

Postscript

In the spring of 2004 a scandal shocked the world: violent pornographic images were accidentally released into the public. In Abu Ghraib, a formerly unknown prison in Iraq, young American soldiers staged violent fantasies of domination and submission in what some considered pornographic images, some considered fraternity behavior, and others considered torture. We became witness to a watershed moment, characterized by the meeting of official history and unofficial fantasy. These photos tied the military domination to the surfacing of continuing fantasies of orientalized homosexual desire that is humiliated by forced submission—again, in the most famous picture: to a cruel woman.

The scandalous photos both continue and break with the traditions and structures that I have analyzed in detail in this book. They continue the structure of forbidden fantasies that are acted out on the bodies of the Other while being framed by a narrative of liberalism that disavows violence and its connection to sexuality. But they also bespeak a radical break with the discourse of the 1980s and 90s, which was my analytical focus in the chapters of this book.

To put it bluntly: victimhood is out and mastery is in. To engage theoretically with the celebratory projection of subversion onto the abdication of power in masochism might soon be a task too frivolous to undertake. Our contemporary period is calling for new studies of mastery, violence, and domination, but to understand them in the full context of their aesthetic, historical, political, and psychological dimensions, we may need to continue to engage with the detailed historical and textual readings that connect us to the time when the terms of the debate were set in place sexually, psychologically, aesthetically, and, last but not least, politically.