

# EMISFÉRICA

Fusco, Coco. *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008. 144 pages, illustrations. \$16.95 paper.

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Though the human rights debate over the United States military's use of "special" coercive techniques in its global war on terror is far from resolved, torture has firmly taken hold of American popular culture. Americans obsessively debate it, vicariously live through it in films and television shows that revel in "torture porn," and engage in a multitude of reenactments in which the debate turns performative—there's even a Guantánamo in the virtual world of *Second Life*.<sup>1</sup> Yet relatively few U.S. performance-based artists have responded to the issue since revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib first came to light in 2004. And among those that have, a prevailing tendency has been to perform the abjected body of the victim in order to forward an ethical argument while implicating viewers.<sup>2</sup> Yet, though such work allows audiences to contemplate their complicity, it runs the risk of replacing critical engagement with affective response.

In the substantive body of work Coco Fusco has developed in past four years, she attempts to short circuit this pattern of liberal inaction by taking on the role of the torturer and inhabiting the ideological imaginary of the U.S. Armed Forces. Relying on a strategy seen in her 2001 collaboration with Ricardo Domínguez, *Dolores from 10h to 22h*, and as early as her 1990 projects with Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Fusco trades on the seduction of impersonation to disrupt accepted norms and the "privilege of political indifference" (25).<sup>3</sup> Though the efficacy of her critical mimicry is debatable, the work nevertheless foregrounds the theatricality of torture as well as its recidivist racial and gender politics.

Simultaneously an extensive artist's statement on the inspiration, nature, and intent of this recent work, a call to ethical accounting (if not action), and a performance, Fusco's *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* similarly parlays simulation. Opening the fake faux-leather cover impressively emblazoned with the seal "United States Central Command," readers fall into the rabbit hole of an ersatz interrogation training manual, featuring the titular thirty-two-page tutorial replete with four-color illustrations depicting a buxom blonde "torture chick"—an Aryan wet dream with a bra size straight out of adolescent video game fantasies—who employs a range of coercive techniques on a cowering, presumably Iraqi, male dressed in an orange jumpsuit (a recognizable signifier of the global carceral gulag). Despite the at-times disjunctive humor of Dan Turner's drawings—in one the detainee looks downright embarrassed *for* his interrogator, not as a result of her antics—the sexual tactics detailed in the manual reportedly have been used by female interrogators. Ironically, Fusco and Turner nudge the facts toward comical fiction by highlighting the racializing and gendering politics at work in such government-sanctioned techniques.

Included in the slender volume is the brief essay “Our Feminist Future,” based on a caustically wry performance Fusco gave at a 2007 Museum of Modern Art symposium in which she adopts her persona of military commander to compare feminist advancements in the U.S. Armed Forces to those in the arts, congratulating the art world for capitalizing on female ambition by “severing the attraction to power from the desire for change” (101). The artist behind the curtain appears in “Invasion of Space by a Female,” though even this epistolary essay is performative in shape. Written as an intimate letter from one friend to another, it re-performs Virginia Woolf’s 1938 “Three Guineas” essay, in which the author contends that women, disenfranchised from the rights of full membership in the body politic, can’t make war. The format permits Fusco to be as infuriated as she imagines Woolf would be to see the uses to which female sexuality has been put in the war on terror.

A searing discursus that takes the military term for Pentagon-approved interrogation techniques of female sexual aggression for its title, the essay nevertheless could have benefited from judicious editing. Reading it, I had the sense that its publisher had rushed the book to press. This does not discount the beautiful critique Fusco launches against an apathetic Left, fellow artists and feminists, and the political hegemony alike. Fusco isn’t interested in causal explanations or in vindicating those involved, but in excavating the extent to which female sexuality has been institutionalized in intelligence gathering—in particular in the performances of gender aggression that haven’t been seen by the public but that are minimized by an innocuous-sounding term and diminished by images of diminutive Lynndie English holding a detainee by a noticeably slack dog leash. To this end, a photocopy of a FBI memo detailing the very real harsh treatment by female interrogators follows the essay. In the final section of “Invasion of Space by a Female” Fusco hits her stride to make clear how the military leverages gender politics by orchestrating a campaign of sexual torture by women, then naturalizing it behind the camouflage of female stereotypes of the worst kind. Potently, she ties this effort into a much larger political logic in which “the Right has marshaled the discourse of identity politics [...] to serve conservative causes” (40).

Fusco’s replicant counter-performances, as José Estaban Muñoz has pointed out, address the underlying ideology that gives rise to sexual torture and also camouflage it—after all, American (read white) women “hardly seem to be capable of masterminding anything like an illegal covert program functioning on a global scale” (38). Exploiting the questionability of the copy as well as its faithfulness, Fusco’s performances are a hall of mirrors that reflect the necessarily performative aspects of interrogation as well as its rationale. Live performance brings close that which is distant, and, as Fusco writes, creating distance from on-the-ground mortalities—the corporeal cost of doing war—has been an emphatic priority of the U.S. war machine and obliging corporate media (12). The value of Fusco’s work lies in her ability to circumvent the limitations of affective reaction in favor of critical response, which is here assisted by the extensive research she conducted during its development.

Admittedly, I had expected a more comprehensive volume, one that would’ve included photographic documentation and additional performance scripts out of this recent body of

Fusco's work, but the combination of footnoted research, personal insight, political outrage, and performative ruse won me over. *A Field Guide* is a welcome contribution to performance studies, especially for scholars of political theater, docudrama, public interventions and other various intersections of progressive social movements and the arts, as well as to transnational feminist critiques of power and militarization.

### Endnotes

1 See *Gone Gitmo*, <http://www.gonegitmo.blogspot.com/> for more on the Guantánamo in Second Life. Examples of reenactments include Christopher Hitchens' exploration of waterboarding; to read the article, see:

<http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/08/hitchens200808>; to watch the video, see:

[http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/video/2008/hitchens\\_video200808](http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/video/2008/hitchens_video200808). For information on Amnesty International's recent U.S. tour of a replica of a Guantánamo maximum security cell and to watch video clips on visitors' experiences, see:

<http://celltour.amnesty.org/>. For more on protests and solidarity actions—including voluntary hooding and caging—see: <http://blog.amnesty.counter-terror-with-justice.org/> and [www.witnessagainsttorture.org](http://www.witnessagainsttorture.org).

2 Examples include Los Angeles-based performance artist Nancy Popp's durational performance *Cell* (2004); Wafaa Bilal's *Domestic Terrorism* (2007) and ironical web-based poll, *Dog or Iraqi?* (2008); and Steve Powers' *Waterboard Thrill Ride* (2008), though the latter emphasizes voyeuristic spectacle over empathetic identification.

3 In *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America* (2006; Victoria and Albert Museum, London), for example, Fusco deployed the media technology and format of a military briefing to stage contemporary intelligence gathering; in the site-specific performance *Bare Life Study #1* (2005; staged as part of VideoBrasil's fifteenth annual Festival of Electronic Art and Performance), she choreographed a grueling street cleaning by toothbrush-wielding "detainees" in front of the U.S. embassy in São Paulo, Brazil, to make a statement on military policing; and for the film *Operation Atropos* (2006; MC Gallery, Los Angeles) she participated in an immersive military interrogation-training program.

### Works Cited

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