

other writers, but is he the author or the “author” of the essays *by* other writers?

The relationship between an author and his readers is tenuous. What, after all, do (I)\* the reader know of the author? Only what he chooses to tell (me) through his book. If he wears a different mask every five pages, how can (I) know what his face looks like? If, indeed, “*Someone Else* uses the essay as a form of autobiography,” as the back cover asserts, the writer would seem to have no values or opinions of his own and only a poor grip on reality. Perhaps he is simply lost in a library that has become both a memory-palace and a maze.

\*

Should I say that *Someone Else* has “beautiful moments but bad quarter hours”? No, that is too harsh; but the fact that it occurred to me may stand as a warning. At least this book is not so long as the works to which that epigram originally applied.

Should I say that *Someone Else* is “both good and original, but the parts that are good are not original and the parts that are original are not good”? No, that also is too harsh; but the fact that it occurred to me may stand as a warning. Many of the parts are very good indeed but *Someone Else* is too uneven and too dependent on others’ imaginations to be entirely satisfying.

\*

These observations stand to *Someone Else* as a conventional review stands to a novel. What I have done to Hughes in this review is what he has done to his subjects. My object was to show, not tell, the pleasures and frustrations of his approach, an approach which has made a pastiche of other books that have influenced the author on his imaginative journey. To that end, I have deliberately failed to give most of my references (and the footnote is deliberately unhelpful, too); deliberately been obscure; deliberately mimicked a variety of other writers. Readers equipped to enjoy Hughes will, I hope, enjoy my review and understand all I am saying about the book.

\* Thank you, Ron-the-Elder, for this neat locution.



*Joanna McIntyre*

## NOT A THING OF THE PAST

Zillah Eisenstein. *Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press. ISBN 13: 978 1 876756 63 5 paperback. pp.142 + ViiiRRP: \$AU 34.95.

For many years before the 2008 US presidential election ushered

in Barack Obama and a so-called “post-race” era of equality and liberation, the social and political landscape in the US was marred by deceit and discrimination, destruction and unnecessary death.

Lest we forget.

Zillah Eisenstein’s 2007 book *Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War in Imperial Democracy* offers a cutting, insightful and unapologetic feminist critique of injustices waged during the reign of the Bush/Cheney administration. Her aim is to incite change and her focus is the gendering and racialising of western politics. As Eisenstein states in the preface: “I look to trace and uncover the racialized and gendered silenced stories of this militarized moment of global capitalist racialized patriarchy ... It is the racializing and gendering of politics that I wish to see more clearly for today” (xi-xii). Speaking here of a ‘moment’ and “today,” it is clear the book is specific to a particular period and Eisenstein meant it to be so. Its brave task at the time of publication was to counter the very lies and propaganda the book unpacks.

Though the times have shifted and thus the book no longer fulfills its original purpose, *Sexual Decoys* continues to be an important work. It presents readers today with the opportunity for a moment of reflection, an opportunity that is especially pertinent in light of the book’s own consideration of that which has come before.

For example: Eisenstein poses the question of whether the fear mongering surrounding terrorism is a reincarnation of the once stifling threat of communism; discussing the apparent need for contemporary female political leaders to adopt masculine attributes in order to be deemed legitimate, she cites eighteenth century Russian ruler Catherine the Great as a precedent; and at one point compares US citizens’ ignorance of atrocities carried out at Guantanamo Bay to that of German citizens who remained unaware of the murder of millions of Jews under the Nazi regime. Clearly history has a way of repeating, and now more than ever we need to remain mindful of our recent past in order to move forward. A product of its time, *Sexual Decoys* provides not only a snapshot of that epoch but also a conscientious evaluation of mistakes and pitfalls future generations need to avoid.

Throughout her career as an activist and academic, Eisenstein, who teaches in the Politics Department at Ithaca College in New York, has critiqued and condemned those forces that oppose equal rights and social justice, both in her homeland of the US and around the world. In *Sexual Decoys*, Eisenstein deploys the concept of “sexual and racial decoys” to expose the ways in which certain political figures from minority groups actually function to perpetuate the discrimination visited upon the very minority group/s to which they belong. Far beyond tokenism, these figures are a distracting front, a

diversion — decoys — presenting a façade of diversity within rightwing parties that hides ingrained sexism and racism. Eisenstein argues that these female and/or black ‘decoys’ support the interests of white males, and in doing so often undermine the very aspects of affirmative action that enabled them to rise to a position of power in the first place.

Central to Eisenstein’s arguments regarding the causes and effects of sexual decoys is the necessary distinction between sex and gender. Her emphasis of post-structuralist sex/gender fluidity is especially important in her reconceptualisation of who is able to occupy the position of, and act in the interests of, the rich white man; according to Eisenstein, “men can be either male or female, white or ‘other-than’” (xi) and if someone is female and/or black and/or gay in a politically powerful position, the chances are that they function as one of these “men.”

Using Condoleezza Rice as just one example, Eisenstein asserts that while such power brokers — who are the exception, not the rule — have little if anything in common with the minorities they are seen to “represent”; conservative parties put their minority status to use. Such individuals’ presence within these realms gives an impression of diversity and commitment to affirmative action programs, and can thus conceal real discrimination in government policy and in society. Eisenstein contends that their

exclusion from these spaces is not parallel to their inclusion in them: “inclusion and exclusion are not simple opposites. Inclusion allows a partial recognition of the gendering and racing of power, but not a power shift. Exclusion exposes the need for a power shift” (94).

The book untangles the complexities of the gendered and racialized politics of “wars of/on terror” (39), to reveal the crimes and contradictions of what she refers to as patriarchal imperialism and “neoliberal fascism.” Scrutinising the sexism and racism imbedded in a country where the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, Eisenstein discusses, among other things the human rights abuses carried out by American soldiers (a number of them female) at Abu Ghraib; the extreme (and at the time largely undisclosed) human toll of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the torture inflicted at Guantanamo Bay; Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath; and the large percentage of black Americans whose options in life are dominated by the possibility of ending up in gaol or enlisting in the armed forces.

*Sexual Decoys* is provocative but shies away from becoming a polemic. Eisenstein takes an uncompromisingly feminist stance and while at times this seems overly-focused, her thorough research, broad knowledge base and sound logic are hard to refute. Many Australian readers will draw (often unsettling) parallels with Australian politics of

the time, and generally the book will be of interest to scholars of feminism, critical race theory, politics and, now, history. As an historical piece, it incorporates some interesting primary sources, including Eisenstein's personal experiences, quotes from "ordinary" citizens, government websites that have already disappeared, as well as time-specific perspectives on differing facets of popular culture. These elements, along with Eisenstein's accessible and passionate prose, make *Sexual Decoys* an entirely digestible piece.

A reflection on *Sexual Decoys* is also timely in light of Eisenstein's latest work, *The Audacity of Races and Genders: A Personal and Global Story of the Obama Election*, published in November 2009. *The Audacity of Race and Gender* contemplates the next stage of the journey for this world superpower, considering the new anti-imperial possibilities for the US and how it might affect race and gender.

*Sexual Decoys* documents how things were and how things needed to change; although it is tempting to believe such racism and sexism is in the past, this book is nothing if not testament to how insidious these discriminations can be, reminding us to remain vigilant.

