

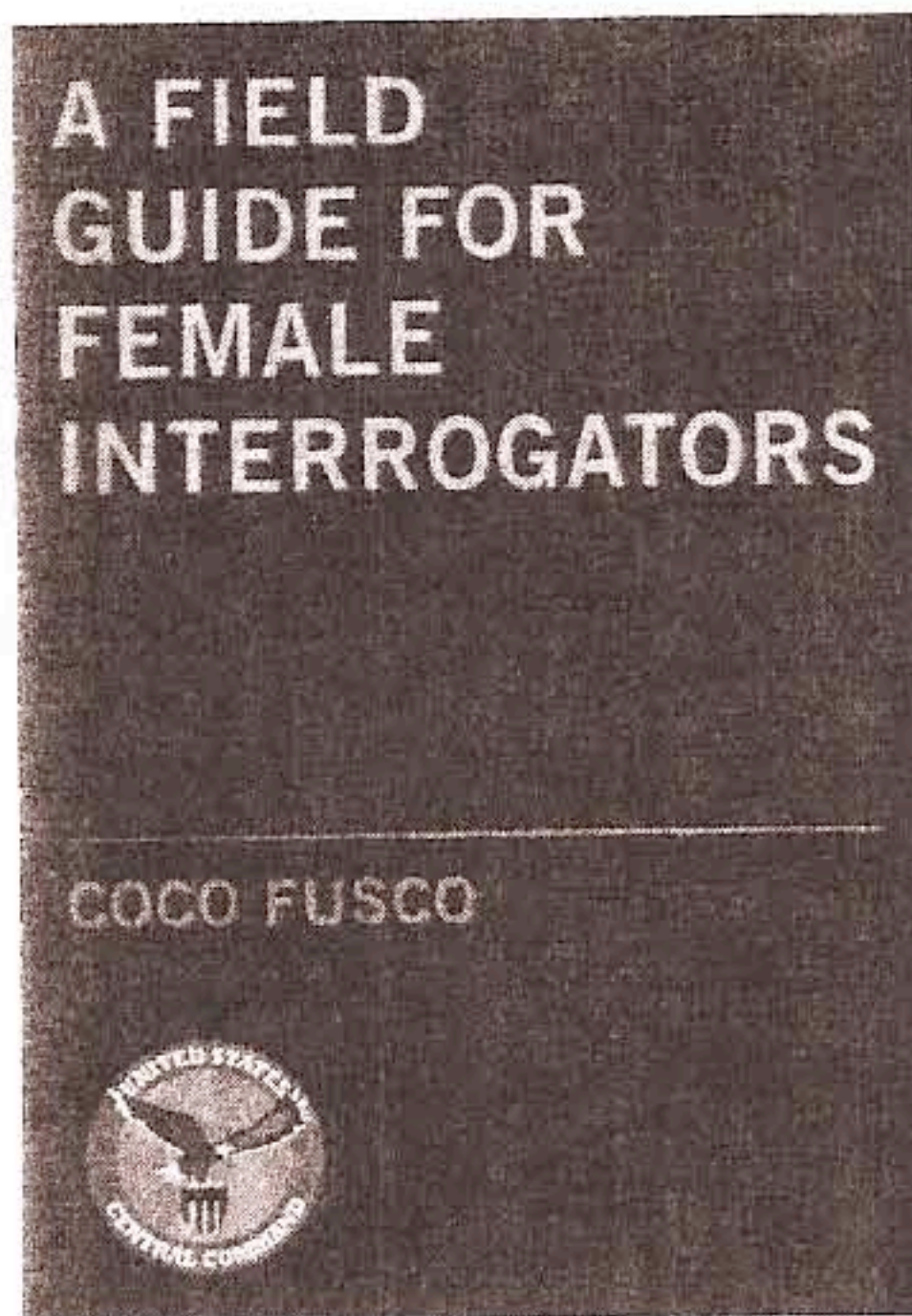
FEMINISM IN THE FIELD

A FIELD GUIDE FOR FEMALE INTERROGATORS

BY COCO FUSCO

NEW YORK: SEVEN STORIES PRESS, 2008

144 PP./\$16.95 (SB)



Coco Fusco's most recent book, *A Field Guide for Female Interrogators* (2008), provides a complex and nuanced reading of the Abu Ghraib scandal through a gendered lens. This feminist reading uses the recent release of Abu Ghraib images to explain the military's construction of institutionalized torture practices. Fusco reveals the way these practices use social constructions of femininity to inform

interrogation practices and to control civilian response to their exposure. Through her essay, performance scripts, and field guide, the reader encounters three different methods of understanding how the military currently deploys gendered bodies and how the public comprehends such bodies. This book will inform readers of all levels who are interested in media, gender, and performance studies.

Fusco structures the first half of her book as a personal letter to writer Virginia Woolf, and both identifies with and questions her writings on war, while catching her up on the developments of contemporary feminism. This frame allows Fusco to perform a critique of feminism's inability to provide a nuanced response to the images of female interrogators released from Abu Ghraib and the way that common sense ideas of gender and culture shaped American responses to the Abu Ghraib scandal. For many, the popular understanding of feminism posits women as always the victims of sexual abuses of power. This understanding renders women both incapable of holding and abusing power, and positions male victims of sexual abuse as non-existent. Due to these misconceptions, the actions of female soldiers were generally not considered to be sexual abuse, and some even imagined that the victims should have enjoyed such actions. Fusco encourages us to realize that the military employed American understandings of gender constructions, and how these notions would shape public responses to Abu Ghraib, to control the anticipated response to the release of information of American torture practices. Similarly, the military used American constructions of Middle Eastern masculinities to determine the efficacy of sexual torture practices on detainees. The complexity of this argument is never diminished by Fusco's witty and accessible writing style, which makes this book both an enjoyable and informative read.

This argument is also presented with both visual and performative methods. The book includes a script from one of Fusco's performances on gendered violence and interrogation tactics and a visual field guide

for female interrogators. Because she is a performance artist, issues of gender performativity, embodiment, and corporeality are central to the text. Her engagement with multiple methods of research and performance enables Fusco to see and understand the interactions of social actors at Abu Ghraib from a variety of viewpoints. In order to understand the performances both the interrogators and prisoners must construct, she attends a training session for civilians wishing to experience military interrogation practices. She uses this firsthand experience to imagine what those at Abu Ghraib might have endured, and the way they may have felt compelled to perform based on their circumstances. When they are in a mock interrogation with "Team Delta," gender performativity comes to the forefront as a method of survival as well as an interrogation tactic.

Gender and performance come together to play a crucial role in how mediatized images circulate in the public sphere. When female soldiers appear in such images, the effect, Fusco suggests, works to both soften and normalize the torture: because these assailants are women, we excuse their behavior as isolated incidents of maladjustment to male military culture—rather than common or sanctioned practice—and construct them as objects of public sympathy. As Fusco reminds the reader, the released Abu Ghraib photos stand as "the tip of the iceberg" (51), and many more shocking acts appear in images censored from public view. But what we are allowed to see in various media outlets limits the scope of events and obscures an understanding of who could have orchestrated this performance of violence. A distancing effect allows readers to justify the photos as abnormal behavior, and thereby deny the government's calculated use of women in the role of sexual torturers. Here, identity politics take center stage, as the Right's controlled output of specific photographs necessarily reinforces female cultural stereotypes. After all, as Fusco muses, "how bad can torture really be if performed by a member of the 'weaker sex?'" (39). Her dense analysis of the mediatized images shows the complex, interrelated processes of constructing gender, performance, politics, and media discourse in the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Fusco's tripartite approach to analyzing women's roles in the approved use of torture at Abu Ghraib demonstrates just how deeply these issues penetrate many areas of public life and scholarly research. As such, Fusco's work should be viewed as a starting point rather than a definitive or complete response. Her research, theory, and performance pieces provide a platform for dialogue outside of the official construction of the event.

ASHLEY BLACK is a first-year MA/PhD student in the department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

KATHERINE NEWBOLD is a first-year MA/PhD student in the department of Radio/TV/Film at Northwestern University.