| book reviews

Sexual decoys: gender, race and war in imperial democracy

Zillah Eisenstein; Spinifex Press, Melbourne/Zed Books, London and New York, 2007, 142p, ISBN: 978-1-84277-817-3, £14.99 (British Paperback); ISBN-10 1-84277-817-x pb; ISBN-13 978-1-84277-817-3 pb; ISBN-10: 1-876756-63-2 pb (Spinifex); ISBN-13 978-1-876756-63-5 pb (Spinifex); ISBN-10 1-84277-816-1 hb; ISBN-13 978-1-84277-816-6 hb, £55.00 (Hardback).

Many times I have found myself bereft of words to respond to those who say 'What do you mean, male power? Women fight in the military today, they head corporations, they make policy. Look at Condoleezza Rice – and what's more she's black'. Zillah Eisenstein's book supplies the reasoning that enables us to say, 'Yes, things have changed. But the changes don't mean what they seem to mean. Patriarchal imperialism lives on, in disguise'. More precisely, what lives on is racialized heteropatriarchal capitalist imperialism. And this daunting phrase signals what is perhaps an inevitable problem with the telling of such a story – finding words that convey the complexity of our contemporary world without leaving the reader adrift.

The author of *Sexual Decoys* situates herself fairly and squarely in the USA, and from this location she analyses the processes that, gathering pace over the last three decades, have dismayed and left speechless many Western feminists, socialists and democrats (small d). As one living at the heart of empire, looking both inwards to her own society and outwards to the imperialized world, Eisenstein reads the changing times. She describes the unprecedented shaking up and remixing of gender and race in this 'post-equality' era. She exposes the appropriation and distortion of the languages of feminism and democracy by those whose project is extending the worldwide reach and control of US corporate and military power.

A decoy is an object designed to allure, deceive and entrap. Sexual decoys such as Hillary Clinton deceive one into believing that women are equal now. Racial decoys like Colin Powell propose that racial discrimination no longer exists. The truth is otherwise. The main argument of *Sexual Decoys* is that the concepts of sex, gender and race, whose definition and mutual relation have long been contested, have recently acquired a startling new fluidity and flexibility, nicely tuned for the interests of global capital and patriarchal imperialist domination. Condoleezza Rice, both sexual and racial decoy, holds onto her femininity, 'shopping for her Ferragamo shoes'. But she has donned a man's role in a masculine world: for example, in the recent furore concerning

alleged US torture practices, 'the warrior princess repeatedly spoke in favour of the necessity of extreme and coercive interrogation' (p. 58). Condi does an excellent job of making patriarchal imperialism look like democracy.

Zillah Eisenstein's book has several distinct themes, though they inevitably intertwine. The first, as the book's subtitle suggests, is war, particularly the war on, or of, 'terror'. Eisenstein discusses the gender shifts that can look like equality – the army recruiting more women, some women becoming suicide bombers – that in reality accompany, and even signal, a 'slide from neoliberal to fascistic democracy' in which permanent war is seen as the answer to the emasculating humiliation of the fall of the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. Abu Ghraib is dealt with at length, especially the disturbing presence of females, centrally Lynndie England, in the torture scene. The Iraqi prisoners were 'made to feel like and be like women or fags while being tortured by females. The brown men at Abu Ghraib remained male, but not men; and the white women guards were female but not women'. Of Lynndie England, Eisenstein writes, 'She represents masculinity in a female body. Gender floats disconnected from its signifying body. She is a decoy for imperial wars' (p. 34). England and the other women present in those disquieting photographs, 'create confusion by participating in the very sexual humiliation that their gender is usually victim to' (p. 37).

A second theme of the book is the eminence of powerful corporations such as Halliburton and Bechtel in political life, and the privatization of war as in the increasing use of private contractors for military operations. These trends advance in parallel with the erosion of human rights and the normalization of torture. While business makes massive profits from militarization, deployment and post-war reconstruction, it is the poorest of the working class who pay the price in their bodies, in war-fighting overseas and in prison at home.

A third theme is the contemporary handling of race in US society. The entry of some black and brown individuals into the inner circles of power is counterposed to black poverty, the shocking number of black men in prison, the fact that 70 per cent of new AIDS cases are black women. The demand for equality has been 'displaced by an embrace of so-called diversity' because multiracialism is what corporate imperialism needs, both to market its products and dispel the call for justice.

Finally, Eisenstein explores how 'the cacophony of gendered meanings today' (p. 93) in diversifying and confounding the meaning of man and woman, undermines critical feminisms. Meanwhile feminist language is seized on by imperial/neoliberal interests in the USA – who represent the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan as crusades to liberate veiled women from their oppression by Islamists – and rightwing nationalist women in third-world sites manipulate the new fluidity of gender for local patriarchal masculinist systems of power. How to

seize back the initiative? A retreat to essentialism is no answer. 'Masculinism in both its traditional and its modern patriarchal forms counts on this tension between diverse females and the homogenized gendered woman' (p. 107). Rather, writes Eisenstein, 'feminisms must reject prohibition and embrace radical sexual deregulation', thereby opening democratic theory and practice to 'insurgent possibilities' (p. 99).

Sexual Decoys affords an insightful and much needed analysis of the way our struggles for gender and racial justice are being politically manipulated by the forces of patriarchy and capitalism. But it is not an easy read. Because it is about representation and discourse the author inevitably deploys those teasing metaphoric phrasal verbs postmodernism has taught us (some more happily than others) to live with. In this text to morph, to dislocate, to parlay, to masquerade and camouflage are in frequent use. The sentences, because they must accommodate race, sex and gender (class too, though this often slips out by default), are complex and confusing at times. The very purpose of Eisenstein's book is to expose and explore a contradiction: that things really change but do not really change, that we appear to gain and in some ways do gain, but we simultaneously lose (instead, or as well). The difficulty of the reading is therefore a useful, if tough, lesson in dialectics. We learn to anticipate the characteristic sequence: a proposition is followed by a 'but', which qualifies or negates it. The 'but' is followed by a 'yet' that further complexifies the proposition, negates the negation, transcends the contradiction. Nonetheless, take courage, for the rewards of a careful reading of *Sexual Decoys* are great.

Cynthia Cockburn

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the women of the iraqi war

Monsterring: inside America's policy of secret interrogations and torture in the terror war

Tara McKelvey, Carroll and Graf Publishers, New York, 2007, 292p. + index;

ISBN-978-0-78671-776-7, \$25.95 (Hbk)

One of the guys: women as aggressors and torturers

Tara McKelvey, editor, Seal Press, Emeryville, CA, 2007, 266p.; ISBN 978-1-58005-196-5,

\$15.95 (Pbk)

In both the meticulously researched investigative report that is *Monsterring* and in the edited volume written in anticipation of the former book, Tara McKelvey, a senior editor of and contributor to the liberal *American Prospect* magazine, is concerned with women in war and at war.