women’s right to *bare* arms is taken as a sign of freedom and progress.

Throughout this book I investigate the associations of the word “freedom” as it appears in popular media, in presidential speeches, and in scholarly articles. Questions of women’s freedom have been central to feminism and women’s liberation movements. Within the history of colonialism, women’s freedom has become a cause for war. It has also been blamed for women’s violence in the United States military and for women’s violent participation in suicide bombings. The president has maintained that he intends to bring freedom and democracy to the entire world, and that the terror attacks of September 11 were an act of war against the entire free world. If freedom is at stake in the war on terror, it is crucial to ask what we mean by “freedom.”

In chapter 3 I analyze the rhetoric of freedom as it has been used by the Bush administration to justify war. In examining presidential speeches, we discover an essential link between freedom and property, between freedom and ownership. We are fighting to protect our property and our right to ownership. Again, freedom is reduced to the free market. In these speeches, the rhetoric of freedom works in tandem with the rhetoric of good and evil. Once more, protecting the Good is reduced to protecting our goods. Thereby, the meanings of freedom, justice, and goodness become fungible, exchanged on the market of politics used to justify military action to gain and secure American wealth. Freedom and goodness become the rallying cries of global capitalism, where opening new markets and guaranteeing contracts for American companies become trademarks of success in the war against terror.

But, as we will see, the fear of losing our wealth, and the determination to protect it at all costs, leads to a paranoid patriotism wherein we feel our wealth threatened on all sides. The flip side of paranoia is delusion of grandeur, which is also evidenced in talk of “the entire free world” and “bringing democracy to the globe.” The ideas that we are the center of the universe and that the entire world is at our disposal go hand in hand with the notion that we are surrounded by forces of evil out to destroy us. In psychoanalytic terms, these are classic symptoms of paranoia. Our sense of ourselves as a nation is strengthened by finding a common enemy, by seeing ourselves fighting the good fight against the forces of evil all around us. Our sense of ourselves as free is emboldened by comparing ourselves to people, especially women, elsewhere whom we imagine as enslaved.

The inflated rhetoric of good versus evil, of us versus them, feeds a paranoid patriotism that acts without thinking. Perhaps more worrisome

are the ways in which, in presidential speeches, this rhetoric is linked to eternity and God: we are fighting a war for eternity because God is on our side. Bush concluded his 2006 9/11 memorial speech as follows: "We go forward with trust in that spirit [the spirit of the American people], confidence in our purpose, and faith in a loving God who made us to be free." If we are fighting for eternity, then we are fighting a war without end, perpetual war without the possibility of peace. Another dangerous aspect of this rhetoric of eternity is that it takes the war out of its sociohistorical context. The war is therefore not about oil, or nuclear weapons, or dictators, or maintaining America's position as a superpower, or rebuilding Iraq, or even free elections in Iraq, but about eternal goodness and our faith in God. The danger of removing events from their sociohistorical context is that we are not given the information needed to interpret and understand these events. We are given hyperbolic images that stir feeling, often violent feelings of hatred and revenge, but we are discouraged from thinking introspectively about those feelings. We are encouraged to feel violent, to want violence, without thinking about our own investments in that violence or about its consequences.

It is not just the administration, however, that undermines our ability to think critically about public policy and the war. The media, particularly in its coverage of 9/11 and the war in Iraq, contributes to the confusion. In chapter 3, I analyze the ways in which embedded reporting, rolling newsbars, and simulated events in newscasts not only decontextualize events but also blur the distinction between fantasy and reality. These simulations and imagined scenarios foment fear and paranoid patriotism. At best, embedded reporting gives a peek into the lives of soldiers or civilians in wartime and thereby evokes empathy; but because these slice-of-life reports are presented out of context and interspersed with simulations, commercial advertisements, and entertainment, this empathy is hollow and does not help us to understand the situation or to act on our feelings or knowledge. At worst, visual images from Afghanistan and Iraq continue a long history of the use of visual technologies in colonial pursuits.

In this chapter I examine the desire for live coverage and embedded reporting in terms of its effect on our sense of time and our sense of reality as they play into this colonial enterprise. I argue that live embedded reporting creates a perpetual present that decontextualizes and naturalizes events and thereby closes off the possibility of critical interpretation that is necessary to reflect on the meaning of those events. The perpetual present

of broadcast and Internet media contributes to the breakdown of borders between fantasy and reality. I describe how feelings of vulnerability and lack of security result in a defensive form of paranoid patriotism. When fantasy replaces reality and when reality becomes marketable, violence becomes more extreme.

Given that immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, one of the most frequently used words was “vulnerable,” it is important to reflect on the meaning and effects of vulnerability in relation to violence, particularly since the word most closely following on its heels was “war.” In the final chapter I explore the connection between vulnerability and violence to understand why a sense of vulnerability quickly gives way to desire for war. Recently philosophers have embraced vulnerability as constitutive of our humanity. For example, Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva have in different ways taken up the notion of vulnerability to suggest that we need to accept our own vulnerability rather than try to deny it, because disavowing vulnerability is what leads to war. Certainly fantasies that we are invincible and not vulnerable can lead to war. As we will see, however, the notion of vulnerability already includes within it violence: vulnerable means both wounding and wounded. Here I question the notion that violence is constitutive of humanity and suggest instead that it is the ability to overcome violence by moving beyond it that is definitive of humanity.

My meditation on vulnerability begins with an analysis of innocence prompted by Abu Ghraib defendants saying at their trials that they were “just joking” or “just having fun.” Apart from their orders and their place in the theatre of war, at another level these young soldiers abused prisoners to amuse themselves. They claimed to be ignorant of Muslim religious practices and to be morally innocent even if they were legally guilty. In chapter 4 I examine this split between moral and legal innocence in terms of a deeper split between bodily sensations and law or meaning in our culture. I analyze some of the ways in which the “black sheep” or “few bad apples” at Abu Ghraib are symptomatic of a part of our culture that valorizes innocence, ignorance, and violence.

My analysis is motivated by the question: What aspects of culture could give rise to young soldiers who abuse, even torture, others for “fun”? I answer this question by focusing on ways in which our society’s civil and moral laws cannot give meaning to our emotional lives and embodied existence. Law—taken in the broadest possible sense as that which provides social structure to life—is being reduced to regulations and disciplinary

codes that do not give robust meaning to life. They regulate, discipline, and, at the extreme, punish our bodies, but they do not give adequate meaning to bodily pleasures and pains. One outcome of this is the creation of what I call “abysmal individuals,” people for whom emotional life is cut off from meaningful articulation; or, in psychoanalytic terms, whose bodily pleasures and pains are cut off from meaningful sublimation. This split between body and meaning or between emotion and law also plays a role in our attitudes toward legitimate and illegitimate force, and particularly our view of suicide bombers, or “body bombers,” as philosopher Adriana Cavarero calls them.

The final chapter is a meditation on what forms of cultural meaning, or lack of meaning, result in the guiltless glee of sexual abuse at Abu Ghraib, on the one hand, and the profound commitment to death on the part of suicide bombers on the other. What cultural contexts make it possible for young men and women to “innocently” abuse prisoners “just for fun”? What cultural contexts make it possible for young women suicide bombers to dedicate their lives to killing themselves and others? And, moreover, why do images of women abusing and killing captivate us so? Moving from an analysis of the rhetoric used to describe these women involved in acts of war to their cultural roles and significance, I examine the pleasure in violence and the passion for death exhibited by these women and their companions in the context of the cultures and technologies that spawn them.

While suicide bombers are different from the Abu Ghraib abusers in many ways, they both participate in and rely on pornographic ways of seeing and trophy-viewing to perpetuate violence. Suicide terrorists rely on media to terrorize. They rely on a pornographic viewing to shock their enemies. They distribute videotaped testimonies of their willingness to “martyr” themselves as trophies of war. Terrorists videotape beheadings for viewing on television and the Internet, again as trophies of their violence. They use television and the Internet to circulate images that seemingly attest to their victory in a war of good against evil, of the godly against the infidel. On both sides violence and war have become media spectacles and media scandals in addition to political practices within a global economy or world history. They are taken out of their context and exploited for their marketability on broadcast and Internet media.

To this extent, the media participates in a pornographic looking that easily leads to trophy-viewing. We make ourselves the heroes of our own story by rendering the vanquished mere objects for our gaze, and they do the

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same. I suggest an alternative to pornographic looking, what I call “witnessing.” Following my development of this notion in an earlier book entitled *Witnessing*, here again I elaborate how the double sense of the word can help us enrich our understanding of what we can see by taking care to attend to the ambiguities of life rather than disavowing them. Witnessing has the double sense of seeing with your own eyes, as in eyewitness, on the one hand, and being witness to something that you cannot see, to something that you can only experience, as in witnessing to the atrocities of war, on the other. The ambiguity of witnessing helps us to bring back the ambiguities of our experience, a kind of transfusion of living back into seeing. Most basically, I emphasize the importance of considering the sociohistorical context of the individuals seen along with their subjective agency, we could even say their spirit. Witnessing, then, requires seeing the sociohistorical situation that leaves the individual where she is, as well as seeing her spirit or agency that might allow her to change that situation. In this regard, witnessing involves attending to the past and to the future as they are related to present circumstances, rather than collapsing both into the perpetual present of most television broadcasts and Internet images.

In conclusion I suggest that witnessing can enrich our conception of freedom. Freedom as reduced to the free market is not complete. Even freedom reduced to the absence of prohibitions is not complete. Without the freedom to create the meaning of one’s own life, most especially of one’s own body, freedom is empty. Perhaps this is why so many citizens of the “free world” are taking prescription drugs—Prozac, sleeping pills, pain pills—to try to fill a void left by the evacuation of meaning from our lives. Perhaps this is why so many middle-class young people living in the land of the free resort to cutting themselves or playing the “hanging game” in order to feel alive, or, at the other extreme, go on shooting rampages at their local schools. The prevalence of depression, the use of various pharmaceutical drugs, self-injury, and violence among young people all signal the presence of strong emotions lying beneath the surface of our wealth and prosperity, emotions that become destructive when they don’t have healthy outlets or alternatives.

The pressures of the free market create fears and desires that remain unarticulated and subterranean precisely because in a significant sense interpretation is antithetical to this flattened notion of freedom. The freedom of the market allows for interpretation only so long as it sells; and within our wealthy democracy the meaning of life is reduced to material wealth rather than wealth of the psyche or soul. Freedom of the psyche, of the

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soul, thrives on meaning. It is fed by the process of interpretation, which nourishes meaning. To be sure, a hungry body has difficulty feeding a hungry soul, and war is waged in the physical world on bodies, but it is also waged in the symbolic world of meaning. To understand the stakes of the war on terror, we need to interpret its meaning. We need to decipher the meaning of our own investments in violence. To be free, we need to interpret our fears and desires before acting on them. In addition to the political and economic stakes of violence toward ourselves and others are the ethical stakes of creating meaningful life.

The stakes of this book, then, take us beyond the war in Iraq or images of women warriors to considerations of ethics and politics more generally. In a sense, the media presentation of the war in Iraq is a case study through which we may illuminate the ethical and political stakes of particular ideas about our relationships with ourselves and others. The ways that we characterize ourselves and the ways that we characterize our enemies can determine how we respond to real-world political situations. The word “ethics” comes from the Greek word “ethos,” which means character or way of life. Our ethos—our character, our way of life—is what we have been told is under attack by terrorists. Yet, what is this ethos? What is our way of life? particularly as it is related to ethics? Today we hear a lot about the “moral majority” and the moral conservatism of Americans. This notion of morality, however, works through ideals of good versus evil that divide people and actions into proper/improper, pure/contaminated, good/evil, etc. As I have argued elsewhere, colonization, oppression, and war justify themselves using morality—but a morality that fills our ethos with aggression and violence. Indeed, we use morality to justify the most extreme forms of violence and to absolve ourselves of responsibility for our actions: we believe that we have a divine right to our way of life and that Providence ordains the elimination of all who may challenge it. How can there be so much killing in the name of moral righteousness—on both sides?

Here, as an outgrowth of analyzing media images of war and determining our own investments in violence, I propose that we think of ethics outside of or beyond moralities of good and evil in order to conceive an ethics based on our fundamental dependence on others and our environment for our very survival and moreover for the possibility of a meaningful life. We must think about ourselves and others as being coinhabitants of one planet, as being part of the same ecosystem, and, more than that, as being first and foremost connected by various dependency relations that sustain

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us and give life meaning. We are dependent on others and the earth not just for our survival, for our biological life, but also for our quality of life, for our psychic life, for the lives of our souls. Unless we were to reduce our conception of the “good life” to mere goods and services, we must go beyond moral distinctions motivated by politics. Ethics, as conceived here, beyond morality, is not a set of codes that divide people into good and evil, dominant and subordinate, friend and enemy. Ethics is the acknowledgment that we live and flourish only by virtue of our relations with others, many of whom we have never met (the farmers who grow our vegetables, the factory workers who make our shoes, the dock workers who unload our electronics, etc.). And that it is our relationships, both intimate and distant, that give life meaning. In this important sense, how we imagine our relationships with others near and far is a central aspect of global politics.