Feminist Media Ethnography in India: Exploring Power, Gender, and Culture in the Field

Radhika Parameswaran
Indiana University

This article is a self-reflexive account of one postcolonial feminist media scholar’s research among young middle-class women in urban India who read Western romance fiction. Urging feminist scholars to pay attention to the politics of representation of audiences in media studies, the article explores power imbalances in the field that arise due to social constructions of gender, ethnic, class, and sexual identities. The article reflects on failures, successes, and dilemmas experienced during the research process to show that feminist media ethnographies are embedded within discourses of power. By examining the multiple positionalities occupied by the researcher in relation to people encountered in the field, this account challenges binary distinctions between categories such as Self/Other, native/Westerner, and insider/outsider. In concluding, the article underscores the implications of research by non-Western feminist scholars in their own cultures for postcolonial feminist ethnography, feminist media ethnographies, and for media reception research on globalization in the cultural studies tradition.

In the past two decades, claims to universal and objective knowledge production in the academy have been challenged by postmodernist and feminist scholars. In particular, postmodern and feminist anthropologists have drawn our attention to the politics of location that shapes knowledge production and argued that ethnographic representations are necessarily partial, constructed, and situated (Abu-Lughod, 1990a; Behar, 1993; Clifford, 1986; Gordon, 1988; Visweswaran, 1994; M. Wolf, 1992). In ethnographic fieldwork, the process of conducting fieldwork involves the cultural biography of researchers and calls for negotiations of power relationships between researchers and people they encounter in the field. For feminist ethnographers, especially, rigorous self-reflexivity has become an important channel to interrogate the research process and reveal power inequalities that arise in the field due to social constructions of gender, class, racial, sexual, and ethnic identities.

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ties. It is within the context of arguments for located and positioned knowledge that I anchor this self-reflexive account of the fieldwork I carried out in a south Indian city among young women readers of Western romance novels.

This article is based on a project that explored the significance of romance reading for young middle- and upper-class women in an urban setting in postcolonial India. The English-language romance novels that Indian women read are commonly referred to as “Mills & Boons” after the British firm Harlequin Mills & Boon, which produces and exports these novels to India. The primary research questions that formed the basis of my project were as follows: How does reading as a leisure activity fit into the social context of Indian women’s everyday routines? How do Indian women make sense of their own sexual identity in the process of reading Western romance fiction? How do readers interpret the cultural expectations of women in India when they read narratives from another culture? How does the historical context of colonialism influence middle-class readers’ perceptions of their romance reading? How does the concept of the West as the symbol of material success shape readers’ perceptions of Western romance fiction?

Broadly speaking, the findings of my ethnographic research indicate that romance reading by elite women in a Third World setting is a complex activity that allowed readers to assert simultaneously the moral superiority of Indian culture, resist cultural expectations of women in India, and enjoy the material aspects of Western culture. My analysis of fieldwork data showed that leisure reading that is pursued in the private sphere is a gendered activity for Indian women who face considerable restrictions on their mobility in public spaces. My project demonstrated the contradictory character of women’s interpretations of sexuality in Western romance novels; that is, they identified with the sexual awakening of virginal White heroines, yet they also expressed cultural superiority when they discussed the “real” morals of Western women. Women’s interpretations of these novels, I argued, can be traced to visions of ideal Hindu femininity in 19th-century Indian nationalist discourse, which was primarily elite and male. I explained women’s defensive construction of their romance reading in the English language as a “high-culture” activity by tracing links among class, language, and British colonial history in India. Middle-class urban women experienced proximity to Western culture when they read romance fiction, a proximity that enabled them to feel modern and cosmopolitan. A part of women’s reading pleasure, I found, arose out of their unquestioned belief in the truth and reality of Western material lifestyles represented in these narratives. I do not discuss or analyze the results of my research in further detail in this article because I focus here on my experience of conducting fieldwork in a metropolitan context in India. My emphasis on methodological rather than substantive issues in this account shows that although I was interested in studying the embeddedness of romance reading in India within discourses of patriarchy, nationalism, and modernity, these discourses were starkly inscribed onto the research process itself.
As a feminist academic who teaches and conducts interdisciplinary research in media studies, particularly ethnographic audience studies, I encountered self-reflexive fieldwork accounts of feminists in anthropology, sociology, geography, literary studies, and women’s studies. These feminists’ fieldwork accounts demystified the “finished” product of ethnographic research and foregrounded ethical problems that can arise in research relationships for beginning ethnographers. With the exception of a few scholars (Lengel, 1998; Seiter, 1990), feminist media ethnographers have not engaged in similar self-reflexive discussions about the politics of studying and representing audiences, the problems they negotiated in the field, and the experience of power differences between and among researchers and audience members. Leveling similar kinds of critiques about the lack of self-reflexivity in audience reception research in general, Patrick Murphy (1999) writes that “even the most celebrated researchers of media reception” (p. 481) are reluctant to analyze methodological problems or debate the merits of different qualitative techniques in the field. Murphy’s article on his research experiences in Queretaro, Mexico, represents one of the first lengthy accounts of a media ethnographer’s efforts to establish authority, carry out the intrusive task of observation, and analyze the “productive discomfort” (p. 482) generated through interactions with people in the field. Focusing on the impact of his identity as an outsider, a “gringo” American, in his relationships with Mexican community members of Queretaro, Murphy demonstrates the boundedness of the research process within national, race, and class boundaries.

In responding to Murphy’s (1999) call for greater self-reflexivity in audience research, my article similarly engages the subjective process of qualitative research and highlights issues of identity and power in field research. In contrast to his description and analysis of gaining entry and acceptance among informants as an outsider, I reflect on the implications of my identity as an insider (urban, middle-class Indian woman from Hyderabad, India) and outsider (stranger, postcolonial feminist academic from the United States) for ethnography among cosmopolitan audiences in the Third World. By explicitly drawing on the writings of feminist ethnographers, I build on Murphy’s contributions to cultural studies by engaging with issues relevant to feminist empirical research such as negotiating solidarity with women informants, challenging limited representations of women, and reconceptualizing women’s identities. In addition, rather than providing a chronological account, I emphasize difficult and challenging moments in the field to show that the knowledge I wanted to produce about the popularity of Western romance fiction among young Indian women (audience consumption of popular culture) was shaped by the larger discursive construction of romance reading (audience activity) itself among a range of social mediators—parents, library owners, peers, and teachers—in women’s lives.

Inviting cultural studies scholars to address the politics of representation in audience research, Vamsee Juluri (1998) draws our attention to the possib-
ities of audience studies in the Third World that are carried out by postcolonial scholars who “share the burden and privilege of certain kinds of colonized and racialized subjectivities that allow us to speak as both insiders and outsiders, as transnational intellectuals and as representatives of specific national and/or local constituencies” (p. 86). As one among a recent generation of non-Western and bicultural feminist scholars who were trained in the Western academy and returned “home” to carry out fieldwork (Abu-Lughod, 1988; Bolak, 1996; Mankekar, 1993; Visweswaran, 1994), I was aware of being part of a historical moment in the social sciences where most knowledge of the non-West has been produced by Western scholars. The return of “natives” in anthropology as scholars studying their own societies has prompted discussions about ethnography and its troubled historical alliance with colonialism, the authenticity of insider versus outsider accounts of cultures, and the hybrid identities of “native” scholars. These debates have important implications for audience studies in non-Western, postcolonial contexts, which are rapidly entering the realm of global audiencehood over the past few years. Self-reflexive research on the reception of Western media among postcolonial audiences can address concerns of location, knowledge, and power that are central to the spread of global media and Western modernity.

Given the history of Orientalist representations of the non-West in the Western academy, what are the political implications of insider/native ethnographic audience research by postcolonial feminist scholars? How do concepts of Self and Other emerging from experiences with colonialism and nationalism influence fieldwork encounters in postcolonial contexts? What positions does the postcolonial feminist ethnographer occupy in a Third World setting in relation to his or her age, class, gender, and cultural capital as an academic trained in the West? How can researchers’ reflections and analysis of dilemmas and difficulties in fieldwork contribute to feminist media ethnography? What are the implications of self-reflexivity in audience ethnography for cultural studies? In addressing these questions in this article, I argue that the multiple positions I occupied as a middle-class postcolonial feminist working among elites in her own culture disrupts notions of power and difference that are typical of debates about Self and Other in traditional ethnographies wherein the Self is the White, Western academic and the Other is the Third World, poor informant.

Using “narrative, interpretive, and reflexive modes of writing,” I examine the “research process as a hierarchical social interaction” and analyze the implications of my different positionalities in the field (Lal, 1996, p. 186). Although I emphasize multiple locations that shape fieldwork, I do not endorse a free-floating “hybrid identity” (Narayan, 1993) for the postcolonial feminist because notions of hybridity can often ignore the effects of historical and political processes on identities and imply that the researcher is “free” to choose among many plural identities (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 132). I begin with a brief discussion of political and personal goals that guided my research.
and provide details about my fieldwork. My analysis of “failed” interviews and my critique of interactions with young Indian women, which follows, challenges binary distinctions between insiders and outsiders and demonstrates the instability of identities such as Third World woman, native, Self, and Other that cannot be predetermined. In the concluding section, I consider the implications of self-reflexivity for the work of postcolonial feminist ethnographers in their own cultures and dwell on the contributions of self-reflexive audience research to feminist media ethnography and media reception research in the cultural studies tradition.

**REFLECTIONS BEFORE FIELDWORK: SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN AS SUBJECTS**

My decision to study urban middle- and upper-class Indian women’s culture, a relatively elite culture, was prompted in part as a reaction to my encounters with two naturalized images of South Asian women as oppressed women and as village women with problems. These two images have formed an important part of the Western gaze on South Asian women both inside and outside the academy. The image of the South Asian woman as passive, oppressed, and as only a victim of patriarchy has persisted in popular consciousness and in scholarship on South Asian women. Since the publication of Edward Said’s (1978) book *Orientalism*, which criticized colonial representations for producing the “passive Oriental,” Third World feminists have joined his project to critique the dominant representation of Third World women as always being passive victims of male domination (Kumar, 1994; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988). A second, more recent image of South Asian women is the monolithic representation of “The South Asian Woman” as the “authentic village woman” found in development research, anthropological accounts, and United Nations documents (Mankekar, 1993, p. 58). In development discourse that has dominated research on the Third World, the rural South Asian woman constantly battles poverty, famine, and the trials of mothering numerous children. The obsessive academic focus on rural women as oppressed Third World subjects has limited the scope of study of South Asia by ignoring the complexities of class, caste, and colonial history and women’s subtle forms of agency. In addition, the vibrant growth of popular culture in urban areas and the changing landscape of rural India, which is gaining access to urban culture in the form of global television, have also been ignored. Seeking an understanding of romance reading among young urban, cosmopolitan Indian women was thus, for me, a vehicle for challenging simplistic and problematic visions of South Asian female subjectivity.

Other compelling reasons to study urban Indian women’s reading of Western romance novels were located in the lessons about gender that I learned growing up as an urban middle-class woman in India. Since my
childhood, my parents and extended family members encouraged me to excel academically and to seek out intellectual challenges. As a third-generation woman of the Indian nationalist and independence movement, I along with my peers benefited from social reforms that abolished some traditional practices that oppressed women and facilitated the entry of middle-class women into the public sphere of education and paid employment. In the specific upper-caste Indian context in which I was raised, elders and parents viewed education as a good thing for young women. However, I also learned from my social environment that women’s education was not about autonomy or independence. Education would render women more attractive in the urban middle-class marriage market and ultimately would be a mere instrument to allow women to support themselves economically if that became necessary.

Like South Asian feminist Uma Narayan (1997), who writes that her childhood perceptions of gender inequalities in India predated her “explicit acquisition of a feminist politics” (p. 9), I too learned about the limits of questioning social norms in my early teens. Unlike my brother, who was free to go wherever he wished, I found that my mobility and freedom were curtailed. I began hearing lectures from my mother about not doing anything that would bring dishonor to my family. My mother’s list of anything included staying out late, dressing immodestly, refusing to learn domestic chores, engaging in interactions with men who were not part of our social circle, and becoming sexually active before marriage. Also included in this list of forbidden activities was reading Mills & Boon romance novels. In my late teens, I noticed some of my girlfriends at school and in college reading romance novels voraciously. A few women read these novels openly at home, and others who feared their parents’ disapproval did it surreptitiously during breaks at college. When I began borrowing these books from friends and brought them home to read, my mother, who was an English teacher, banned romance novels as trash that would ruin my English. Although I partially believed my mother, I also knew that she was concerned about these novels because they were about love, sexuality, and romance, often in very explicit ways. I did not pursue this conflict with her partly because I strategically decided to focus on other battles and moved on, but still remained curious about my young peers’ voracious romance reading. My memories of my girlfriends’ Mills & Boon romance reading in India were thus linked to larger social discourses about female sexuality, modesty, honor, and respectability.

In addition, before I went to India for fieldwork, colleagues and friends in the United States posed interesting questions about class, gender, and colonial history that I as a privileged insider to middle-class urban Indian culture took for granted. Why do women in certain parts of the postcolonial world such as India read romance novels in the English language and not in translation, as women in China, Japan, and Eastern Europe do? Why do middle- and upper-class women in India read these romance novels, unlike readers in the
United States, who belong to a wider range of socioeconomic categories? Wary of generalizing about all Indian women based on my research among elite women, I conducted research to show that leisure reading in English among urban middle- and upper-class Indians had become possible due to the literacy project in the English language that was initiated during British colonialism in the 19th century. My interest in romance reading among women in India was thus a process of the familiar becoming strange, of envisioning larger questions about an ordinary everyday leisure practice, and of rethinking and reconnecting the personal with the political.

FIELDWORK AT “HOME”: RETURNING TO INDIA AS A FEMINIST

These questions about gender, class, postcolonialism, and romance reading led me to Hyderabad, a city in south India, which is one of several places that I call home. I conducted my fieldwork in Hyderabad during the four summer months of May through September 1996. I had lived in Hyderabad, where most of my immediate family still lives, until I was 22 years old when I left to pursue graduate education in the United States. After having read studies of romance readers in the United States before I left for India, I wanted to read as many Mills & Boon romance novels as I could and conduct intensive individual and group interviews with young women to find out why Western romances were pleasurable for them. The 42 young Indian women I interviewed were all middle- and upper-class, single, college-going women between the ages of 17 to 21 years.

Heeding the advice of Angela McRobbie (1990), who has urged feminist scholars to contextualize audiences’ engagement with the media by analyzing other activities that surround media consumption, I sought active involvement in my informants’ lives beyond their romance reading. I ate snacks and lunch at cafés with groups of women, went to the movies, dined with them at their homes, and accompanied them on shopping trips. I joined women’s routine conversations during break times and interviewed informants at a range of everyday sites, such as college grounds, homes, and restaurants. I visited used-book vendors, bookstores, and lending libraries with several readers and observed social interactions between library owners and young women. To gain insight into the multidimensional relationship between women’s romance reading and their experiences with everyday social discourse about romance readers, I interviewed young women’s parents, siblings, teachers, bookstore managers, and owners of the lending libraries they frequented.

I was returning to India for my fieldwork after a 6-year stay in the United States as a graduate student in my late 20s. One among the many social positions available to me is the “subjective construction of my identity as an
Indian woman” (Lal, 1996, p. 190). I grew up in a rather sheltered university-town setting in Hyderabad, India, for most of my life. As the daughter of two teachers—my father was a university professor and my mother a school teacher—I benefited from all the privileges of a solid middle-class background. I attended an elite convent school where English was the medium of instruction and took for granted class privileges such as a good college education, a career, and the cultural capital I possessed as someone who was raised in a family where education was highly valued. Because my parents were fairly liberal compared to many of my friends’ parents, I grew up with a little more awareness than many middle- and upper-class Indians of the differences between my life and that of the vast majority of Indians. Although I questioned some restrictions that were specific to women of my class, I did not have the language to engage in a systematic feminist critique of patriarchy or nationalism. Feminism for me had been unfortunately constructed as an illness that struck highly Westernized intellectual Indian women who were out of touch with reality. As other South Asian feminists have reported (John, 1988; Lal, 1996), it was my dislocation from India to the relatively racialized context of the United States that prompted my political development as a feminist and a woman of color.

REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK: FAILURES, SUCCESSES, AND DILEMMAS

What are the challenges of doing research for feminist media ethnographers who interview elites in their cultures? How do kinship roles assigned to native scholars shape social interactions in the field? How can commitments to sisterhood make it difficult for feminist ethnographers to achieve critical distance and discuss female informants’ prejudiced views? Using these questions to guide my analysis, I now discuss the implication of my identity as a feminist researcher within the very social discourses of patriarchy, class, and nationalism that I wanted to make the objects of my work.

Failed Interviews: Gender, Sexuality, and Class in Fieldwork

Feminist ethnographers in the past decade have begun to record and theorize their failures in the field although for different reasons (Kumar, 1994; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Visweswaran, 1994; M. Wolf, 1992). Kamala Visweswaran (1994) suggests that feminists should write about failures in ethnography not just to add to the feminist manual on methodology but because “failures are as much a part of the process of knowledge constitution as are our oft-heralded ‘successes’” (p. 99). Visweswaran argues that failures in the
field should be discussed not only to point to possible problems with our interviewing techniques but also to theorize failures as moments that are shaped by history as well as by accountable positionings. Furthermore, analysis of difficult and challenging moments in the field can contribute to a richer understanding of the phenomena we hope to study.

During my fieldwork in India, I found myself often justifying and explaining my interest in studying romance reading. The social construction of sexuality as a taboo subject, rarely discussed with strangers, affected my professional interactions with people. A few older men not only found the topic of my research offensive but also thought it was inappropriate for a “respectable woman” to want to study and discuss romance novels. One such interview was my tense and troubled interaction with Raja Rao, the manager of the Hyderabad branch of India Book House, an old and reputable Indian publishing firm that distributes imported Mills & Boon romance novels in India. When I phoned India Book House, a secretary took a message, but I never heard back from Raja Rao. After repeated phone calls and numerous messages that elicited no response, I decided to go in person to his office. As I always did when I lived in India, I was dressed in a shalwar kameez (loose pants and a long shirt), and I wore my long hair braided. When I was shown into his spacious office, the manager, a man in his 50s, was on the phone. He motioned me to sit down and handed me a few brochures about India Book House. In a few minutes, he ended his phone call and then asked me rather curtly, “What do you want?” After I finished my usual explanation, he demanded that I show him a letter to prove that I was indeed working on an official project. Then, after he read my letter, instead of letting me begin my interview, he began interrogating me and spent more than 15 minutes delving into my personal background.

In the course of his interrogation, we found out that he had actually met my father several years before when he had visited him for some advice about his nephew’s career. Raja Rao (RR) expressed his disappointment because I had not brought my father along to the interview. Beginning to act more and more avuncular, he expressed his dissatisfaction with my choice of a topic for my dissertation:

RR: Do you read Mills & Boons?
Me: I have been reading them for the past few months.
RR: So, you have been reading them for your research. You should know by now why you did not read them before. Your father must have told you better. Why did you choose this strange topic? Those Mills & Boons are worthless, and you should not be wasting your time and money.
Me: I wonder why you call them worthless.
RR: Those stupid girls who think they are so modern—it is those girls who read these books. They hold those books and walk around the college shamelessly. Have you seen the covers of the new books? They are very bad. Young girls should be doing more useful things. Parents should discourage their daughters...
from reading these books. Those books will encourage them to misbehave. Maybe reading these English books is better than those cheap roadside Telugu novels, but doing research on Mills & Boons is not good. Research should be done on things that are good about our culture. Did you talk to your father about your topic? I am sure he would say the same thing.

Me: But if fewer women read these books, you could not sell as many books to bookstores and libraries. Does that concern you?

RR: No! Not at all. The decision to distribute these books was made in Bombay, and I had nothing to do with it. I wish India Book House would stop selling these books. I don’t want my company to be associated with Mills & Boons. The same is true for your thesis too. You will be writing this in the United States, and they will read about India Book House and associate it with Mills & Boons.

Me [Trying to steer the conversation back]: Could you give me some information about the distributing relationship India Book House has with the Mills & Boon company?

RR: No. I cannot waste time on your project. I am telling you this for your own good. Let me suggest something. India Book House is the proud publisher of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics. I’m sure you read those as a child. [I nodded my head.] Those comics have stories about our culture and our history. We try to educate children about the rich culture of India. Many children no longer can hear our mythological stories from their parents, who are too busy working. Write about those comics. If you want, I can write you a reference letter to show to your Ph.D. guide or what did you say, Ph.D. adviser?

Me: So, I cannot expect any help or information from you at all?

RR [Looking a little apologetic but still stubborn]: No, you can talk to my secretary about whatever you want. As long as he gets permission from me to spend time with you, I don’t mind. But I hope you will change your mind. Please share my suggestion with your father.

As an older, urban, English-educated professional man who knew my father, Rao adopted a condescending and critical tone toward me. His position as an older man from the same class milieu also meant that he could boldly tell me what I should or should not study. This familiarity enabled him to openly criticize women who read Mills & Boons as “shameless,” thus seeking my alliance and creating a distance between me (not a habitual romance reader and thus a good woman) and young women who read romance novels. I heard similar labels—“stupid,” “senseless,” “useless”—used by other older middle-class men with reference to romance readers. My inability to challenge such language about young women reminded me of Jayati Lal’s (1996) acute discomfort when managers she contacted in and around Delhi insulted factory women she wanted to interview by explicitly objectifying their bodies. Commenting on the “deeply implicated” process of conducting research, Lal (1996) writes, “Moreover, if the men one is researching have power . . . then they act to undermine and subvert a researcher’s goal of non-hierarchical and non-objectifying relationships” (p. 196).
Expressing his dissatisfaction with my research agenda, Rao also indicated that my work on Indian women’s pleasure in reading about sexuality would not represent his organization or Indian culture appropriately in the eyes of Western audiences. I encountered similar responses among some fathers of young women; whereas a few men openly displayed their skepticism when I explained my research, others pointed out that there were many more worthy ideas for research I could have pursued. Among the range of possible ideas suggested were the success of the televised Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, classical dance forms, Hindu texts, and “great” English-language Indian newspapers such as *The Hindu*. One man told me within minutes into our meeting that studying “dirty” books such as Mills & Boons for my dissertation was a “complete waste” of the “wonderful” academic opportunities I had. Displaying remarkable cultural self-consciousness about how India should be represented in the West, a few men implied that it was my duty to provide Westerners insights into the spiritual greatness of India.

In short, through my work as a responsible insider on useful and worthy projects about India, I was to play what feminist Uma Narayan (1997) has called the role of an “Emissary” (p. 128). Deconstructing the role Third World scholars can play as “Authentic Emissaries” in representing their cultures, Narayan writes that Emissaries focus on providing knowledge about the Third World through the lens of a “cultural riches approach” to their cultures:

What I am calling the “cultural riches” approach has a significant tendency to focus on the texts and artifacts of “High Culture,” the cultural products of privileged sections of a society, whose social position not only gave them privileged access to the domains of cultural achievement, but also gave them power to constitute these achievements as “definitive,” “emblematic,” and “monumental” aspects of the culture in question. (p. 128)

Narayan argues that these representations of “High Culture” that become universalized marginalize the culture of minority groups within the Third World and obstruct understanding of the place of these cultural achievements within the political fabric of their social contexts. In addition, the sermons I received on studying and teaching the spiritual greatness of India in the United States relied on “cliched oppositions” between “materialist” Western culture and “spiritual” Indian culture (Narayan, 1997, p. 130). Ironically, the emotional investment I noticed among these people in constituting such binary oppositions between spiritual India and the material West have also been a part of Orientalism, a colonial, Western enterprise that constructed India as the essential, spiritual opposite Other of the rational Self of Western culture (Prakash, 1990; Ram, 1992). As Narayan (1997) points out in her critique of Ananda Coomaraswamy’s book *The Dance of Shiva*, efforts to emphasize the greatness of India that draw on Orientalism can also be made by
Third World “Orientalist” subjects seeking to validate their culture in the eyes of Westerners by reinforcing these binary oppositions. Although my interview with manager Rao exemplified efforts to position me as an emissary, one interview that did not take place at all provided insight into compromises that had to be negotiated between romance readers as transgressive women on one hand and lucrative consumers on the other. The owner of an old and well-known bookstore in a busy part of the city refused to grant me an interview, saying, “I do not want to speak about these books. Yes, they sell a lot, a lot more than any other kind of books and bring in money, but I would not allow my own daughter to read these books.” When I returned to the store later to try to talk to him again, I could not see the bookstore owner anywhere. Pretending to be a customer, I walked up to a young man who seemed to be in charge. Friendly and courteous, the young man offered to help me. Feeling reassured, I described my work and informed him that the manager had refused to speak to me. Looking a little embarrassed, the young man softly said, “That’s my uncle. He did not want to sell Mills & Boons, but I persuaded him because all these girls from Stanley Junior’s College, which is next door, read these books. He likes the money, but he has never been comfortable with his decision.”

Failed/difficult interviews also included challenges to my professional identity that highlighted the marginal location of mass communication as a field of study in postcolonial India. A few fathers and mothers of young women expressed disbelief when I solicited opinions about their daughters’ romance reading. These responses were usually followed by discussions about their own relatives who lived in the United States. Reeling off names of sons, daughters, nephews, and uncles who were very “well settled” in the United States as scientists, doctors, or computer professionals, I was asked what the point of my research was, what problem I really hoped to solve, and what my chances of success were in a nonscientific field such as mass communication in the United States. One parent who interrogated me about the value of my project implied that my lack of interest in computer science was the fault of my irresponsible parents. As a scholar in a nonscientific field, I had to field questions from several parents about media research and the possibilities for this research to be transformed into something of practical value. Ashis Nandy (1987), who has written extensively about postcolonial psychology, writes about the legacy left behind by Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of independent India, in whose modern, rationalistic, and Europe-influenced worldview, Western science, scientific rationality, and technology presented the solutions to India’s problems. Discussing the celebration of Western science among Asian intellectuals, government officials, and elite Indians in the postcolonial era, Nandy despairs of their “uncritical acceptance of science as the absolute standard of validation [which] is now more common than the Asian flu” (p. 106).
In some failed interviews, I encountered open hostility because parents and elders assumed I was supporting and encouraging young women to read romance novels. Two men who had agreed to my requests for interviews readily on the phone quickly and curtly recanted their offer when I met them in person. Speaking about his ongoing problems with his daughter who continued to disobey him, one of the two men abruptly said to me, “Why are you creating more problems for us? God knows what she will do when her head gets filled with all that nonsense.” One woman, an aunt of one of my informants, responded angrily with a “no” when I asked her for her views on her niece’s romance reading. In seeking out interviews with parents, I always sought the permission of my primary informants and only contacted their parents after they gave me their consent. Anticipating such hostility perhaps and fearing their parents’ anger at being “found out,” 8 out of my 30 primary informants told me that they did not want me to contact their parents or interview them at their homes because they were afraid their parents might overhear our discussions about Mills & Boons.

In reflecting on my difficult experiences in interviewing certain men and in gaining access to a few women’s parents, I realized that these methodological problems explained in part young women’s resentment about the silent and vocal disapproval of romance reading they encountered from parents and other elders in their extended families. Underlying some women’s expressions of resistance and protest to cultural expectations of docile, asexual femininity was a feeling of betrayal and regret about their parents’ lack of trust in them. These women suggested that romance reading was a “harmless” manifestation of youthful interest in sexuality, a rite of passage that would disappear in a few years. Other women’s resistance took the form of a rather sophisticated critique of parents’ simplistic assumption that romance novels could have a “magic bullet” effect, that is, an instantaneous impact on young women’s sexual behaviors. Articulating their preferred construction of romance novels as manuals on sexuality in a culture where they had few sources to go to for information about sex, these women argued that romance reading was a form of healthy and “sensible” sex education. A third set of women spoke about romance reading as a “right” that they deserved because it was an appropriate practice for modern, cosmopolitan women who were exploring new identities unlike their traditional mothers and grandmothers.

The difficulties I experienced in interviewing some middle-class people were a contrast to my warm and friendly interactions with lending library owners and used-book vendors, who were eager to spend time with me. They offered to introduce me to their customers and readily permitted me to “hang out” at their libraries. Differences in class, cultural capital, and my affiliation with America were responsible for my pleasant experiences with library owners, most of whom were lower middle class and did not have any formal education beyond high school. My position as an “America-returned” aca-
emic, which provoked many questions about material life in the United States, brought home to me the mythic aura of America that now surrounded me: I represented someone who had escaped all the chaos, dirt, inconveniences, and poverty of India. However, as I spent more and more time at lending libraries, I learned about other reasons for the relative ease with which I was accepted. One day, during an informal conversation, Nagaraj, a chatty library owner, expressed his surprise and pleasure that I had not become very “Americanized.” On probing further, he said, “If you had not told me that you were now studying in the States and that you had lived there 6 years, I would never have guessed. Your dress and your behavior... Nowadays, I have noticed that girls who even live here think they are movie stars—wearing all kinds of clothing, make up, etc.” My Indian clothes; the lack of makeup; my spoken English, which still retained an Indian accent; my ease with Hindi and Telugu; and the details I had divulged about staying with my family in Hyderabad had all combined to code me as a modest and respectable woman. I had achieved the success of going to America yet had managed to resist the corrupting influences of Western culture.

Continuing our conversation, Nagaraj said in a conspiratorial tone, “One of my customers, an older lady with a son, a computer engineer in the United States, said that some young Indian women who live in America do not make the best brides because they become ‘fast’ girls. They begin staying out late, start enjoying life [with a wink], and don’t know how to respect husbands.” His tone and manner indicated to me that had he any suspicion that I could be one of these immodest women, he would not have revealed this tidbit to me. Like non-Western feminist ethnographers Lila Abu-Lughod (1988), Hale Bolak (1996), and Soraiya Altorki (1988), who attributed certain successful moments in the field to others’ approval of their modesty, my appearance of being a modest woman may also have prevented “failure” with men who were not from my social class.

Negotiating Sisterhood: Empathy and Dilemmas in Interviewing Women

Having grown up in India, I knew that as a middle-class woman I would have easier access to young college women than would most male researchers. The milieu for my research in India was similar to the fieldwork environment of feminist scholars who have described how being women allowed them easier access to non-Western women’s culture (Altorki, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1988; Bolak, 1996). The urban Indian middle-class female world I was reentering was by no means a strictly gender-segregated world: That is, the segregation did not imply that women and men lived and worked in completely different spheres. Sex segregation in modern India means a “less stringent bifurcation of social life, whereby women venture into public
space and participate in numerous male spheres but must nevertheless observe real or decorous distance from men” (Altorki & Fawzi El-Solh, 1988, p. 5).

When I first visited women’s colleges, I could easily enter the gates of two colleges without being stopped or interrogated by the guards who stood outside. When I asked principals of the four colleges I visited for permission to interview their students, I could see that they perceived me as harmless. With every request for permission, I was asked to divulge personal details about my family and my parents. At three of the four colleges I visited, the principals seemed visibly relieved and happy when they found out that I was the daughter of two academics. One woman recalled that she had heard my father speak at a professional meeting. During these principals’ inquiries about my personal background, it became apparent that my affiliation with the local academic community in Hyderabad assured these women that I presented no danger to their female students’ safety.

Once I obtained written permissions, I was free to walk on the campus grounds to seek out and interview students. I could be fairly inconspicuous because I did not look much older than the students and was dressed like many of them. I asked women for interviews during their lunch breaks when they were sitting in circles eating their lunch. When I approached groups of women, introduced myself, and spoke about my research, I could see the surprise on many of their faces. In contrast to the skepticism and hostility of some older authority figures I had interviewed, these young women seemed amused and curious about my interest in talking to them. Unlike the lending library owners, who had questioned me about wealth and prosperity in a fantasy America, these women, many of whom had relatives abroad, were more interested in my everyday life, academic experiences, and the details of admission and financial aid to go to school in the United States. Given the “brain drain” from India, that is, the continued migration of educated urban Indians to the United States, many of these young women wanted to go to America themselves. They barraged me with questions about my work and my interest in their romance reading because most of them had never been questioned before by strangers about the popular culture they enjoyed. When some women found out about my local roots and the schools and colleges I had been to, they animatedly inquired if I knew their friends and acquaintances who had attended the same institutions.

Informants’ feelings of shame and anxieties about the pleasure they experienced in reading romance novels, which arose from their reactions to patriarchal constructions of women as pure and asexual, was an integral part of the research process. When I shared the informed consent process and explained that I would be using pseudonyms in all my writing, I noticed that some women who initially appeared tense and unwilling to participate in my study looked relieved. Concerned about being identified in my research, these women asked me probing questions: Who will be reading this disserta-
tion? Are you going to publish anything in the local newspapers or magazines in Hyderabad? Are you going to share transcripts of interviews with anyone in Hyderabad? Can you promise us that you will keep using pseudonyms wherever you publish your research?

To my amazement, with one group of young women, my requests for their pseudonym preferences turned into a social event that raised provocative questions of identity and authenticity that are implicated in the naming process in ethnographic research. Several women in this group, in response to my request, began talking, laughing loudly, and sharing ideas for names. Two women looked at me, winked, got down on their knees in front of two other seated women, and in elaborate courtship style, asked for their hands and begged for the privilege of using one another’s names. This game got picked up by others, who soon began enacting similar courtship rituals and asked their friends’ permission to use their names. Just as nostalgic memories of my own fun-filled college days began hitting me, one woman interrupted my thoughts and asked, “Should we choose only Indian names? Why can’t I be Janet, Jennifer, Carolyn, Nancy, or Katy, names that women have in the romance novels we’re reading?” I remember feeling at a complete loss for an answer to this question, and thankfully at that point, our conversations turned to other things. In the end, all of them chose Indian Hindu names for pseudonyms, and I was relieved because, at the end of my fieldwork, I still did not have an answer except that I knew Indian names would make my dissertation more “authentic” (Visweswaran, 1994, pp. 60-61).

Doing fieldwork among elites can be a challenging process where informants can question our intrusion into the routines of their everyday lives. Such challenges to the researcher’s authority can surprise even those who are insiders to the culture and prompt unanticipated changes in methodology. After I had completed the informed-consent process, I began requesting one-on-one interviews with women who read Mills & Boons romance novels. I intended to follow up individual interviews with collective sessions where I would facilitate discussions among women about their romance reading. Assuming that the process of scheduling these interviews would go smoothly, I had carefully budgeted my time over the next month. My confidence about how these individual interviews would proceed was partly based on my assumptions about my insiderness—the trust I could earn quickly—and partly on my impatience to get my work underway. To my surprise, several young women did not seem happy or willing to spend time with me alone right away. When I requested the first group of women to meet me on an individual basis and asked if they could meet me during their breaks from classes, I was surprised and uncomfortable with the loud silence that ensued. Looking flustered, one woman said, “I don’t know. . . . College break times are fun for us. We see each other, we go to the café to drink soda, we go to the library to get books, and we plan what we want to do with our
friends on Sunday.” Immediately, another woman continued, “Why can’t you talk to us when we’re together? After all, our friends know everything about us.”

When I faced similar questions from another group of women who also appeared to resent my appeals to meet with them alone, I realized that I had arrogantly encroached into their intimate, everyday rituals of friendship. It dawned on me slowly that break times in college were sacred for these women. Knowing well that without collecting data from these possibly recalcitrant subjects, I had no project, I reluctantly changed my plans and agreed to accept their demands. I began talking to them in groups first, and gradually, more than 30 women willingly agreed to meet me in individual sessions. Later, I discovered that they preferred to respond to me as a group first because they were wary about the kinds of questions I planned to ask about their sexuality and romance reading. The more public nature of group discussions meant that it was a safe space where I might hesitate to ask intrusive and personal questions. This situation of resistance from women illustrates Margery Wolf’s (1992) cautionary words about reversals in power relationships between fieldworkers and their informants.

Even the most arrogant neocolonialist soon discovers that one cannot order rural people to reveal important thoughts about their culture. . . . Those who carry the culture and those who desperately want to understand it may participate in a minuet of unspoken negotiations that totally reverses the apparent balance of power. (p. 134)

Women’s resistance to my efforts to separate them for the purpose of my research suggests that relationships within interpretive communities of readers or viewers can have surprising and unanticipated implications for our research practices. The notion of interpretive communities discussed in reader response theory (Fish, 1980; Radway, 1984) proposes that meanings of cultural texts are not inherent within texts themselves because meanings are created by communities of readers who interpret texts based on common social and individual experiences as women, Asians, Blacks, and so forth. Feminist media scholars have widely applied this notion of interpretive community to studies of audiences in the United States. However, some scholars have been criticized for imposing the concept of community on audiences through their research practices, when in reality, the viewers or readers they interviewed consumed media texts in isolation. Critiquing Janice Radway’s ethnographic study of romance readers for its reliance on a realist epistemology, which leads her to deny the “construction of culture,” Ien Ang (1996, p. 101) writes that Radway may have created an interpretive community of female romance readers for the first time when she brought women together for collective interviews. In contrast to Radway’s research, romance reading for the young women I talked to was already embedded within friendships and a
strong sense of community. Far from having to bring women together as an artificially created collective for my research, I was challenged to earn the right to become a part of their peer communities.

Group interviews in which women spoke about love, courtship, and heterosexual relations in Western romance fiction became opportunities to debate, contradict, and affirm their opinions about a range of gendered social issues in India such as sexual harassment of women in public spaces, stigmas associated with single women, expectations of women to be domestic, pressures on married women to obey elders in husbands’ families, and the merits of arranged versus choice/love marriages. The backdrop and starting point for many of these discussions was women’s explicit comparison between values held in Indian and Euramerican culture about love, family, parenting, and gender relations. Other than some references to class differences in India, social difference as constructed in group interviews stayed mostly at the level of nation, gender, and culture and rarely addressed religious or caste differences. Furthermore, although many women had been discussing gender restrictions casually with their friends prior to my arrival, the group interviews I facilitated, as some informants reported, appeared to be the first time such discussions took on a very emotional and intense quality. Although it is tempting for “undercover” feminist scholars to label such group interviews as consciousness-raising sessions and to cast themselves as feminist missionaries, the lack of long-term contact on my part with these women, the novelty of my presence, and the more abstract nature of these conversations in a public setting mitigate against such an interpretation. What did strike me, however, was the regret and sadness that many young women expressed about leaving behind this community—their world of relatively carefree womanly bonding—for future lives as professionals, wives, and mothers. Also, romance reading was not a practice that all women in these female communities shared; in an interesting and unexpected outcome, I listened to two women’s passionate attempts during group interviews to persuade their friends who did not read romance novels to begin reading Mills & Boons.

In contrast to these collective sessions where young women’s discussions primarily revolved around gender discrimination toward women as a group, in individual interviews, many women were much more talkative about restrictions on their sexuality, and several women shared their frustrations with immediate, everyday problems pertaining to family members’ control over their movements. Women’s candid responses in private, one-on-one interviews could relate to cultural taboos against criticizing family members in public settings such as group interviews and in my “safe” outsider status as someone who no longer lived in the local community of Hyderabad. For some women, the privacy of individual interviews and my own insider identity as a Hindu, upper-caste, and middle-class woman allowed them to discuss more freely their opinions about caste and religious differences perhaps
because these identities have become sensitive and highly politicized categories in the public sphere of news and politics in India.

In my interactions with young women, I was gradually assigned the role of a “didi”—an older sister. Other feminist ethnographers have also written about how their assigned kinship roles as honorary mothers, daughters, wives, or sisters created solidarity and empathy, caused conflicts, or posed threats to ethnographic authority (Abu-Lughod, 1988; MacIntyre, 1993; Raheja & Gold, 1994). Although this insider kinship role facilitated data gathering among young women, being an older sister also put me in the uncomfortable position of having authority over my informants, which parents and relatives wanted to manipulate for their own ends. The role of didi proved ideal because had I been a mother figure, I could not have encouraged these women to speak to me about pleasure, romance reading, love, or sexuality. The 8 to 12 years’ difference in age meant that I did not belong to the young women’s peer group; however, I could still participate in their group activities without intimidating them. The role of older sister also allowed me to blend in and participate in many of these young women’s everyday rituals, such as shopping, eating out, visiting lending libraries, and going to the movies. Some women asked me to interview them at their homes, two groups of women invited me to watch videos at home on Sundays, and several women set up interviews for me with their parents at their homes. For ethnographers, even those who are native scholars, becoming an insider in the community one hopes to study is thus a moment in the personal histories and biographies of both researcher and researched—a fleeting discourse that may well be difficult to recapture in the same way again.

In my role as an older sister, I gradually earned the friendship, trust, and affection of many young women. A few informants with whom I developed closer relationships invited me home several times to share meals with their families. Some of the more extroverted women eagerly offered to help me with my research. Three women proudly introduced me to their library owners as their friend from the United States and set up interviews for me. Several women sought out and urged their friends to call me or talk to me in person. Some women brought me articles from newspapers and magazines they thought were relevant for my research. At one college, one young woman spoke to the college librarian and convinced her to allow me to use the library and its resources despite policies that restricted use of the library to students only.

However, being an older sister also meant that I had to constantly negotiate the delicate boundary between being a confidante and being comfortable with authority. In the role of confidante, I found myself listening to stories about secret rebellions, resentment against parents, and tales about friends who had lovers and boyfriends. During these times, a few women explicitly asked me to turn off my tape recorder and to confirm my promises of ano-
nymity and confidentiality. Despite the comfort and familiarity of the older sister figure to which I became accustomed, these anxieties among young romance readers revealed the uneasy and tense relationship between my professional life as researcher and the insider kinship role conferred upon me in fieldwork. Most accounts I listened to about “friends” were later revealed as events and circumstances in the lives of my informants themselves. Despite their eventual willingness to share their fears and complaints about gendered social pressures, I still wonder whether these young women would have been more open about their sexuality with a Westerner who might be seen as less likely to judge them based on cultural expectations of women’s behavior in Indian society. The well-known word rapport, which is often used to signify acceptance and warm relationships between informants and researchers, was thus something I could not take for granted despite being an insider; all I could claim was an imperfect rapport.

Although the didi role allowed me entry into young Indian women’s emotional worlds, this role also meant that I became privy to active attempts by parents to recruit me as a spy and a channel to exert control over their daughters. During interviews, a few working mothers anxiously inquired if their daughters were indeed in college when I visited because they were worried about bringing up good daughters. One mother was particularly concerned because her daughter’s college had two movie theaters within walking distance, and she had heard from her colleagues at work that many young women skipped classes to watch movies. Two mothers wanted to know more about a nearby college for men, which had a reputation for unruly male students: “Did you see these men hanging around outside the gates? Did my daughter hint to you that she had a boyfriend from that college? Did you see her riding on any men’s scooters?” One father wanted to know how often his daughter visited the lending library and blamed her for being stubborn about enrolling in a college far away from home: “She wanted to be with her friends from school so she insisted on going to this college. Now we don’t know anything she does after she leaves home.” Several parents assumed that I was conducting a survey about reading habits to pinpoint problems with rebellious young women who were ambivalent about conforming to idealized notions of Hindu middle- and upper-class femininity—dutiful, docile, educated, and domestic. I was told by a few parents that as an older “sensible” Indian woman who had achieved success (going to the United States), I could dissuade these young women from reading romance novels and instead urge them to spend time on more productive intellectual or domestic pursuits. My perceived insiderness, which arose not only because I was Indian but also because of my local connections, age, cultural capital, and class, thus led parents to invest me with the cultural authority attributed to the didi role.

Resisting parents’ attempts to recruit me as a disciplining authority figure was not the only difficult situation I had to negotiate. A thornier dilemma I
experienced was in thinking and writing about my informants’ responses that revealed prejudice toward marginalized others: working-class and poor Indian men, minority Indian women of other religions, and racial minorities in the United States. In their talk about the sexual harassment of women in public spaces in urban India, many of my informants bitterly complained about their feelings of humiliation in city buses and on busy streets in Hyderabad, where they were frequently subject to verbal and physical abuse by men.Attributing the problem of women’s harassment in public spaces to poor and working-class men who “were cheap,” “had no culture,” “were uneducated,” “drunk,” or “had no control,” many women were silent about and resistant to discussing the less visible participation of middle- and upper-class educated men in these forms of harassment. Some women called for more police control over their harassers, and others wondered why these men found pleasure in inviting the unwilling attention of women like them, that is, women who were clearly unattainable by men from the lower classes.

By recounting middle- and upper-class women’s criticisms of male harassers in Hyderabad, I do not imply that sexual harassment is similar in all Indian cities or that class hierarchy in India falls into the sharply polarized binary system of privileged versus poor classes, when in fact, class in India is enormously complicated by religion, language, regional differences in caste, colonial history, gender, urban versus rural locations, occupations, income, education, and land ownership (Ahmad, 1992; Basu, 1996; Beteille, 1965; Hancock, 1995; Liddle & Joshi, 1986; Lieten, 1996; Seymour, 1995; Varma, 1998). Most of the upper-caste Indian women I interviewed in Hyderabad belonged to the professional English-speaking class, which is an elite group not solely in terms of wealth, but also in its ability to harness cultural capital through access to education and skilled jobs (Joshi, 1991; Sridhar, 1977; Varma, 1998). Unlike larger cities such as New Delhi or Bombay, where men from the newly rich classes are also likely to harass women, in Hyderabad, a smaller south Indian city, class mobility through entrepreneurship is less likely, and therefore, street harassment can be more easily attributed to working-class and poor men.

In individual interviews, informants struggling to discuss their pleasure in reading sexually explicit material explained their sexual identity as a contrast to dominant discursive representations of minority Indian women’s sexuality. Emphasizing their differences from Muslim and Anglo-Indian women, these Hindu women expressed their understanding of their own sexuality as being in the “middle.” By “middle,” they implied that they were not, on one hand, as sexually repressed as working-class and poor Muslim women and not, on the other hand, as sexually immoral or “easy” as women from the Anglo-Indian community, a community formed of children born to Indian women who were mistresses or concubines of British men during colonialism. Distancing themselves from Muslim and Anglo-Indian women, these romance readers constructed their own gender identity as being the
perfect compromise between tradition and modernity: cosmopolitan yet modest, career oriented yet domestic.

Similarly, I also learned that part of the pleasure in reading romance novels as expressed by some informants lay in the ability of these novels to transport them into the world of predominantly White, affluent, First World citizens. My questions about their possible interest in recent and newer romance novels featuring men and women of color—mostly African Americans—were received with indifference, confusion, and annoyance. I learned from two women that my questions had displayed my ignorance of what defined a good Mills & Boon romance: courtship between White men and women or between White women and exotic aristocratic men such as Arab Sheiks or Egyptian princes. Expressing racist opinions about African Americans as criminals, poor, and underachieving and other Asians such as Chinese and Japanese as unemotional and passive, these romance readers argued that a "great Mills & Boon" had to be a romantic story set within the context of White middle- and upper-class life. Paradoxically, these readers even rejected the idea of a romance novel set in India with Indian men and women: Reading a favorite Mills & Boon romance novel was thus a vicarious experience located within specific dominant class and race formations.

Although I was comfortable with explaining women's gender oppression, I found myself denying, resisting, and avoiding writing about women’s elitist views about class, religion, and race partly out of loyalty and partly out of my own difficulties in achieving critical distance. Given previous Western scholarship on India as the model example of a highly hierarchical society, I also feared that my representation of these negative views of Indian women in my work after publication in the United States would fuel ethnocentric views of Indian culture. The political goal of my project, which was to write about Indian women’s experiences with and resistance to patriarchal control over their sexuality, was thus complicated by strong and unexpected scripts of privilege and prejudice. These scripts did not neatly fit into images of women’s subversive resistance to patriarchy that I had repeatedly encountered in the work of feminist media scholars.

Writing about hierarchical views of elite women raises new issues about feminist scholars’ ethics, particularly, researchers’ potential to use women informants’ words to represent their lives and identities in ways that they may not endorse. In charting the future course of feminist research in its earlier stages, pioneering feminist scholars in different disciplines have debated and outlined the politics and ethics of feminist work (research goals, topics for research, and methods) in the academy. Expressing concerns about androcentrism and the silencing of women’s voices in the academy, Sandra Harding (1987) wrote that feminist research should be “for women”; that is, feminist scholars must be committed to recovering women’s everyday experiences to write about the world from women’s perspective. Renate Duelli
Klein (1983), Ann Oakley (1981), and Shulamit Reinharz (1983) viewed qualitative field research methods that involved lived interaction with women as egalitarian and ethical methods to produce knowledge about women’s everyday lives. In her frequently cited essay “U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?” which dwells on the ethical issues generated by material inequalities between poor Third World women and Western/North American feminist ethnographers, Daphne Patai (1991) urged feminist scholars who “study down” to commit themselves to political action. How is it possible to retain Harding’s (1987) vision of feminist research if women themselves are doing the silencing? How are these ethical issues related to the politics of research different when we “study up” and have to take into account elite, not poor, Third World women’s experiences of privilege within dominant class, caste, and religious structures?

In considering the ethics of how we represent elite women’s discourses of “othering,” it is perhaps easier for feminist scholars to study and narrate disturbing responses of male rather than female informants due to fears of betraying the sisterhood and of distracting from the overall goal of redistributing power between the sexes (Sanday, 1990; Seiter, 1990; Weis, 1990). Some feminist ethnographers, including Judith Stacey (1991) and Sondra Hale (1991), have written about how strongly ingrained assumptions of empathy and solidarity with women’s gender oppression can create emotional and intellectual conflict when female subjects express racist, classist, homophobic, and other elitist views. Criticizing feminist notions about ethnography as a less exploitative and more respectful research method because it is based on personal interactions with real women, Judith Stacey (1991) suggests that feminists can diminish the “inequality and potential treacherousness” (p. 113) inherent in ethnography by looking to critical and postmodern ethnographers. She writes that an uneasy fusion of feminist and postmodern/critical ethnography that rigorously questions power relationships in the field and within the academy can temper feminist celebrations of ethnography. However, relying on the insights of postmodern and critical ethnography could not mitigate the anxieties I experienced in deciding how, where, and if I should include my informants’ problematic opinions about marginalized others. Although I had theoretical knowledge about intersections among race, gender, and class identities in feminist theory, applying this theory to real women with whom I had developed friendships was difficult.

Ultimately, I decided to include and integrate Indian women’s denigration of other social groups within my analysis of the complex ways in which audiences in non-Western contexts appropriate global media to reinforce local meanings of power—meanings that may not have been envisioned by the original producers of transnational culture. My decision to include women’s problematic views in the written product of my fieldwork was inspired by scholars who advise against a retreat from analyses of privilege and power in
the real world. Grappling with the political project of cultural studies, Stuart Hall (1991) asks cultural studies scholars to return to the “worldliness of cultural studies”:

I want to go back to that moment of “staking out a wager” in cultural studies, to those moments in which positions begin to matter. This is a way of opening the question of the “worldliness” of cultural studies, to borrow a term from Edward Said. . . . I’m trying to return the project of cultural studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below. (p. 278)

Urging qualitative researchers to resist the romanticizing of fieldwork narratives, Michelle Fine (1994) writes that one way of interrupting the binaries of Self/Other and identifying possibilities for change is to productively engage the contradictions that litter texts and fieldwork experiences. Fine suggests that exploring the structures and practices of othering by individuals living in spaces of privilege (class, gender, or race) can disrupt the taken-for-granted fixedness of social categories and point to the multiple and interchangeable roles of Self and Other that we all occupy. One strength of qualitative, ethnographic research, after all, lies in the access it promises to the ways in which power and privilege get articulated at the level of people’s everyday lives. In writing about how elite South Asian women constructed the other, I had to, however, resist creating simple and “flat caricatures” (Fine, 1994, p. 79) of dominant versus powerless groups and instead map out the “overlapping, conflicting, and de-centered circles of . . . identities” (Denzin, quoted in Fine, 1994, p. 79).

Recent definitions of feminist ethnography also allowed me to analyze women’s multiple subjectivities as including experiences of power as well as powerlessness. Sally Cole and Lynne Philips (1996) define feminist ethnography as a project not only of giving voice but also of “documentation and presentation of the conflicting, contradictory, and heterogeneous experiences of women cross-culturally” (p. 4). My efforts to explain Hindu middle- and upper-class women’s negative views toward other minority Indian women resonated with Kamala Visweswaran’s (1994) arguments for going beyond binary analyses of White/Black, Western/Third World, and colonized/colonizer in ethnography. Urging women-centered feminist ethnography to explore and theorize “relationality,” she writes, “But rather than foreground men’s relationships to one another [which classical ethnography does quite well] . . . perhaps a feminist ethnography could also focus on women’s relationships to other women, and the power differentials between them” (p. 20).

Acknowledging her difficulties with writing about multiple hierarchies among women in Burkina Faso, Marie Andree Couillard (1996) describes the power differences she witnessed between urban, educated women and rural women:

Women’s solidarity, rather than being taken for granted, must be problematized and investigated in specific contexts. . . . Moreover some “sisters” manage better
than others vis-à-vis “brothers who hold powerful positions. And some “sisters” will not hesitate to manipulate “brothers” to their own ends while preventing other sisters from having access to knowledge, skills, and resources. (pp. 65-66)

Influenced by Foucault, feminist ethnographers have also reconceptualized women’s subjectivities as complex, that is, as including agency and passivity, oppression and power, as well as resistance and accommodation to power structures (Abu-Lughod, 1990b; Kumar, 1994; Mankekar, 1993). These new perspectives on women as actors who devise complex strategies allowed me to go beyond binary constructions of power along the lone axis of gender and instead explore the articulation of power as a complex process that includes multiple social identities.

CONCLUSION

Engaging in a critique of our research practices reveals the troubled and power-laden circumstances that underlie the production of knowledge within the academy. In returning to the questions I raised in the introduction about qualitative media research carried out by postcolonial feminist scholars in their own cultures, my analysis of methodological concerns has implications for postcolonial feminist ethnography, feminist media ethnography, and finally, for audience ethnographies of media reception in a global context.

The entry of postcolonial scholars from the Third World in the U.S. academy as scholars and ethnographers studying their own cultures rather than as the traditional “objects” of research has been heralded as a major transformation in the history of Euramerican academic knowledge production (Escobar, 1993, p. 364; Tedlock, 1991, p. 81; M. Wolf, 1992, pp. 137-138). Postcolonial feminist ethnographers carrying out research in their own cultures could claim that, as authentic insiders, they have the capability of producing knowledge that is closer to the truth or reality of people’s lives in the Third World. However, as some postcolonial feminists have cautioned, such claims about the authenticity of knowledge produced by insiders can be problematic because they confer authority based on biological essentialism and attribute representational power to insiders in the political sense of “speaking for” silenced subjects (Ganguly, 1992; Narayan, 1997; Spivak, 1988), that is, of claiming authority to be a transparent medium through which native informants’ voices become heard. In exploring the impact of my age, gender, class, and cultural capital on my research relationships in Hyderabad, including my interactions with Indian women of a similar background, my analysis demonstrates that rather than experiencing neatly categorized states of insiders or outsiders, postcolonial feminist ethnographers will find themselves negotiating insider/outsider and Self/Other positions depending on the dialogical and interactive process of identity constitution in the field (Tedlock, 1991).
Given the history of Orientalist representations inside and outside the academy, postcolonial feminists have taken on the task of challenging limited Western representations of Third World women as a homogenous group of women who are typically represented as passive victims of indigenous patriarchal systems (Kumar, 1994; Mani, 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Ong, 1988; Visweswaran, 1994). Conducting ethnographies in their own cultures to show the diversity of people’s lives in the Third World and highlight non-Western women’s resistive discourses can therefore be politically empowering experiences for postcolonial feminist ethnographers. In building on the challenge to Orientalism that postcolonial feminists have initiated, my project on Indian women’s romance reading questioned the monolithic representation of Third World women as the rural, poor woman of development and mainstream news discourses that usually ignore urban, cosmopolitan cultures in the Third World. My project also suggested that far from passively accepting patriarchal constructions of ideal middle-class femininity, young Indian women were actively questioning the control and regulation of their sexuality and mobility, even if these expressions of resistance appeared to partially accommodate existing norms rather than advocate a complete transformation of patriarchy. In writing about Third World women’s agency to contest Orientalist representations, postcolonial feminist ethnographers must, however, resist the desire to minimize the power of traditional patriarchy on women’s lives merely because such a representation might weaken Western notions of cultural superiority. Based on my fieldwork experience, I also argue that despite pressure from community members to produce celebratory accounts of glorious traditions in their cultures, postcolonial feminist ethnographers must resist the role of emissary because, as feminists, they have a stake in “calling attention to norms, unfair, and oppressive to many within their societies, including women” (Narayan, 1997, p. 133).

In seeking South Asian women’s abilities to fashion their own hidden discourses even as they are part of a repressive social order, postcolonial feminist ethnographers should also examine the darker side of women’s agency, that is, how women themselves can call upon dominant, hegemonic meanings to construct their identities in opposition to those who are marginalized. Given the “extreme heterogeneity of the people called women, unified not by class or region, history or culture, only tenuously by biology, and not at all by age” (Kumar, 1994, p. 22) in South Asia, postcolonial feminists must be prepared to engage in multidimensional analyses of power that cannot always be attributed to sources such as colonialism, the “Big, Bad, West,” or “those traditional men.” To circulate representations of South Asian women as agents who can participate in the reproduction of dominant discourses might present challenges for postcolonial feminists who work within the Euramerican academy because of their feminist politics and loyalty toward their community. Avoiding critiques of female subjects, however, only implies that postcolonial feminist ethnographers are abdicating responsibility to a vision of transna-
tional feminism that is committed to critiquing all systems of power, including the rising tide of religious fundamentalism (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Hancock, 1995; Mankekar, 1993; Mazumdar, 1994; Moghadam, 1994). The increasing power of Hindu fundamentalist discourses in India that demonize Muslims as foreign, uncivilized, barbaric, and so forth forms the larger context within which Hindu women readers in my study denigrated Muslim women, a context that demands attention to the politics of religious identity. Encouraging transnational feminists to go beyond the “holy trinity” of race, class, and gender because it limits the range of discussion around women’s lives, Indrepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) write,

What is often left out of these U.S. focused debates are other complex categories of identity and affiliation that apply to non-U.S cultures and situations. U.S. feminists often have to be reminded that … other categories also enter into the issues of subject formation both within and outside the borders of the United States, requiring more nuanced and complex theories of social relations. (p. 19)

Feminist media ethnography would benefit greatly from an increased sense of self-reflexivity about the research we do among readers and viewers of popular culture. Warning feminist scholars about the dangers of a self-reflexivity that could turn into a narcissistic focus on the researcher herself, a “hidden form of self indulgence,” Ien Ang (1989, p. 28) cautions us against promoting struggles over writing and representation within the academy rather than engaging with the external realities of people’s lives. As my article demonstrates, far from ignoring the power of dominant discourses or suggesting that representational power can be disrupted through a “politics of textuality” (Said, 1989, p. 209), self-reflexivity on the part of feminist media ethnographers can enrich our work and productively explore tensions between the politics of the world and the experiences we have with research subjects. Methodological problems, such as difficult interactions with book managers, parents’ reneging on interviews, and failures to gain access to some parents, only served to reinforce the strength of young Indian women’s loud and vocal defense of their romance reading. In addition, writing about and reflecting on troubled relationships in the field has enhanced my understanding of why romance readers’ expressions of resistance were ridden with contradictory feelings, such as pleasure/guilt, resistance/accommodation, and superiority/inferiority.

Interrogating unexpected moments and ethical dilemmas in the field could also provide feminist media ethnographers opportunities to put into practice a politics of pedagogy that can be more effective in deconstructing authority and power than theoretical disavowals of objectivity, realism, or equality in relationships between researchers and researched. For many feminist researchers, as Lal (1996) writes, the academy can be a site of politics because our reflexive methodologies have great “potential for the pedagogical empowerment of a new generation of feminist scholars” (p. 205). To
enable future feminist media ethnographers to become aware of the significance of fieldwork experiences for the knowledge we produce about gender and the politics of pleasure, it is important that we begin to reflect on dilemmas, silences, failures, and successes in doing qualitative research. My students’ enthusiastic reactions to a recent book *Speaking of Abortion: Television and Authority in Women’s Lives*, one of the first publications in feminist audience studies to include an insightful opening chapter and methodological appendix about authors Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole’s interactions with women during focus groups, suggests that situating ourselves in the field can enable feminist media ethnographers to reach out to one of our most important constituents within the academy (Press & Cole, 1999).

With regard to the contributions of self-reflexive audience ethnographies in postcolonial settings to cultural studies, I argue that analyzing how we gain access to audience members, negotiate representational dilemmas, and contend with silences and opposition during fieldwork can richly illustrate the contradictory reception to global culture within a range of social groups. Reflecting on parents’ hostility and anxieties about their daughters’ romance reading; mothers’ coercive efforts to enlist me in the role of spy and role model; older, educated middle-class Indians’ disdain for my discipline and research topic; and informants’ momentary desire for pseudonyms drawn from Western culture provided insights into the context of global media consumption within which postcolonial scholars often work. Global Western media, as my account reveals, are an integral part of the ways in which power and hierarchy get mapped out across transnational borders, within national boundaries, and through the trajectories of colonial history.

Self-reflexive research on media reception can also promote cultural studies’ ongoing interest in interdisciplinary dialogue and facilitate a politics of methodology that is different from the capitalist media industry’s interest in audiences. Emphasizing the value of reflective writing for enabling a richer understanding of context in audience studies, media scholar Murphy (1999) points out that “narrative development, questions of power, reflexivity, and concerns over voice” (p. 501) remain neglected in ethnographic research. The absence of analysis about research and fieldwork as sites of cultural politics is a symptom of cultural studies’ limited vision of interdisciplinarity because audience ethnographers have liberally borrowed theoretical and methodological approaches from anthropology; however, unlike feminist, postmodern, and critical ethnographers in anthropology, they have neglected to historicize and examine the politics of audience research. Lack of sensitivity to the histories of methodologies and the politics of knowledge production about audience activity can lead to ethnocentric assessments about the future course of research in cultural studies. As Vamsee Juluri (1998) notes, recent nostalgia about audience research and arguments to abandon ethnographic studies of audiences so we can return to political economies of media industries fail to be reflective about the kinds of audiences we have heard from dur-
ing the past two decades—mostly White audiences in the Euramerican world. In fact, extending Juluri’s argument to questions of culture and postcoloniality, it is only recently that cultural studies in the United States has begun to contemplate questions of postcolonial identity, despite the prominence of postcolonial theory in allied fields such as anthropology, literature, and women’s studies. Furthermore, anthropologists have recently begun acknowledging the “profoundly influencing” challenge that the mass media pose to “orthodox notions of culture” because the media allow us to transgress cultural, national, and regional boundaries (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, pp. 18-19). Audience ethnographies in the Third World could speak to anthropology’s current interest in seeking a better understanding of the role transnational popular culture plays in human experiences of cross-cultural modernity. Finally, audience research by postcolonial media scholars among elite, cosmopolitan audiences in the Third World has tremendous potential to challenge troublesome relationships in the paradigm of “Powerful Self (Western academic)/Oppressed Other (Third World, poor informant)” (Radway, 1989, p. 5) that is ever present in traditional notions of ethnography in anthropology.

Criticizing audience ethnographer David Morley for not reflecting on his position as a researcher in his book Family Television, Ang (1996) asks,

Why examine audiences empirically at all? After all, some critical scholars still dismiss the idea of doing empirical audience research altogether, because, so they argue, it would necessarily implicate the researcher with the strategies and aims of the capitalist culture industry. (p. 51)

She argues that this troubling question should not imply a retreat from empirical audience research because ethnographies of media reception, unlike the neat and manageable data generated from market research, remind us that reality is always more complicated and diversified than our theories can represent. This article’s emphasis on problems, failures, and unexpected events in fieldwork rather than successful moments alone shows us that it is futile to objectify audiences or treat audience activity as slices of reality because media ethnographers’ access to audience interpretations are always bound by our identities and the contexts in which we carry out our research.

NOTES

1. For examples of self-reflexive essays of feminists in anthropology and folklore, see Abu-Lughod (1988); Behar (1993); Gordon (1988); MacIntyre (1993); Narayan (1993); Stoeltje, Fox, and Obrys (1999); Visweswaran (1994); and M. Wolf (1992); in sociology, see Bolak (1996), Naples (1996), and Stacey (1991); in geography, see England (1994), Gilbert (1994), and Kobayashi (1994); in literary studies, see Radway (1986); and in women’s studies, see Altorki and El-Solh (1988), Cole and Philips (1996), Patai (1991), and D. Wolf (1996).
2. I thank the coeditor of *Qualitative Inquiry*, Norman Denzin, for drawing my attention to Patrick Murphy’s (1999) research.

3. Most self-reflexive accounts of non-Western feminists discuss the rupturing of their feelings of “insiderness” when they were interviewing poor and working-class women from their own cultures (Bolak, 1996; El-Solh, 1988; Lal, 1996; Ram, 1992b). These feminists have written that their middle- and upper-class backgrounds rendered them as much outsider to the working-class people they were talking to as Western scholars who do research among the poor in the Third World.

4. For example, in her article about becoming a dutiful “modest” daughter, Lila Abu-Lughod (1988, pp. 139-162) discusses her identity as an Arab-American among the Bedouin in the Egyptian Western Desert and writes that to be accepted, she had to distance her American self with its connotations of immodesty. She reveals that her father’s background, the fact that he accompanied her on her trip and introduced her to prominent families, and her willingness to do domestic chores endeared her to the Bedouin community.

5. Rereading my notes later, I recalled Kamala Visweswaran’s (1994, pp. 60-61) discussions about the naming process in research. Raising a series of questions about the naming process, Visweswaran asks us to pay more attention to our naming practices and to think about the relationship between naming, identity, and authenticity. Asking her readers why names such as Francoise, Ghislane, or Jennifer would not satisfy audiences because her informants were all Indian women, she writes, “The pseudonym is a false name that stands for a real person. As such it marks a key site between the real and fictitious in anthropological writing. Yet some fictions are expected, indeed required, to figure both ethnography and authority” (p. 61). To move away from realist narratives that feed audiences’ needs for authenticity, she resorts to calling her subject “M” in the tradition of the cheap detective novel.

6. For research that explores linkages among gender, caste, and class, see Liddle and Joshi (1986) and Seymour (1995). Basu (1996) and Hancock (1995) examine the ways in which the recent upsurge in Hindu fundamentalism affects class, gender, and caste identities. Ahmad (1992) considers the rise of the English language and English-language publishing for the consolidation of elite postcolonial urban culture in India. Lieten (1996) and Beteille (1965) examine the changing relationship between caste and class structures and conclude that, for the most part, upper-caste people continue to belong to the economically higher strata of middle- and upper-class groups. Pavan Varma’s (1998) recent book *The Great Indian Middle-Class* provides good background information and a cogent analysis of the origins and growth of the elite, English-educated Indian middle class in urban areas. Varma describes the rise of the urban middle class during British colonialism; explains the involvement of members of this class in the nationalist, anticolonial movement; and analyzes the current, pervasive interpellation of urban middle-class Indians as ideal consumers in a global economy.

7. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of *Qualitative Inquiry* for pointing out the range of social categories that mediate experiences of class in India and for drawing my attention to different kinds of street harassment in larger Indian cities such as New Delhi.

8. For an excellent critique of Western fascination for collectivism and caste hierarchy in India, see Ram (1992a).

9. Discussing Hinduism or Islam and non-Western women’s religious identities raises the issue of how postcolonial feminist ethnographers’ research might be received in Euramerican contexts. To write and speak about the patriarchal control over Indian
women’s sexuality, I must discuss Hinduism, arranged marriage, and sexuality as configured in Hindu religious texts and scriptures. Given the glaring absence of feminist ethnographies in the West, which take into account the impact of Christianity on the social construction of sexuality, such discussions of Hinduism and Indian women can become an exotic discourse drifting in and out of conference rooms for the “facile consumption of cultural Otherness” (Salazar, 1991, p. 100). Thus, it may be even more challenging for a postcolonial feminist ethnographer to deconstruct Self/Other distinctions that are produced by her research.


11. Another way of challenging the classic paradigm of Western Self/non-Western Other would be to reverse the relationship whereby Third World scholars would study First World cultures. For an excellent discussion of such reversals in fieldwork relationships, see Stoeltje et al. (1999, pp. 174-176).

REFERENCES


Radhika Parameswaran is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington. Her research interests include gender and the media, ethnographic research, postcolonial studies, and audience studies. Her recent research has been published in *Journal of Communication*, *Gazette: The International Journal of Communication Studies*, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, and *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. The article is based on the author’s dissertation “Public images, private pleasures: Romance reading at the intersection of gender, class, and national identities in postcolonial India” directed by Prof. Carolyn Dyer, School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242.