Resuscitating Feminist Audience Studies
Revisiting the Politics of Representation and Resistance

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Questions of what constitutes the most appropriate object of study and related debates over the academy’s potential to challenge structures of domination have come to occupy a central position in recent speculations on the future of critical media studies. One crucial strand linking these critiques of media research in the cultural studies tradition is a growing dissatisfaction with the celebratory tenor of ethnographic projects, which have claimed that readers’/viewers’ interpretive creativity offers evidence of subversive political resistance in audiences’ everyday lives. In arguing for a reinvigorated approach to media audiences, one that insists on recentering issues of ideology and power, this chapter builds on and responds to those critiques of populist audience ethnographies that have attempted to recuperate critical media studies’ originary allegiances to a progressive global politics of race, class, and gender. I articulate my engagement with the politics of knowledge production and audience representation through the lens of my specific location within a newly emerging body of work in postcolonial feminist media studies.

This chapter’s discussion comprises four parts. The first section contends that in battling tendencies toward audience populism and media polysemy, First World media scholars, who urge the abandonment of audience ethnography and a nostalgic return to media texts and political economy, fail to recognize the racial privilege and ethnocentrism that lurks beneath the surface of their prescriptive arguments. I suggest that instead of ignoring the audience (women or men), what we need at this specific juncture, when corporate globalization is eager to conquer new territories and religious fundamentalism endeavors to capture the imagination of local and transnational diasporic communities, is a renewed commitment to discovering global media’s role in constraining and
enabling progressive social-democratic practices. In the second and third parts, I address critiques of the problematic ways in which some strains of ethnographic audience research have theorized the import and implications of audiences’ interpretive skills. In these two sections where I draw on my research among young middle- and upper-class women in India, I show that historically inflected and locally contextualized feminist audience studies can avoid the pitfalls of resurrecting the autonomous, rational, identifiable, and predictable subject of Enlightenment and capitalist discourses.

The Limits of Multiculturalism/Internationalism in Media Studies: Challenging Western Ethnocentrism

Following the boom in media reception studies during the eighties, a slowly brewing backlash against empirical audience research has been steadily gaining momentum. Within the field of feminist media and cultural studies, for instance, Radway’s ethnographic research on romance reading in the United States was first hailed as a pioneering effort to rectify the self-indulgent tendencies of textual analyses and the elitist economic determinism of the Frankfurt School and allied political economy approaches (Allor, 1988; Markert, 1985; Newman, 1988; Schudson, 1987; Schwichtenberg, 1989). Gradually, however, Radway’s research on romance readers was criticized for its exclusive focus on middle-class readers and for her failure to theorize the impact of readers’ class positions on their interpretations of popular literature (Press, 1986). Another critical response to Radway’s work has suggested that in her over-reliance on individual readers’ statements, Radway (1984) did not adequately account for the larger social/material context of women’s lives, and for the possibility that interviewees, in their extreme anxiousness to please the feminist ethnographer, could have been less than forthcoming about the realities of their lives (McRobbie, 1990). Focusing attention on the material and discursive forces that influence the process of media reception, recent critics of populist audience studies have also argued that ethnographies, which celebrate audiences’ consumption practices as effective forms of resistance, ultimately disavow the unequal distribution of economic resources and cultural capital in society (Angus et al., 1989; Budd, Entman, & Steinman, 1990; Carragee, 1990; Clarke, 1990).

While the above critiques directed against Radway’s work were articulated in the spirit of advancing the feminist project of audience ethnography, textual critic Modleski went one step further when she attacked Radway (and feminist ethnographers in general) for embracing the ideology of mass culture. Modleski (1986) argued that the danger of ethnography lies in the fact that “critics immersed in their [the audience’s] culture, half in love with their subject are incapable of achieving a critical distance from it” (p. xii). Targeting feminist ethnographic research on women audiences in particular, Modleski charged that in mindlessly
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celebrating the critical “micro-resistant” viewing/reading practices of female soap opera fans and romance novel readers, feminist scholars have naively colluded with capitalist entities. When confronted with charges of cultural colonization and manipulation, corporations also claim that savvy consumers, who possess keen skills of discrimination, have the power to accept or reject commercial culture in a “free marketplace.” Similarly, other critics advocating political economy approaches have alleged that audience ethnographies (painting them with a broad stroke) have led critical media studies away from its original intent of intervening into and challenging the power of dominant social and economic institutions (Garnham. 1995; Kellner. 1995. Murdock. 1989).

In some cases, despair over ethnographic audience studies’ repeated production of the resistive consumer, a subject who is excised from her ideologically infused economic context, has led critics to renounce any progressive possibilities for empirical audience research. In a leading undergraduate text on race, gender, and class in the media, the introductory chapter outlines and reviews production, textual, and audience approaches to media research (Dines & Humez, 1995). In the section on audience studies, after citing problems with populist ethnographies of media reception (avoidance of class and lack of attention to media ownership and marketing), the author concludes that one solution to ending the celebration of the active audience at the expense of mapping out the social structures of late capitalism is to avoid the human audience altogether: “A new way, in fact, to study media effects is to use computer databases that collect references to media texts (such as Dialog or Nexis–Lexis) and to trace the effects of media artifacts through analysis of references to them in the news media” (Kellner, 1995, p. 14). Although it is crucial to examine the ways in which diverse media texts creatively harness audiences as consumers or as citizens, analysis of the imagined audience alone cannot speak for the myriad complexities of everyday social experience.

A vital, ongoing critique of research practices is essential for promoting self-reflexivity in critical media studies, an enterprise that strives to be vigilant of the ways in which modes of knowledge production can silently reproduce power asymmetries. However, the recent questioning of and backlash against empirical audience research at recent conferences and other academic settings is more reminiscent of regressive turf policing rather than thoughtful wrestling with theories or tools of interpretation. One “trendy” mode of demonstrating a sympathetic alignment with grassroots activism, socialist political practice, and ideological critique is to distance oneself from the field of audience studies and the research practice of ethnography. Assumptions guiding critiques that frame the return to textual analyses/political economy as an antidote to problems with audience research include the notion that audience studies cannot release itself from the trap of regurgitating Fiske’s early emphasis on subversion/polysemy and the belief that the field has produced all that we need to know about audience activity.
As feminist scholars and activists working within the academy, it is critical that we interrogate trends in academic research before we participate in or endorse research agendas that gain currency as the latest “fashion.” In fact, many of the problems with ethnographic audience research in the United States including the facile insistence on polysemy and preoccupation with viewers’/readers’ individualized voices and interpretations, can themselves be traced to the appetite for “cutting edge” theories and the impulse to promote a culture of academic stardom and celebrity (Moran, 1998). The temptation to earn cultural capital by blindly emulating the latest academic celebrity’s theories can lead to the unreflexive recycling of reified concepts or the combative impulse to trumpet the contributions of new research by dismissing wholesale the tentative observations of pioneers in the field. Postcolonial feminist Ganguly (1992, p. 69) questions the politics of feminist audience researchers who “take up the latest critical practice as they do clothing fashions,” but she also argues against the disciplinary divisions created by those who posit the only analytical possibility for audience research as located in the banal reaffirmation of the active consumer. Guided by Ganguly’s felicitous move to recuperate a politics of accountability for audience studies, I argue that in deliberately turning away from the audience as an object of study, media studies could be throwing the “baby out with the bathwater.”

Rather than advocating a wholesale renunciation of the audience, media scholars can begin to seek out refinements in interpretive theories and innovative modes of analyses that are better equipped to transcribe the wide spectrum of everyday relations between structures of power and audiences’ media practices. Undertaking precisely such an ambitious project to redirect the future of audience studies, Nightingale (1996) points to the need for a more enlightened and interdisciplinary orientation to media reception research. Nightingale argues that although audience studies has undoubtedly demonstrated the merits of fieldwork engagement with communities of readers and viewers, media researchers have yet to pursue the provocative methodological implications of anthropology’s radical critiques of ethnography (pp. 114–17). She suggests that the term “ethnographic,” in its superficial context in media and cultural studies, has come to be associated with a set of qualitative research terms like “empirical,” “cultural,” or “depth interviews,” but debates on ethnography in anthropology have become entangled with far transformative epistemological questions of colonial histories, ethics of research practices, and the politics of representation.

Taking seriously Nightingale’s imperative to chart new horizons for audience research, I contend that exhortations to bury the project of audience ethnography so we can move on to new pastures overlook the historical marginalization of race and ethnicity in the academy. It is dangerous to pretend that the body of work on White metropolitan audiences in critical media research can masquerade with its “unnamed, universalizing normativity as knowledge of audiences everywhere” (Juluri, 1998, p. 83). Examining the corpus of writings in feminist media studies, for instance, it becomes apparent that until very recently, ethnographic research on audience activity was mostly confined to the experiences of
it is critical to consider in or on. In fact, United States' viewers' / to be traced to a culture of racial cultural discourse, can lead to the trumpet of observation. p. 69) presupposes critical discipline for audience. Guided by the audience as an object of attention, media and innovative spectrum of practices, are of audience widened and argues that fieldwork researches have anthropology's term "ethnonass" come into "cultural," have become "historical histories," for audience since ethnography at the body can mask audiences in feminist, ethnographies of White women audiences in the First World. Numerous studies produced in the eighties and early nineties have analyzed white women's interactions with popular culture (Ang, 1985; Brown, 1994; Brundson, 1981; McRobbie, 1990; Press, 1991; Radway, 1984; Thurston, 1988). But the publication of audience research on women of color and non-Western women is still a fairly recent phenomenon (Bobo, 1995, Gillespie, 1995; Duke, 2000; Durham, 1999; Parameswaran, 1999; Valdivia, 2000). Disturbed by the elision of race and ethnicity in studies of film and television spectatorship, Valdivia (2000) enjoins feminists to forge a multicultural vision that rejects the hegemonic allure of racial binaries (White and Black women only) to make visible a range of diverse immigrant women's popular culture experiences.

To date, despite the popular and widely-cited text Cultural Studies' (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992) claim that the field was witnessing an international boom (the text included few studies outside the U.S. UK and Australia), we have only initiated the process of describing and analyzing media structures, texts, and audience reception in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Commenting on the powerful discourses of nostalgia and closure in the First World, which promote audience research as an enterprise of the past that has outlived its potential, Juluri (1998) writes, "As someone entering the field in the mid-1990s, I wonder what it means that the high moment of audience studies seems to have passed, perhaps to travel, like old American sitcoms, to the rest of the world." (p. 86). Deconstructing the politics of race, class, and location that invisibly structures the games of publication, canonization, and contestation in the academy, Juluri urges critics in metropolitan Western academe where "the world is written into knowledge" to be aware of discourses and practices that render research on the Third World as a cross-culturalist footnote or appendix (p. 85).

For postcolonial feminist ethnographers in audience studies, it seems ironic that just as they have launched efforts to record non-Western women audiences' responses to popular culture, media studies is eager to "pack up" and herald the demise of the audience as an object of study. The capricious politics of temporality and canonicity, which produces the dilemma of "catching up" (Juluri, 1998, p. 87) for postcolonial audience researchers is in one sense similar to the discomfort that women's studies scholars and critical race theorists expressed when radical postmodernism began heralding the death of space, subjectivity, history, and resistance. While evaluating the strengths of postmodernism, Kumar (1994) adopts a cautious approach to arguments that advocate a return to pure discourse and genealogy because she finds it important to "retain the subject for, let us say, political reasons, being unable to live up to the epistemological task of giving up subjectivity on having been denied it for so long and just discovering it" (p. 8). Similarly, Braidotti (1987) notes skeptically the coterminous rise of postmodernism and the increasing numbers of immigrants and women of color within the humanities and social sciences. "in order to announce the death of the subject, one must have first gained the right to speak as one" (p. 80). For postcolonial media ethnographers, empirical audience research offers an opportunity to generate
alternative knowledges of the non-West, knowledges that revise, revisit, and complicate the narratives that have been fashioned by European/colonial anthropologists and administrators. Proposing a sense of audience representation as deeply linked to intellectual practice, Juluri (1998) argues, "I am particularly invoking those of us who share the burden and privilege of certain kinds of colonialized 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. I am concerned with the possibilities that are enabled in audience research for a politics of representation involving third world/diasporic scholars of media as well as Third World audiences" (86).

In searching for alternatives to the political paralysis implicated in certain strains of postmodernity, feminist audience researchers cannot fall into the trap of authentic essentialism or nostalgia for originary and utopian moments of pre-modern/pre-colonial belonging. Orchestrating a polycentric vision of multicultural feminism, Shohat (1998) writes that we are "obliged to . . . work through a politics whereby the de-centering of identities" does not prevent us from examining the power asymmetries that privilege a few and disenfranchise many others (p. 6). Multicultural feminism, as Shohat envisions, transcends national and disciplinary borders to not only emphasize a range of distinct cultural subjectivities, but to also engage the fissures and dialogical relations within and between ethnicities, classes, and nations. Inspired by Shohat’s efforts to seek a balance between resisting analytical binarisms and negotiating the straitjacket of identity politics, our attention to audiences in the rest of the world must offer more than a vacuous, corporate vision of multiculturalism or a frenzied inclusive empiricism. As Shohat argues, simplistic models of global diversity based in the “flavor of the month” paradigm reduce feminists of color into native informants who collect new and exotic forms of Third World subalternity for regular consumption in the First World (p. 16).

Our investment in progressive racial politics and goals of achieving a radically global perspective need not lead to the mere addition of African, Indian, or Malaysian women to the smorgasbord of existing audiences in the canon. Firstly, rather than being a “guilty” afterthought, ethnographic audience studies in Asia or Africa can engage with questions that are germane to a new politics of audience research that interrogates the modes and practices of global capitalism and avoids essentialized models of the viewing/reading process. For instance, Valdina (2000) questions models of feminist media reception that assume viewer/reader identification to be a linear, one-way process of horizontal gender correspondence where men relate to men and women to women (p. 135). Hence, research on Third World women’s consumption of Western media, which predominantly represent the lives of White characters, would demand an analysis of media consumption that accounts for audiences’ contradictory experiences of affiliation and alienation. Secondly, audience research must stress the relational web of porous social formations within which the media constitute viewers’ identities. Therefore, when we study communities of color as spectators of
mainstream popular culture, we are not only studying race as “blackness” or “brownness” but also as the circulation of whiteness and vice versa. Foregrounding race in examining a group of White middle-class American girls’ playful consumption of Hispanic dolls can tell us volumes about the ways in which powerful discourses on immigration and citizenship percolate the quotidian practices of everyday life (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreschel, 2000). Finally, in negotiating the fine balance between power/ideology and agency/resistance in audience research, feminists can adopt a modified Foucauldian approach that views women as historical subjects who are molded by authoritative (and persuasive) media discourses, but are not “passive recipients” of dominant messages (Kumar, 1994, p. 21).

Gender, Resistance, and Colonial History

In my project on young urban middle- and upper-class Indian women’s leisure reading practices, I analyze the cultural space occupied by the practice of popular romance fiction reading in women’s everyday lives. I conducted ethnographic research for five months in Hyderabad, a city in South India and the capital of the state of Andhra Pradesh, among women between the ages of 17 and 21 years old. As part of my fieldwork, I moderated discussions about romance novels among seven groups of women; women in each group were friends before my arrival, and some women had known each other since their childhood. I conducted two- to three-hour-long interviews with 30 regular romance readers and read over a hundred novels they recommended. To gain insight into the discourses about romance reading that young women encountered. I interviewed parents, teachers, library owners, publishers, and used-book vendors. My involvement in readers’ everyday routines included “hanging out” with them at their colleges; joining their visits to lending libraries, restaurants, and movie theaters; accompanying them on shopping trips and picnics; and eating meals with women in their homes.

Typically, women from urban English-speaking middle- and upper-class communities read imported Western romance novels in India. Historically, middle-class urban Indian communities gained power and status through their access to economic and cultural capital—private school instruction, university education, and professional employment—during the colonial period. As members of the expanding Indian middle- and upper-classes, the women readers who shared their time with me belonged to a socioeconomic bloc whose purchasing power and desire to consume fueled the processes of economic liberalization and globalization (Varma, 1998, pp. 170–1). In the media’s hegemonic visions of upward mobility for Indian citizens, the fantasy lifestyle of the urban Indian middle classes is widely promoted as a symbol of postcolonial modernity. Hyper-visible images of middle- and upper-class urban Indian women circulate in the imaginary economies of consumerism and state discourse. These “modern” women
who represent the ideal subjects of success in models of national development shape the aspirations of poor, working-class, and rural women.

Media critics sympathetic to the project of refining ethnographic audience studies have argued for radically historicized and socially contextualized analyses of the processes that shape readers’ identities (Ang 1996). Commenting that audiences, not just media products created for consumption, are socially constructed and influenced by economic and social changes, Schudson (1987) urges researchers to unravel the historical constitution of audiences because “audiences are not born but made” (p. 63). In his thoughtful essay on ethnography and media reception research, Gibson (2000) proposes a model of audience studies that would allow researchers to avoid the trap of becoming ensnared in the semiotic worlds of popular culture’s fans and devotees (p. 253). Arguing for deep contextualization of audience activity while drawing from the writings of Morley (1986) and Hall (1980), Gibson proposes a three-pronged approach to understanding how readers’ interpretations are located within and against shifting fields of alliances, articulations, and historically-produced structures:

three important sites of analysis that must be explored if the context of audience meaning-making is to be reconstructed. These three sites include (1) the media text and its discursive structures, (2) the overdetermined social positions occupied by readers of texts, and (3) the social context of use and interpretation. (p. 261)

As Gibson notes, when considered together these three sites underscore the profound importance of context because “the context of a practice or discourse is not the background necessary for analysis, it is the product or goal of analysis . . . analyses of the audience, then should rebuild the historical and social context – in essence the context of prior articulations – which structures a particular text/audience relationship” (p. 261). While Gibson’s model subtly over-emphasizes the need to analyze the ways in which historically determined structures constrain the production of meaning, that is, induce audience passivity, what would an ethnography that historicized resistance against domination reveal? How can our knowledge of the historical formation of reading publics code particular leisure practices as “resistance” far before feminist ethnographers arrive in the field eager to discover women’s everyday acts of resistance? What new light can the history of colonial modernities in the Third World shed on our understanding of global women audiences’ consumption of Western media? In the case of romance reading in India, my project’s ethnographic exploration of Indian women’s interpretive agency was enriched by accounting for the impact of colonial reading histories on postcolonial leisure practices.

Although, on the surface, the circulation of romance novels in India offers evidence of global/Western media’s economic power to become present in non-Western settings, in a historical sense, women’s consumption of “trashy romances” in postcolonial India can be traced to the resistance the Indian reading public expressed against nineteenth-century British colonial elites’ project of civilization
for the colonies. The sheer volume of print culture’s material artifacts in urban spaces—hardcover fiction displayed in the windows of plush chain bookstores, magazines hung outside small bookstores in busy strip shopping areas, brightly-colored comics laid out on vendors’ carts at train stations, and faded, damaged paperbacks spread out on pavements by used booksellers—offers a glimpse of the vibrancy and range of leisure reading practices in postcolonial India. Urban Indian women’s contemporary English-language romance reading, coexisting alongside other reading practices, is historically linked to the arrival of print technology, the establishment of colonial educational institutions, the introduction and dissemination of the English language, and the importing of British novels into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial India. Together, these political and economic events marked the ushering in of colonial modernity, the triggering of new forms of national consciousness, and the creation of reading publics in British India (Dharwadker, 1997; Joshi, 1998; Paddikal, 1995; Viswanathan, 1989).

Historicizing questions of Western domination that have preoccupied media scholars’ writings on cultural imperialism in the post-World War II era, Joshi (1998) excavates data on urban Indians’ reading preferences in the mid-to-late nineteenth century to “uncover the complicated processes at work in the transmission of culture between Britain and India” (p. 198). Questioning the politics of colonial histories that yield bland narratives of “imperial zealots” and “compliant natives,” Joshi argues that an excessive emphasis on British imperial policies and pronouncements has concealed a more complex portrait of cross-cultural exchange that was taking place on the ground in colonial India. Combining the methodological insights of the history of the book and the sociology of reading, she attempts to document urban Indians’ selective appropriation and consumption of British literature during colonialism, a process that challenges unidimensional propositions about Western cultural conquest in nineteenth-century India.

Following the establishment of the English Education Act of 1835 by Baron Macaulay, who proposed that English language and literature would be instrumental in creating a “class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,” British book imports to India gradually increased, and between 1850 and 1900, printed matter from Britain constituted almost 95 percent of all book imports into India (Joshi, 1998, p. 207). Initially, the colonial government encouraged publishers and booksellers in Britain to produce and export paperback editions to India by offering financial incentives. Gradually, as English-language literacy spread throughout urban Indian centers of commerce and politics, the growing numbers of readers in India became a highly lucrative market for British publishers. Colonial policies that elevated the English language over vernacular languages and the subsequent steady flow of printed material from Britain into India point to the potentially powerful effects of cultural and economic imperialism. However, Joshi argues that archival records of import statistics maintained during colonialism document
the conditions of the colonial market, not the precise content of this market or
the “archaeology of consumption” that emerged due to the creative agency
expressed by Indian readers.

Turning to reading data contained within book advertisements and book reviews
published in Indian newspapers between 1861 and 1881, Joshi demonstrates that
contrary to the elitist/ethnocentric model of citizenship propagated in colonial
education policies, urban Indians did not seek out those novels the colonial
administration listed as ideal instruments to inculcate the best “English” values
among the natives:

For one, the “good” English novels that were part of the colonial curriculum and
were entrusted with creating an Indian who was English in “taste, in opinions, in
morals, and in intellect” were in practice not the novels sought out by Indian
readers for leisure reading. The canon of popular literature and the books most
avidly and spontaneously consumed by Indian readers were increasingly disjunct
from those prescribed by the Department of Public Instruction. (p. 204)

Throughout the colonial period, Indian readers avidly sought out sensational,
gothic, and melodramatic serial novels – middle-brow and pulp fiction – rather
than novels authored by Dickens, Austen, Eliot, Thackeray, Meredith, and the
Brontës, which the colonial elites held in high esteem. Rejecting the confining
codes of high realism in “good” English novels, Indian readers enthusiastically
consumed anti-realist literary forms because these fictional genres shared a
symbolic and structural affinity with older Indian literary forms, and as such
“paradoxically bridged the gulf between the premodern world and modernity”
(p. 213). These anti-realist tales that were reminiscent of pre-modern Indian
tales, myths, and epics permitted Indian readers entry into their fantasy worlds
with few cross-cultural restrictions. Furthermore, numerous books of such minor
authors as G. W. M. Reynolds, Marion Crawford, Marie Corelli, and G. P. R.
James were translated into Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil, Kannada, and
Telugu, thus reaching a much wider audience of Indian readers than the popu-
lace that could read in English. Joshi argues that ultimately, on probing the
interstices between colonial policies and native readers’ responses, scholars will
have to acknowledge that the success of the novel and the emergence of the
leisure reading public in India are rooted in the “failure of British high culture to
penetrate fully the Indian marketplace of ideas” (p. 216). In Joshi’s historical
analysis of colonial interventions into India’s reading culture, Indian readers’
subtle yet significant practices of counterproduction became evident in their
selective appropriation of specific forms of colonial modernity that could be
easily assimilated into pre-existing indigenous imaginary landscapes.

What if my project’s analysis of leisure reading moved from one historical
site, which precipitated cross-cultural negotiations between West and non-West,
to another historical moment in India’s reading culture, one that points to the
contentious debates that took place over gender, class, and women’s consumption
of pulp fiction *within* Indian communities? As Priva Joshi’s work demonstrates, the Indian reading public’s tastes for fiction subtly subverted the priorities of colonial imperatives to a certain degree. However, as fiction reading spread rapidly in the early part of the twentieth century, urban Indian readers’ voracious appetite for pulp novels did not go unnoticed by elite Indian male intellectuals, who were at the vanguard of creating a nationalist, anti-colonial culture for the Indian middle classes. In the southern state of Tamilnadu, a flood of novels, including adaptations and translations of popular British detective, romance, and melodrama series fiction, deluged Tamil society in the mid-1910s. Analyzing editorials, essays, and advertisements pertaining to fiction reading in Tamil periodicals between 1910 and 1930, Venkatachalapathy (1997) documents the reception accorded to vernacular fiction that closely imitated the styles of Western fiction among Tamil community leaders, writers, poets, and politicians.

Venkatachalapathy notes that Indian male public intellectuals expressed alarm and deep concern for the damaging effects that fiction reading would have on the average “gullible” reader, who supposedly lacked the critical skills to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Arguing that serial fiction would destroy Indian culture, these intellectuals argued that newly available popular pulp novels would only encourage unbridled Western materialism, corrupt spirituality, promote the use of poor language, and eventually limit the range of vocabulary used in Indian prose and poetry. One leading Tamil writer, who had no reservations about the impact of cheap novels on Tamil literary production, wrote unequivocally: “Contemporary novels spread the habits, customs, and attitudes of foreign countries and send the Tamil people tumbling into the abyss of immorality. The Tamil people who know not the true novel are gobbling up this trash like fowls eating termites” (quoted in Venkatachalapathy, 1997, p. 59).

Drawing attention to the gendered discourse that characterized intellectuals’ strident criticism of fiction reading, Venkatachalapathy writes that the most scathing comments in Tamil periodicals were reserved for the devastating impact sensational escapist narratives would have on “Indian women”, and hence the very moral fabric of a newly emerging national Hindu culture. As novels were published in increasing numbers and women flocked to read them, discourse in Tamil periodicals on women’s fiction reading became deeply implicated within Indian elite males’ fears over the unshackling of Indian women’s sexuality by colonial modernity, a contaminating force that had the potential to fracture the essence of Hindu identity. In one text on Tamil womanhood, a prominent Tamil writer went so far as to entreat women not to physically “touch” these tales of titillation: “Young women should not be permitted to hear titillating stories, pseudo-novels, and other such stuff, nor should they even touch these books. Parents should take special care in this regard…” (quoted in Venkatachalapathy, 1997, p. 62). Furthermore, Tamil authors who reproduced the styles of Western pulp fiction in vernacular novels, defended their work by strategically deploying women’s sexual subjectivity as the litmus test for claiming respectability:
“Dear readers, like my other novels this one too does not contain any repulsive aspects or words that are not fit to be read by chaste women” (quoted in Venkatachala pathy, 1997, p. 64). Following the agenda outlined by community leaders, elders in families, pandits, and officials in educational institutions began to forbid young women from reading fiction, and strove to prevent women’s access to novels.

On shifting from one cross-cultural historical experience, which engendered the formation of an Indian reading public under conditions of Western domination, to another “internal” historical articulation, we see that Indian women readers struggled with the ideological authority of patriarchal discourses; ideas of besieged female sexuality and endangered Hindu morality became vehicles to convey male elites’ passion for preserving the authenticity of indigenous culture. Middle-class Indian women’s early leisure reading experiences thus represented a gendered form of resistance against structures of domination on two levels – against high culture Western modernity and against the Indian patriarchal power structure that sought to control “native” women. Together, these two contexts point to the intricate associational network of historical events and discourses that organize the trajectories of contemporary cultural phenomena.

On returning to my project’s goal – investigating Indian women’s pleasure in consuming imported English-language romance fiction in postcolonial India – we can infer from the above discussion that audience ethnographies cannot be coded as naive voyages of discovery or recovery that hinge only upon the empiricist desire to reveal “real” (and contemporary) women informants’ oppositional forms of resistance. A thick ethnographic reconstruction of contemporary reading practices in India would have to acknowledge, at the outset, that fiction reading is embedded within and shaped by the historical constitution of the Western text/non-Western audience relationship in colonial India. Regardless of the kinds of empirical data I hoped to gather in the field, data that would be eventually analyzed as evidence of resistance, submission, or coping mechanisms, my discussion of the subject positions occupied by Indian women romance readers had to engage with prior historical articulations against Western imperialism and local patriarchy.

While an extended discussion of young Indian women’s interpretations of Western romance fiction is not possible here, a few examples will suffice to illustrate how strategies of resistance or compliance in women’s contemporary leisure practices are suffused with the legacies of historical articulations. Many young Indian women who participated in my ethnographic study argued that they resented their parents’ and English teachers’ repeated admonishments that they should read English-language high culture – Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Jane Austen – to improve their reading comprehension and language skills. In discussions that were held away from the presence of teachers and parents, Indian women’s “hidden transcripts” of resistance located romance reading within socially legitimate practices of literacy (Scott, 1990). Calculately invoking utilitarian, middle-class discourses of productive labor, some women insisted that
authority figures in their lives were ignorant of the redemptive and didactic qualities of formula fiction. Claiming instructional value in romance reading, these women suggested that new and difficult words, descriptions of faraway lands, and details of material life in Western romance novels trained them for careers, marriage, and cosmopolitan life in a rapidly modernizing India. Furthermore, in defense of their romance reading as a culturally permissible ritual, some women claimed a seamless affinity between Western narratives of romance and the elaborate traditions of erotic love and courtship in Indian (Hindu and Islamic) poetry and mythology.

Speaking to the gendered aspects of women’s fiction reading, many concerned parents, elders, and teachers cast young women’s romance reading as a transgressive practice that flouted codes of middle-class feminine respectability. Negotiating parental expectations of appropriate behavior at home, a few young women revealed that they covered romance fiction with newspaper, read in the privacy of their rooms at night, and ensured that their novels were never casually exposed in living and dining room areas. For some Indian women, much like the midwestern sixth grade girls in Finders’ compelling study of underground literacies, these elaborate ruses to hide their novels from teachers and parents became the basis for intense allegiance with other women in their groups (Finders, 1997). Finders’ ethnography of girls’ covert and extracurricular literacy practices shows that complicated expressions of agency and intricate power plays related to reading and writing characterize the subculture of feminine adolescence. Documenting girls’ “literate underlife,” multiple practices of literacy that disrupted sanctioned literacies recognized by authorities, Finders argues that reading and displaying specific magazines and books, writing notes, and preferences for sharing or not sharing written assignments were a crucial means for traversing boundaries between rebellion and conformity. Engaging the histories of Indian women’s postcolonial practices of “literate underlife” deepened my empirical observations of the ambivalent ways in which they maneuvered romance reading to ally with and oppose discourses of authority.

Othering the West: Sexuality, Gender, and Agency

How can ethnographic audience studies in non-Western locations affirm the promise of robust interdisciplinarity? How can feminist audience research on non-Western women’s consumption of Western popular culture enrich and modify existing paradigms of First World–Third World relations? How can historiographed research on women’s encounters with discourses of tradition and modernity challenge the bifurcated ways in which scholars have approached resistance and compliance? Revealing the cross-cutting and overlapping texture of multiple social identities, women audiences’ discourses of resistance can sometimes become complicit with the very ideologies that sanction control over female sexuality. As the ensuing discussion of my research illustrates, non-Western women audiences’
resistance against Western media narratives can simultaneously announce allegiance to another power structure—the troubling resurgence of patriarchal nationalisms based in religious fundamentalism. Identifying one of the greatest paradoxes of the current epoch, Castells (1997, pp. 27–32) observes that the age of globalization, standardization, and universalism is also the age of fragmented and heterogeneous cultural and ethnic nationalisms. By accounting for questions of cross-cultural reception to Western media images in the midst of nationalist discourses, feminist audience studies has much to contribute to ongoing interdisciplinary concerns with Orientalism and Occidentalism, and hence to our knowledge of the discursive relations between East and West.

Edward Said’s controversial Orientalism, a pioneering literary contribution to postcolonial theory, sought to map out Europe’s discursive construction of the Middle East (and the non-West) during Western colonial expansion. Deeply influenced by Foucault’s arguments about the inextricable links among representation, ideology, and cultural/economic practices, Said explicitly approached his work as a political intervention into the relations of domination and hierarchy between East and West. Describing Orientalism as a discursive body of knowledge that facilitated Europe’s colonization of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Said (1978) defines Orientalism, a regime of hierarchical representations that originated during colonial expansion, as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 7). Since the publication of Orientalism in the late seventies, numerous scholars in anthropology, history, comparative literature, film studies, and Women’s Studies have drawn inspiration from Said’s theoretical insights to deconstruct Othered/Orientalist representations of the non-West in a wide range of Western cultural texts.

Gradually, some postcolonial critics also began to modify, challenge, and revamp Said’s paradigm of discursive domination because it subtly reproduced the epistemology of colonial discourse. As these critics argued, Orientalism was a binary, bifurcated mapping of the world into the stable oppositional categories of East–West, representer–represented, and powerful–powerless. Literary critic Porter (1994) writes that in his eagerness to confront Western hegemonic discourses, Said asserted the unified character of diverse European texts and experiences at the expense of counterhegemonic European voices that lingered at the periphery of the colonial empire. Porter suggests that Said’s diagnosis of Orientalism was predicated on the very same problematic representational techniques he identified in Western images of the Middle East: over-generalization of diverse experiences, lack of attention to contradictions within European texts, and homogenization of texts across time and space. Locating the traffic in theory within the currency of academic capital, Aijaz (1994) proposes that Third World intellectuals seeking to position themselves within “hip” First World discourses on marginality (the race–gender matrix) have promoted Orientalism/colonialism as their legitimate badges of oppression. The warm reception accorded to Orientalism and related postcolonial scholarship, according to such critics, has more to do with the petty struggles for legitimacy within the academy rather
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than a radical politics that is genuinely interested in dismantling the West’s cultural and economic domination of the world.

Notwithstanding such cynical musings about the institutionalization of post-colonial studies in the Western academy, other scholars have pointed out that Said’s textual analysis of Orientalism in literature and art elides crucial questions of the colonized subject’s agency. Examining discourses and practices of O ther ing within metropolitan China that were targeted at the Miao, a rural ethnic minority community living on the periphery of China’s economy, Schein (2000) writes, “Pitting East and West as opposites in a dyadic, but unequal relation stopped short at the conclusion that the East is muted and therefore, by extension, rendered incapable of othering” (p. 103). Schein suggests that in accepting Said’s formulation of Orientalism, scholars may unwittingly reproduce the East as a mute, passive participant in history, one that is incapable of producing or negotiating its own discourses of power and hierarchy. In her analysis of Japanese imperialism, Robertson (1995) points out that such critiques as Orientalism privilege Euro-American intellectual and theoretical trends as universal and obfuscate and neutralize the histories and legacies of non-Western imperialisms and associated ‘othering’ practices” (p. 973). Furthermore, as Schein (2000) and Nader (1989) argue, Said’s analysis of Orientalism fails to explore how gender—the trope of the feminine—becomes a compelling cultural hinge of Otherness in Western views of the Eastern world and vice versa.

Underscoring the disturbing tendency in social science media research to ignore the analytical insights of the humanities, Said’s work has been rarely, if ever, discussed in empirical studies of non-Western audiences or in international communication debates that consider the impact of Western media on the Third World. For example, Said’s analysis of the imperial West’s proliferating images and products, discursive representations that predated the global ubiquity of contemporary Western consumer culture is conspicuously missing in John Tomlinson’s critique of “hypodermic needle” models of cross-cultural reading and viewing practices. Although Tomlinson (1992) examines the implications of nationalism for media reception in the Third World, he does not raise the possibility that cultural imperialism can be cross-cut and mediated by Occidentalism, an obvious by-product of the non-Western world’s steady exposure to Western media.

Defining Occidentalism as ideologically related to Orientalism, Chen (1995) writes, “Orientalism has been accompanied by instances of what might be termed Occidentalism, a discursive practice that, by constructing its Western Other, has allowed the Orient to participate actively and with indigenous creativity in the process of self appropriation, even after being appropriated and constructed by Western Others” (pp. 4–5). Chen notes that the seemingly unified discursive practice of Occidentalism exists in a paradoxical relationship to the discursive practices of Orientalism. and in fact, shares with it many ideological techniques and strategies. Urging scholars to examine the mobile meanings and strategic uses of Occidentalism in specific locations, Chen argues that non-Western
discourses on the Western world can become a means to enable liberation or oppression depending on the context within which it is articulated. Distancing himself from postcolonial paradigms that promote Orientalism and cultural imperialism as unified discourses of uninterrupted and homogenous power, Chen writes that Occidentalism, in some cases, can even become a metaphor for liberation from indigenous forms of oppression.

Pointing to the little knowledge we have of how the East constructs the West, Nader (1989) comments that the West has been accessible to non-Western peoples through a wide variety of global media forms, but the contours of Occidentalist discourse still remain a mystery. Lamenting the neglect of ethno-Occidentialism, that is, essentialist renderings of the West by members of the “primitive” non-Western societies that anthropologists have studied, Carrier (1992) argues that although fieldworkers have informally recorded constructions of the West among “natives,” such data has rarely entered the world of published scholarly work. Carrier writes that non-Western informants’ impressions of Western culture have remained scribbles in researchers’ fieldnotes because this data was deemed to be marginal to the larger enterprise of producing knowledge on Western modernity’s impact on Third World societies. Building on recent interdisciplinary responses to Said’s arguments, feminist media ethnographies, which explore the ways in which non-Western audiences read and (mis)read representations of the West, can offer significant contributions to questions of cultural imperialism, gender, and audiences’ agency.

My reception research suggests that the mechanisms underlying the production of Orientalist discourse – homogenizing, distancing, and exoticizing the racial object of desire – were also deeply implicated within non-Western women’s descriptions of Western culture. Young women readers’ interpretations of Western romances certainly showed some evidence of Western media’s hegemonic authority; however, Indian women’s Occidentalist descriptions of Western culture also drew on Hindu nationalist ideologies to construct the West as immoral, inferior, and homogenous. My discussion of Indian women’s views of the West and white women, intertextual interpretations that oscillated between the “fantasy” of romance fiction and the “reality” of the Western world, does not intend to resurrect dyadic, binary ideas of East versus West. Rather, I want to demonstrate the self-conscious, historically specific and contingent ways in which Indian women readers deployed a specific form of Occidentalism – a pre-colonial legacy of Othering the West in India – to explain their tremendously productive responses to Western popular culture.

Middle-class urban Indian women’s fascination for modernity disguised as Western material culture became apparent in their strong dislike for and rejection of mythological/historical romance novels. Most readers expressed their categorical preferences for romance fiction that described contemporary culture in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other metropolitan tourist locations. As Mullika explained, she found the contextual details in historical romance novels “boring, bland, and distracting” and besides, as other readers
claimed, in their rapidly modernizing urban milieu in India, they were better off learning about the codes, practices, and symbols of Western cosmopolitan life. In a style reminiscent of consumer advertising (beauty products, food, and tourism), the “favorite” novels that many readers recommended to me were filled with details of gourmet food, designer clothing, bathing rituals, cruises and vacations, landscaped gardens, and expensive homes. Young women strongly identified with the consumerist middle-class white heroine whose material and romantic fantasies were realized as she is gradually incorporated into the upper-class world of the affluent hero. Speaking in sharply gender-inflected narratives, some women informants argued that Western-style consumerism mapped onto the bodies of white heroines in romance fiction allowed them to pursue individualistic “selfish” pleasure and thus gain temporary respite from the selflessness their families and communities expected from them as dutiful, honorable daughters.

Although Indian women expressed unqualified admiration for Western consumerism, their interpretations of the West shifted when they began sharing their opinions on courtship and sexuality in Western romance fiction. Explaining their reasons for turning to these novels for relaxation and entertainment, some women insisted that these “simple” stories allowed them escape from the restrictive norms of middle-class Hindu femininity that constrained the possibilities of romance in their own lives. I soon learned that Indian women readers’ identification of romance fiction as “simple” was an insider classification that had little to do with my own judgment of these books as enacting a relatively simple and standard formula. Gently pointing out my mistake, several readers patiently clarified that the stories in Western romance fiction were simple because of the marked absence of secondary characters — parents, community members, family, and clergy — who exerted pressure on the heroes and heroines to conform to traditions or social conventions. Contrasting the unbounded quality of white heroines’ pursuit of romance with the complexities and tensions of accommodating religious, class, and ethnic boundaries in their own lives, some women insisted that courtship in Western culture was a matter of free choice. Individuals in Western culture, some women claimed, had no obligations to family or kin, and did not have to fear isolation, exile or loss of family support because the penalties for disregarding tradition were non-existent or minimal. Seamlessly conflating fiction with reality, Indian women readers produced Occidentalism here through their construction of romance novels as transparent representations that reflected the West as a homogenous cultural space where social differences and hierarchies were invisible and easily surmounted.

If the fiction of romance in the West as a practice that transcended socioeconomic hierarchies proved to be convincing to women, interestingly, they scornfully dismissed other ingredients of fictive representations in the very same popular novels as unrealistic fantasy. Women’s skeptic evaluations of Western romance fiction as perpetuating “false” and inaccurate images, which distorted the disturbing truths they knew about the West, revolved around white heroines’
virginal persona and the requisite happy endings that promised to last forever. Challenging the veracity of fictional descriptions of white heroines’ sexual innocence, several women were surprised to hear that romance fiction was popular among women in many Western countries – this particular piece of fiction, according to them, bore little resemblance to their knowledge of “real” white women’s sexuality. Several young women argued that, contrary to the representations of virginal white heroines in romance fiction, “real” white women were immoral and sexually promiscuous. In women’s ideological distilling of Occidentalist difference, white women, in their essentialized and intractable Otherness, became problematic symbols of unregulated Western modernity.

Similarly, the happy endings in romance fiction became another site of Othering where women intertextually referred to “credible” sources of reality (the news, relatives living in the West, and travelers’ stories) to foreground their concerns about the lack of morality in Western culture. Some readers argued that the “objective” news information they had about AIDS, divorces, teenage pregnancies, and child abuse in many Western nations exposed the happy ending in romance fiction as pure farce, a mere figment of authors’ imagination. Women’s discussions about moral chaos in Western culture were frequently accompanied by contrasting statements about the superior stability of Indian culture – Indian marriages lasted forever and Indian families were close, supportive, and united. Previous research shows that such constructions of the West as culturally/morally inferior exist across regional, ethnic, and class boundaries in India. In her ethnography of Indian viewers’ responses to television, feminist anthropologist Mankekar (1999) recounts that working-class and lower-middle-class viewers who lived in and around New Delhi in North India passionately defended India’s greatest strengths as located in the loving and enduring Indian family and the loyal Indian wife and mother. Mankekar’s informants asserted their national identity by comparing the superior quality of moral life in India to the immoral and decadent West.

My informants’ Occidentalist discourse, perceptually filtered through their immersion in Western popular literature, offer a counterpoint to Said’s discussion of Orientalism. As critics of Orientalism have suggested, we have to account for the possibility that the West may become the Othered object of its own Others. What are the implications of Indian romance readers’ Othering of the West for debates over cultural imperialism? Demonstrating the importance of approaching cultural imperialism as multi-layered and multi-dimensional, Indian women’s responses demonstrated the power of Western culture at the level of fantasies related to transnational consumerism, but on another level, in the realm of the private sphere – family, kinship, and moral character – the West became an object of contempt and scorn. However, before feminist ethnographers prematurely celebrate non-Western women audiences’ critical observations about Western culture as resistance against cultural imperialism, they would have to “radically contextualize” the oppositional content of such Occidentalist responses (Ang, 1996, p. 70).
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Advocating for deep contextualization in ethnography, Carrier (1992) writes that if scholars want to avoid essentializing concepts such as Occidentalism, what we discover in fieldwork must be situated against the backdrop of local structures and processes: “Attention to relationships will help sensitize researchers to just how a particular society is linked to the larger world. Just as important, it will help motivate researchers to recognize the incongruities in what they observe” (p. 206). On applying Carrier’s advice about deep contextualization to Indian women’s statements about the West, we can begin to understand the contradictory impulses in audiences’ resistance to structures of power. When situated against the social fabric of elders’, parents’, and teachers’ discourses of disapproval, my informants’ Occidentalist responses can be interpreted as a strategic form of emotional justification. While they readily agreed to interviews, some women were eager to reassure me (and other authority figures) that their absorption and pleasure in reading romance fiction would not transform them into sexually active “white women.” Many women spoke about the subversive tactics—hiding romance novels in textbooks, reading books when parents were away at work, and combining visits to lending libraries with other womanly/domestic chores—they had devised so they could avoid constant surveillance. Reading romance fiction thus allowed these Indian women to partially resist norms of chaste Hindu middle-class femininity, yet in order to minimize and distance their feelings of guilt they turned to Occidentalism. Transposing promiscuous sexuality onto white women’s bodies becomes a strategic defense to repress feelings of guilt, experience moral superiority, and respond to charges that these sexually explicit narratives could corrupt their minds.

Going beyond the immediate milieu of their experiences within families and communities, women’s Occidentalism is also related to the ideological context of middle-class Hindu nationalism. Over the past decade, the exclusionary myths of religious Hindu fundamentalism have gained a remarkable foothold among the Hindu middle classes. Tensions around religion, communalism, and culture have become highly public issues in India, especially since the early nineties with the outbreak of violence and rioting between Hindus and Muslims during the Babri Masjid incident (Appadurai & Breckenridge, 1995: Basu et al., 1993; Basu, 1996; Nandy et al., 1995; Rajagopal, 1996; Setalwad, 1996). The Babri Masjid or Ramjanamboomi incident took place on December 6, 1992, when a mob of Hindus belonging to various political and religious groups destroyed a mosque in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. Religious leaders, who coordinated the destructive campaign, claimed that the mosque had been built by Muslim invaders on a sacred site that was the original birthplace of the Hindu god Ram (Basu et al., 1993, p. viii). Since the Babri Masjid incident, the Bharatiya Janata Party (the Hindu nationalist party), and other associated Hindu revivalist organizations have been gaining political power and popularity among Hindu communities. Promoting Occidentalist views of the West, Hindu fundamentalist politicians and clergy have celebrated the enduring chastity and fidelity of the loyal Indian wife and mother, whose virtue, they have argued, distinguishes India from the West.
Analyzing contemporary Hindu nationalism in India and its continuities with nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-colonial struggles, feminist scholars have critiqued the patriarchal representation of Indian womanhood that male social reformers strategically constructed to counter colonialism (Kandiyoti, 1991; Katrak, 1989; Mazumdar, 1994). Eager to challenge British colonizers’ Orientalist descriptions of Indian culture as barbaric and heathen, upper-caste Indian male reformers began to fashion a rhetoric of defense that emphasized cultural traditions, gender relations, and family values. As carriers of tradition and symbols of India’s resilient national spirit in the face of numerous invasions, middle-class Indian women were glorified as devoted mothers and wives. Chatterjee (1990) locates the idealization of middle-class Hindu women as pure/virtuous within the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which proposed a powerful distinction between “inner/outer worlds” and correspondingly between “home, private/material world, public.” Seen as part of home, the private world, Indian women became symbols of this unpolluted inner life, and hence the ground for establishing difference from Western society. Even more importantly, as Chatterjee notes, the desexualization of the bourgeois Hindu woman in post-independent India was achieved by displacing active female sexuality onto European and local racially and economically marginalized Others. The purity of the upper-caste Hindu woman was pitted against two opposing images—the vulgar and sexually accessible low-caste, poor Indian woman (Rege, 1995) and the immoral and sexually licentious Western woman (Chatterjee, 1990). Middle-class Indian women readers’ Occidentalist mapping of promiscuous sexuality on white women’s bodies is thus a pernicious legacy of nationalist ideology that continues to inflect numerous vernacular popular culture accounts of wholesome Indian romances, families, and communities.

Indian women’s reliance on Occidentalist discourses to defuse criticism of their romance reading and declare their loyal alliance to their own culture reveals the contradictory qualities of audiences’ resistance. From a feminist standpoint, Indian women’s contrastive strategy of Othering the West is fraught with contradictions: seeking distance from the “promiscuity” of white women reiterates the very forms of control over their sexuality that they seek to disturb and rupture. Occidentalism and Orientalism are thus discourses of power that ultimately serve as mechanisms of control over women in the West and the East; both these discourses of domination use the comparative method of describing women’s inferior status in the East or West to convince “native” women that they should be content with the status quo because they are “better off” or superior to “those” women. Discussing the ways in which covert and overt nationalisms deploy cultural comparison (Orientalist and Occidentalist) to control women, Nader (1989) writes, “Misleading cultural comparisons support contentions of positional superiority, which divert attention from the processes, which are controlling women in both worlds” (p. 323). To date, Occidentalism may not have the global economic power of Orientalism; however, it does have power within specific national contexts where dominant religious groups gain power by promoting a
return to the glorious days of tradition, a period when the nation in the guise of the “native” woman was unpolluted by imperialism.

The Politics of Representation and Resistance

How can concerned critics advance the field of media studies in a manner that does not silently reiterate racial/neocolonial power and privilege? To what extent does the promotion or marginalization of specific research agendas, at the expense of paying attention to the locations and ideological positions from which we speak, legitimize the hegemony of the West? These questions demand a candid assessment of academic fashion’s significant impact on emergent intellectual developments and debates. The interrelated ingredients that drive academic fashion in the First World – the economy of celebrity stardom and fan clubs, a market-driven university system, a promotional ethos of worship and attack, and the hierarchical circulation of cultural capital – can often militate against cultural and media studies’ fundamental interests in encouraging scholarship that is sensitive to global geopolitics (Moran, 1998). Citing acute self-reflexivity in knowledge production as one of the driving forces in a postcolonial approach to communication and rhetoric, Shome (1996) urges scholars to continuously situate academic discourses within the larger political and economic practices of nations:

What is the ideology that operates in us that makes research agenda A seem more significant than research agenda B? How are we always already “interpellated” into examining A but not B? What does that interpellation say about our role in reproducing and participating in the hegemonic global domination of the rest by the West? (p. 46)

Examine the challenges that globalization poses for research practices and theorization in feminist communication scholarship, Hegde (1998) writes, “Research is an expression of our location in a world connected by lines of power and cultural asymmetry” (p. 285). Taken together, Shome and Hegde point to the political critique of knowledge as the foundation for creating an academic space where scholars interrogate the modes through which we establish disciplinary authority. By unpacking the assumptions that invisibly guide the trajectories of our research practices and rejecting monologic models of writing and speaking, media scholars can lay “the epistemic basis for a genuine multiculturalism” (Hegde, 1998, p. 275) that facilitates the democratization of knowledge production.

This essay is one effort towards “decentering” and foregrounding global and racial hegemony in recent efforts to shape agendas for future critical media studies research. Predicting the premature death of audience studies because we believe the field has produced “enough” knowledge of media reception or because we cannot imagine better ways of conducting empirical research only reiterates
a limited vision of multiculturalism that does not question power differentials. Recognizing the urgency of "outing" the silent ways in which racial privilege permeates popular media, Shome (2000) calls upon communication scholars to deconstruct the ways in which "whiteness remains the organizing principle of the social fabric and yet remains masked because of the normativity that this principle acquires in the social imaginary" (p. 367). Destabilizing the invisible authority of whiteness, as Shome argues, can perhaps propel whites to begin acknowledging their privileges as members of a globally dominant group, even if they accrue these privileges unintentionally.

Similarly, I suggest that feminist media critics in the First World (regardless of racial/gender affiliations) must be aware of which specific audiences' voices and experiences we have recorded before we begin to sing requiems for the audience or recommend a shift to other "more important" objects of study. Research in audience studies has barely scratched the surface of the exploding mediascape in numerous non-Western locations where "global audiencehood" (Jhuli, 1998) is implicated simultaneously within a range of Western media and local, vernacular cultural productions. Highlighting the widespread global media presence of Western nations, a phenomenon that we have only begun to investigate, Said (1993) comments, "Rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there is today from America to the rest of the world" (p. 319). Recuperating the insights of postmodernism and postcolonialism for a more nuanced feminist analysis of women's lived experiences in the era of globalization, Hegde (1998) writes, "The commitment to globalize the theoretical scope in communication needs an engagement with the meaning of experience" (p. 287).

Rather than stretching, adding, or extending the canon whereby the problematic contours of the canon itself remain unchanged, how can audience studies in non-Western locations resuscitate the practice of feminist media ethnography? Drawing from constructive critiques of audience research, feminist ethnographers can avoid the uncritical reproduction of well-rehearsed, banal mantras of resistance, agency, and the active audience. A feminist rethinking of audience research in postcolonial contexts would emphasize the vital importance of engaging local historical discourses as a constitutive element of women's national/gender identities. Historicizing middle-class Indian women's romance reading shows us that contemporary cultural practices in urban India are shaped by and articulated within the ideological contexts of colonialism and nationalism. On the one hand, despite the obvious evidence of cultural imperialism that could be inferred from the ubiquitous material presence of global Western media, Indian women readers' consumption of imported serial romance fiction belongs to a history of Indians' subtle resistance against the civilizing mission of colonial high culture. On the other hand, unlike Indian men, the reading of pulp fiction for Indian women, who are interpellated as symbols of purity in nationalist ideology, invoked resistance against two structures of power — against colonialism and religious patriarchy. The feminist critical enterprise in the non-Western world.
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as Chow (1993) points out, has to contend with more than the legacies of colonialism alone. "While for the non-Western world that something is imperialism, for the feminist it is also patriarchy." (p. 59).

Moreover, a critical feminist ethnography of media reception must acknowledge that the "process of weaving in and out of gendered systems of meaning is punctuated with contestation and resistance, as well as acquiescence" (Hegde, 1998, p. 288). Outlining an anti-essentialist approach to studying women's experiences, Hegde writes, "It is important when portraying the material conditions of cultural others that we do not impose a false unity by essentializing a cultural core and thereby produce lives as artifacts or, for example, romanticize the woman as victim (Hegde, 1998, p. 289). Along with exploring women's resistance to global commodity culture, feminist media ethnographies should also document the constraints on women's agency, that is, our analyses must interrogate how equally important and sometimes class/religious/national identities are woven together in the subjective space that constitutes "woman." In India, as well as in other postcolonial locations, religious nationalism, which draws from the gender ideologies of nineteenth-century nationalism, is masquerading as a grassroots response against Western imperialism and globalization. In Indian women's active engagement with virginal white heroines as false reflections of real white women's promiscuous sexuality, romance reading becomes a site of mis-identification and Othering; these popular culture texts provoked readers to resurrect the binary configurations of East and West, which are embedded in Occidentalist and Orientalist ideologies. Although middle-class Indian women's efforts to read romance novels signified resistance against norms that attempted to control women's sexual pleasure and agency, articulating their resistance through an emphasis on the immorality of "foreign/Western women" simultaneously endorsed Occidentalist Hindu nationalism.

For postcolonial feminist ethnographers, scholarship in a multicultural context thus cannot be limited to the deconstruction of Western imperialism alone if the goal of our audience research in the non-West is to engage politically with difference – across nations, but also within the hegemonic context of the nation itself. Navigating the complex relationality between local culture and global media flows, postcolonial feminism's deconstruction of Eurocentrism and the emancipatory patina of globalization must include a vigorous critique of nationalism's limited promises of salvation (Shohat, 1998, p. 52). Theories of the "Big Bad West" cannot explain why Indian women, who repeatedly expressed a desire for freedom and escape from the demands of family and community, should resort to nationalism's Occidentalist renderings of the West. Distinguishing themselves from "real" white women while identifying with white heroines, these readers insisted that romance reading was theoretical knowledge in the service of future matrimony (not for pre-marital sex). Radical contextualization of audience ethnographies in postcolonial locations thus involves probing the problematic ideologies of colonial regimes, neo-colonial economies, and local nationalisms. Challenging nationalism along with imperialism becomes a crucial task for
postcolonial feminist media ethnographers because “native chauvinism” (Dirlik, 1990, p. 401) with its regressive models of “native” women’s identities and reversed binaries of “us” versus “them” only reproduces the epistemological legacies of colonial modernity.

References


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