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Feminist Media Criticism and Feminist Media Practices

By S. CRAIG WATKINS and RANA A. EMERSON

ABSTRACT: This article explores four thematic areas in feminist media criticism. First, it considers how gender informs norms and values that pattern industry production practices and conventions. Next, it explores how feminist criticism has influenced one of the emergent areas in media scholarship: reception studies. This particular subgenre of media studies examines how audiences actively engage the mediascape around them. Third, the focus shifts to the rising influence of black feminist criticism, which has identified many of the tensions within feminism and also has pointed toward new modes of media criticism and practice. Fourth, the article examines how feminism has informed the study of masculinity. The final section of the article identifies and briefly discusses two areas that will forge new directions in feminist media studies: the burgeoning sex industry and globalization.

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FEMINISM has had a considerable effect on the field of media studies. In addition to influencing how journalists, scholars, and consumers of media read and think about gender, feminism has also influenced the images, narratives, and genre forms produced in the media culture industry.

The present article centers on two broad areas of the feminist enterprise: media studies and practice. Feminists have established a body of reading strategies, analytical frameworks, and theoretical models for better understanding the crucial role that media perform in the reproduction of gender inequality. For example, feminism helps cultivate a society that is more cognizant of the social and political implications of gender role stereotyping in popular media discourse. Still, we also recognize that feminist politics have never been simply about criticism but fundamentally about effecting social change. Therefore, at various points in this article, we also focus on how feminist practices labor to create counternarratives and counterrepresentations that contest male regimes of cultural production and empower women to use media for their own interests and pleasure. In other words, we examine the efforts of feminists to carry out their own distinct forms of political intervention.

Feminist media criticism and practice began as a challenge to the culture industry's misrepresentations of women. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, popular media culture came under increasing attack as a particularly pernicious site of gender inequality. Feminists charged,

for instance, that gender role stereotyping in television and film normalized the dominant cultural values and customs that legitimate male domination of women. As the second wave of feminism was hitting its stride in the early 1970s, therefore, many participants in the movement turned to the field of popular media as a prominent, even preferred site of social and political struggle.

Throughout the 1970s, several studies analyzed popular media depictions of women, often with strikingly similar results (Dominick and Rauch 1972; McNeil 1974). The studies found that women tended to be depicted in subordinate roles (for example, housewives, secretaries), whereas men were often portrayed in roles of authority (for example, household breadwinners, professionally employed). Furthermore, the studies reported that images of women were more likely to be set in the domestic sphere, whereas workplace and other public settings were more likely characterized as male spaces. Moreover, advertising on television typically targeted women only in relation to purchasing household products and appliances (such as detergent, refrigerators) that reinforced their homemaker status or cosmetics designed to make them more attractive to men.

Feminist analysis of the dominant news media organizations revealed that issues salient in the lives of women—employment and wage discrimination, spousal abuse, child care—were generally marginalized, if not ignored outright. Conversely, the issues most likely to be

designated as newsworthy—the economy, electoral politics, crime—typically involved male authority figures. Analysts of news media consistently reported that men were far more likely than women to be selected as media commentators and sources (Zeidenberg 1990). One such study concluded, “Men in our culture not only control news discourse but are authorized to know more than women” (Reeves and Campbell 1994, 65). In addition, as radical feminist groups began to employ dramatic forms of protest in order to highlight gender inequality, many media organizations tended to either vilify or trivialize the feminist movement (Gans 1979; Gitlin 1980; Douglas 1994). For example, news media organizations would focus on sensationalized images of “bra burners” rather than the issues that drove women to dramatize their protest politics.

It is within this context that various incarnations of a feminist-inspired media criticism and practice began to develop. While media criticism has been especially prominent in academic circles, more direct forms of intervention have been situated within the media industry. Even though these two forms of feminist intervention seem unrelated, in truth, a symbiotic relationship has emerged such that an instance of one can inform the other. In other words, feminist media criticism identifies some of the salient issues, themes, and conflicts that require a more direct challenge on the part of media practitioners. Similarly, as feminist media workers struggle to redefine the gendered

norms and customs of the media industry, they enrich the development of feminist theory and media studies.

In this article, we explore some of the major currents in feminist media criticism today. Due to space limitations, we highlight four specific topical areas where media and feminist studies intersect. First, we consider how gender informs the industrial processes and production logic that shape network television. In this section, we discuss some of the gender norms and values that penetrate and pattern industry production practices and conventions. Next, we explore how feminist criticism has influenced one of the emergent areas of media scholarship: reception studies. This particular subgenre of media studies examines how audiences actively engage the mediascape around them. Third, we turn our focus to the rising influence of black feminist criticism, which has identified many of the tensions within feminism and also has pointed toward new modes of media criticism and practice. Finally, we look at how feminism has informed the study of not only femininity but masculinity, too.

FEMINIST CRITICISM AND THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

Any serious feminist analysis of the media industry must devote considerable attention to the organizational milieu in which media products are created. Since the late 1970s, network television has been in a constant state of flux due to social, technological, and industry change.

For example, increasing patterns of female labor force participation have redefined when and how women watch television and the degree to which they are identified as a niche market (Santi 1979, 61). Additionally, technological innovations like cable television, the VCR, and the personal computer vie fiercely with conventional sources of home entertainment. As the industry has been forced to reinvent itself in the face of constant change, its programming strategies and practices have changed also.

Network television, like its cable competitor, has shifted almost exclusively to the narrowcast philosophy of programming, meaning that executives now design programs to capture specific viewer demographics. Much of network television programming targets white, middle-class men and women in order to attract the greatest advertising revenue. Because women constitute the largest share of television viewers, they have emerged as an especially coveted demographic. As feminist values and beliefs have become more broadly disseminated, the televisual representations of women have become more varied, too. Whereas the dominant television image of women before the 1970s was the happy homemaker, current female roles include a greater range of paid professionals (for example, lawyers, judges, police).

Although the images of women have undergone some changes, the organizational structure and culture of the television industry have proved much more difficult to alter. In fact, the very foundation of

television programming is shaped by gendered assumptions, values, and beliefs. Gender structures the time and space coordinates that determine network programming schedules (for example, daytime, prime time, and late night), genre forms (for example, soap operas, cop shows, situation comedies), and character types (for example, dumb blondes, male hunks). Although image-based studies and content analysis illuminate specific patterns in media representations of women, they fail to examine the organizations that produce media content.

Take, for example, Julie D'Acci's study (1994) of the popular television show *Cagney & Lacey*. The initial conceptualization of the program challenged conventional codes of femininity insofar as it featured two female lead characters in a traditionally male-oriented genre, the cop show. In addition to marking the characters with feminist sensibilities, the initial episodes of *Cagney & Lacey* pivoted around dramatic issues and situations—violence, antagonistic commanding officers, and action sequences—that typify the cop show genre. Many of the key scenes were set in the workplace or some other public sphere, and it was not unusual for the two female leads to forcefully apprehend criminals.

D'Acci notes, however, that as the show's producers and writers struggled to maintain viable ratings in the face of competing programs that offered more traditional gender portrayals of women, *Cagney & Lacey* shifted from a cop show to a more traditionally defined woman's program. As a result, the show underwent a

major overhaul. Among many other things, the topical issues featured in the show became more exploitative and sensational (such as rape, spousal abuse, pornography); the characters more stereotypically feminine (for example, in terms of their hairstyle or clothing); and the settings for scenes more domestic (many scenes were set in the home). She also notes that the very tone of the show changed as the producers sought less action-oriented sequences (considered too masculine) and more dialogue between the characters as a way to highlight their emotional side and personal lives (such as their romantic relationships).

The peculiar journey of *Cagney & Lacey* is not distinct but, rather, exemplifies the profound ways in which gender ideology shapes television production practices. More generally, the show demonstrates how representations of women are governed by genre conventions, competitive constraints, and audience familiarity with and presumed affinity for stereotypical codes of femininity.

Equally important, programs like *Cagney & Lacey* demonstrate how elements of feminist discourse have successfully pierced the corridors of network television. Still, the industry's appropriation of feminism has been selective. Despite a polyphony of voices, ideas, and perspectives that make up a very multifaceted and multilayered feminist movement, television writers and executives customarily appropriate elements of only the liberal feminist tradition to inform their creation of feminist-inflected shows, characters, and

narrative situations. But, as critics within the feminist movement argue, because the liberal tradition is defined mostly by white, middle-class women, it often fails to acknowledge the race and class differences between women. Popular programs like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Ally McBeal*, reflecting liberal feminist ideals, highlight issues like equal pay, occupational mobility, and protection against sexual harassment. Although these issues are important to all women, these shows tend to reflect racial and class biases insofar as they ignore topics like the problem of jobs that pay inadequate wages and the specific stereotypes and forms of discrimination encountered by poor women and women of color.

The limited employment of women in decision-making roles is a key element in understanding how gender inequality is woven into the media industry. In their study of gender stratification in the film industry, Denise and William Bielby found that, as the screenwriting profession has become more prestigious and lucrative, it has also transitioned from a female- to male-dominated occupation (Bielby and Bielby 1996). During the silent film era, women dominated the screenwriting profession. However, the introduction of sound and other technological, social, and economic innovations led to the industry's transformation toward male domination. Bielby and Bielby write that "as filmmaking became more industrialized and rationalized, men dominated key roles in corporate channels of production, distribution, and exhibition"

(252). Eventually, screenwriting underwent a process of masculinization, suggesting that it became not only male dominated but also more likely to reward those individuals who expressed masculine sensibilities in popular genres like action-adventure and science fiction.

MEDIA RECEPTION

The systematic study of media reception is recent. While the rise of cultural and media studies was quite proficient in raising questions regarding what Stuart Hall (1977) terms the "ideological effect" of the media, questions regarding how individuals receive and use media remained largely underprobed. Feminist media criticism began to develop important frameworks for studying audiences and their media reception practices.

Feminist film criticism employed the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud and his follower Jacques Lacan in order to demonstrate how the camera presumes a male viewer and positions the audience in an inherently masculine manner. In her groundbreaking essay, "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey introduced the notion of the male gaze in feminist film theory. Although her work focused on the cinema, its implications for media reception studies were far broader. Because this gendered gaze privileged the point of view of men, the very process of watching a film was constructed as an essentially male activity. According to this perspective, the masculine gaze so

thoroughly shapes the film-viewing experience that it socializes women into identification and compliance with the very patriarchal values and ideologies that reproduce their marginalized status.

Indeed, many of the earliest theories of media reception assumed that receivers of media content were passive victims, rendered subservient to both the medium and its message. Stuart Hall's influential essay, "Encoding/Decoding" (1980), however, marked an important theoretical shift insofar as it posited that receivers of media are actively involved in the construction of meaning. As researchers sought to more effectively understand the complex process of media reception, the notion of the active female receiver of media came into greater view. In other words, rather than assuming that women internalized images of gender inequality and objectification, this theoretical break compelled media analysts to contemplate the creative ways women engage images of gender subordination.

As the area of media reception continues to flourish, researchers are exploring the different ways in which media have become a central feature of everyday life. Feminists today argue that watching television and films, listening to music, reading the newspaper, and surfing the Internet have the potential to both reproduce and contest gender inequality. As a result of feminist scholarship, we better understand how women selectively use media to make sense of and inform their own lived experiences.

A recent example of such feminist scholarship is Andrea Press and

Elizabeth Cole's ethnographic study (1999) of the ways in which women of different class, religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds respond to and interpret the discourse surrounding the abortion debate in broadcast television movies and shows centered on the topic. The study's most important discovery reveals that the complicated nature of women's opinions on the abortion issue is not accounted for by the for-or-against dichotomy that dominates activist and academic notions of the debate. Press and Cole argue, consequently, that such dichotomous notions of public opinion do not accurately represent the ambivalences regarding abortion that emerge in women's everyday life, of which television viewing and media reception are integral parts.

Like Press and Cole's work, some of the most noteworthy feminist audience studies focus on how television viewing is a gendered practice. Several researchers explore and illuminate the ways in which television and other forms of media function as a site within which the gender order of the household is both contested and reinforced (Seiter 1989; Modleski 1982; Radway 1984; Brunson, D'Acci, and Spigel 1997). One of the most interesting findings suggests that gender hierarchies in the family determine television-viewing patterns. In homes where male control is the norm, gender inequality is a significant influence on the choice of programs to be viewed. The practice of television watching tends to be gender segregated, with mom and kids unable to watch their favorite shows if they conflict with dad's football game or

cop show. In this way, gender inequality in the family serves to restrict the spaces available for women to use the media (Ang 1996).

However, this restriction does not mean that women are excluded from media use altogether. Feminist media criticism investigates the strategic ways girls and women use the media in their everyday lives in order to cultivate personal space, negotiate the broader social issues they face, derive pleasure, and bring their own lived experiences to media consumption. Most compellingly, feminist perspectives on media reception have revealed the ways in which women appropriate the media as a site of meaning construction, actively engaging and, occasionally, contesting images and themes of gender domination. This theme is exemplified in Jane Shattuc's work (1997) on the genre of the daytime television talk show in the 1980s and 1990s. Shattuc argues that this genre provides a space for women to explore in a public forum women's issues that are relegated to the private sphere of the home.

Additionally, the desire for nontraditional media images of women sometimes stimulates collective action. Women viewers have organized national letter-writing campaigns in order to urge television networks to continue broadcasting shows that feature feminist themes, such as *Designing Women* in the 1980s and *My So-Called Life* in the 1990s, which were threatened by cancellation from the prime-time schedule. These organized initiatives illustrate how girls and women may actively struggle against the sexism

and male bias that pervades television programming and often marginalizes the female point of view.

The female-dominated communities that spring up around various sites of media are another example of how women actively engage the popular media terrain. For instance, many young women gathered for “*Melrose Place* nights”—viewing parties at bars, nightclubs, and other hangouts in the mid-1990s. Camille Bacon-Smith’s ethnography (1992) of women’s participation in television “fandom” culture shows how communities that have developed around television shows like *Star Trek* serve not only as sites for women’s collective creative expression but also as spaces for subversive acts of rebellion against dominant society’s norms of women’s behavior.

The Internet is also a site for the development of female communities. The Internet enables large discussion groups to form in relation to a wide range of issues. One Internet discussion group, for example, has formed to debate the soap opera *The Young and the Restless*. In between discussing hairstyles, outfits, and seemingly ridiculous plot twists, the predominantly female subscribers of the list-server frequently criticize the submissive and passive behavior of female characters on the show and ridicule the often hypermasculinized, dominating actions of male characters. Instead of merely accepting the representations of gender relations depicted in the soap opera, the participants in the e-mail discussion bring their own experiences to their viewing. Laura Stempel

Mumford (1995), for example, describes how women reinterpret and appropriate the dominant ideological meanings of daytime soaps and thus find pleasure and enjoyment in viewing them.

In England, Angela McRobbie (1991, 1994) explores how adolescent girls are active participants in the making of popular media culture. McRobbie accurately notes that the scholarly analysis of how youths use style, music, language, and other cultural forms to engage in practices of meaning making, identity formation, and cultural resistance typically focus on young men. Yet girls create and enthusiastically consume a vast popular culture universe—fashion, popular music, dance, and teen magazines—that is distinct and relatively unexplored. Lisa Lewis’s work (1990) on the fans of female rock stars in the 1980s (such as Madonna, Pat Benatar, Tina Turner, and Cyndi Lauper) demonstrates how girls create cultural spaces to construct new modes of expression and identity politics that transgress conventional gender norms and stereotypes.

Although many of these forms of mass consumption may not be called “feminist” by a strict, political definition of the term, they nevertheless reflect sensibilities and practices that are designed to empower women. Instead of supporting the notion that women are mere receptacles for the ideologies disseminated through the media, studies show that media reception is a gendered social practice that can be enabling rather than constraining, empowering rather than oppressive, and active rather than passive.

THE BLACK
FEMINIST CHALLENGE

Black feminists have transformed several fields of academic study and popular discourse, including media studies. These scholars have focused on how media culture and the feminist criticism of it reproduce the continued domination of black, Latina, and Asian women by rendering invisible the intersection of race, class, and gender in their everyday lives. Black feminist criticism forged open space to consider the particular ways black women are represented in public discourse.

For example, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) uses the concept "controlling images" to discuss the politics that shape representations of black women. According to Collins, the images of black women reflect the interlocking processes of race, class, and gender oppression. Images like the mammy (such as "Aunt Jemima"), the jezebel (the highly sexualized black woman), and the welfare mother have become staple icons in the popular mediascape, finding routine expression not only in popular media culture but also in the arena of social policy discourse.

Black feminist criticism also considers how nonwhite women appropriate the sphere of popular media culture to document their own experiences and express distinct, often counterhegemonic, worldviews. For many black women, independent or avant-garde cinema is an especially important space of cultural production. Although the work of filmmakers like Julie Dash, Euzhan Palcy,

Kasi Lemmons, and Darnell Martin goes largely unnoticed, their cinematic visions reflect a desire for alternative representations of black womanhood. *Just Another Girl on the IRT*, directed by Leslie Harris, provided a young black woman's perspective on urban life, a theme whose cinematic treatment was dominated by stories told from the point of view of young black men.

Similar representational strategies of black female cultural producers are apparent in the production of popular music. Angela Davis (1998) discusses the ways in which black women performers utilized the blues as a public space to comment on the social conditions of racism and sexism faced by black women in everyday life. In the same way, black female rhythm and blues singers influenced the popular and commercial trajectory of postwar-era popular American music (Ward 1998). Even though the burgeoning hip-hop scene is typically viewed as a male-dominated terrain of cultural production, young black women have always participated in the evolution of hip-hop culture as rappers (or MCs), DJs, graffiti artists, and less often as B-girls (or breakdancers) (Guevara 1996; Rose 1994).

Several feminist media critics have explored the construction of gender and sex relations in music videos (Kaplan 1987; Rose 1994; Stockbridge 1987). Rana Emerson (1999) argues that black female performers, through music video, address the complex experiences that young black women deal with in society on a day-to-day basis. She

maintains that black women use music video to counter and revise dominant and oppressive notions of black female sexuality.

Although black women are usually cast in a limited range of roles—dancers, models, sex objects, and love interests—some black women performers who have achieved greater creative independence in the music industry use their music videos to express self-determination, strength, and independence. Erykah Badu, Missy “Misdemeanor” Elliot, and Lauryn Hill, all of whom write and produce their own music and often direct their videos, comment, in their work, on the state of male-female relations, efforts to be economically self-sufficient, and the everyday world inhabited by young black women.

Furthermore, Emerson (1999) contends that black women recognize that music services not only male pleasures and desires but female pleasures and desires, too. For example, in the video *Red Light Special* of the rhythm and blues trio TLC, T-Boz, Left-Eye, and Chilli play a game of strip poker with a group of buff-bodied men, who end up as the scantily clad objects of female desire. Instead of constructing a world filtered through a male gaze, the black female performers construct modes of spectatorship that presume female viewers and privilege female-oriented narratives.

Black feminist readings of the gender and sexual politics in black popular culture are especially notable. Bell hooks and Jacquie Jones, for example, examine how forms of black popular culture routinely reproduce

controlling images of black femininity (hooks 1992; Jones 1991). Two of the most vibrant spheres of black cultural production—rap music and black cinema—have generated intense debates regarding the possibilities and problems associated with the commodification of black popular culture (see, for example, Rose 1994; Gray 1995; Watkins 1998). Whereas many analysts view rap music and black cinematic discourse as formations of cultural resistance, black feminists note that hegemonic ideas about gender inform the most popular and most commercially viable aspects of the black culture industry (Lubiano 1991).

For example, the most popular subgenres in the brief history of rap music—message and gangsta—privilege male agency and pleasure. Although themes related to black protest, nationalism, and self-empowerment are prevalent in message rap (Decker 1989; Kelley 1994), the thrust of this subgenre is hyper-masculine insofar as it imagines black political empowerment as a primarily male enterprise. Gangsta rap has been heavily criticized for its misogynistic depictions of women that include demeaning language and acts of violence. Some black feminists note, however, that these and other subgenres of rap music have always been multilayered expressions of youth discourse and, at times, generative of self-criticism, parody, and social critique (Kelley 1994; Rose 1994).

Although analysts examine the expressive forms, styles, and exuberance that characterize rap music, few note how the production sites in

which this form of popular music is produced privilege male producers over their female counterparts. The technological innovations crucial to the production of rap music—digitization, multitrack recording devices, sampling machines, turntables, and video—are largely controlled by men. Consequently, the most important site in rap music—the studio—is constructed as a masculine space, thus limiting, though not negating, the ability of young female cultural producers to assert their creative agency and independence in the production of rap music.

Moreover, as black American cinema has achieved a certain degree of popularity and commercial viability, the emergence of a mostly male-directed black cinematic enterprise raises serious questions regarding black representational politics. Much like the field of rap music, black filmmaking has emerged as a critical space for black cultural production. Popular filmmaker Spike Lee, for example, challenges the racialized practices of the film industry, both the misrepresentation of black Americans and the institutional barriers that restrict black employment opportunities in the industry. Yet, as Lee has appropriated the arena of popular film to engage hegemonic ideas about blackness, his interrogation of dominant gender ideologies is less vigorous. Much like the dominant filmmaking practices he routinely assails, Lee's cinematic imagination is intensely masculine insofar as it typically privileges males as the primary source of narrative agency, employs female characters to introduce sexual

tension, and positions spectators from the perspective of a male gaze (Lubiano 1991; Watkins 1998).

The rise of a vibrant black feminist perspective has broadened the terms of feminist discourse and media criticism. It has brought attention to issues of representation surrounding not only black women in media but also other women, including Asian and Latina Americans. Consequently, this particular tradition of feminist discourse contributes to the struggle to create a more diverse and empowering mediascape for women.

REPRESENTING THE MALE BODY

Much as the study of race (long perceived as the study of blacks, Latinos, and Asians) has led to a more focused interrogation of whiteness, the study of femininity highlights the importance of examining the social construction of masculinity, too. The dominant representations of masculinity vary by industry and genre. For example, television genres such as the cop or detective show, dramatic serial, and broadcast sports programs present men in formulaic gender roles and predictable narrative situations. In cinema, the action-adventure or gangster genre are also predicated on familiar codes of masculinity: strength, violence, and individualism. In television news, men are often cast in the anchor role, thus marking them as the authority figures in the dissemination of news and information.

The action-adventure genre has become a staple in U.S. cinema. This particular genre is predicated on a

Hollywood star system in which the white, heterosexual male has become the chief global icon representing a complex system of ideological meanings and values. Critics contend that the action-adventure genre not only transmits values that reinforce notions of male dominance but also animates discourses about national, racial, and military supremacy (Jeffords 1994).

But if the cinema is a primary site of hegemonic masculinity, the fashion and the advertising industries circulate alternative, if not counter-hegemonic notions of masculinity. In her discussion of visual presentations of the male body, Susan Bordo (1999) writes, "It was male clothing designers who went south and violated really powerful taboos—not just against the explicit depiction of penises and male bottoms but against the admission of all sorts of forbidden 'feminine' qualities into mainstream conceptions of manliness" (168). For example, ads for Calvin Klein products—cologne, blue jeans—depict men in provocative poses that sexualize the male body. The queering, or feminization, of male representations reflects the degree to which ideas about masculinity are constantly in flux, shifting in correspondence with emergent discourses about gender and sexuality.

Differences also proliferate within popular constructions of masculinity. Inevitably, representations of masculinity intersect with changing ideas about race and class. The coding of masculinity in broadcast sports is a prominent example. Research suggests that sports broadcasts employ

different rhetorical and visual strategies in their representation of black and white male athletes. Commonsense ideas about racial biology and difference inform the language that sports commentators use in their description of athletes (Hoberman 1997). For example, commentators frequently portray white athletes as intelligent ("he is a heady ball player"), contemplative ("he studies his opponent's weaknesses"), or hard working ("his work ethic is exemplary"). Conversely, black athletes are typically described along a different axis, usually in relation to their physical bodies ("he is big and strong"), genetic constitution ("his dad was a great athlete"), or athletic attributes ("he is a quick jumper"). Although these rhetorical strategies are commonplace, they nonetheless reveal the extent to which pernicious ideas about racial "otherness" permeate society and the sports broadcasting industry.

Furthermore, the visual strategies employed in sports broadcast media canonize particular images of black masculinity. Because blacks dominate many of the sports that receive extensive television coverage—basketball, football, track—the spectacle of black athletes in motion reinforces commonsense ideas and popular myths about black bodies. The use of technological innovations like slow motion, camera close-ups, and instant replay not only fetishizes the black male body but also reinforces and popularizes the belief that blacks are genetically predisposed to succeed in certain areas (athletics) and fail in others (academics). Interrogation of such media strategies as

well as masculinity enhances our understanding of how gender differences are culturally constructed rather than naturally produced.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this article has been to highlight some of the major developments that shape feminist media criticism and practice. Although we focused primarily on the television and film industries, we recognize that feminist scholarship includes analysis of other media spheres, too. For example, because broadcast radio represents the first electronic form of mass media and popular culture, its role in shaping the genres (for example, family sitcom, detective show) and gender role types (for example, housewife, male-breadwinner) on which television and film representations were established cannot be overlooked (Hilmes 1997).

Today, the field of feminist media criticism is a thriving enterprise. Although several emergent areas—youth culture, postfeminism, women-owned media, and women's athletics—promise to forge new directions in feminist media studies, we briefly highlight two areas that will certainly shape that future: the burgeoning sex industry and globalization.

Perhaps no issue reflects the tensions within and about feminism more than pornography. While women's attitudes regarding pornography vary considerably, two contingencies of feminist discourse shape the debate. Feminists who oppose pornography argue that it reinforces

male supremacy, objectifies women, and reproduces gender inequality (MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997). Most important, the movement against pornography contends that the issue is not sex but, rather, power and the civil rights of women.

There is, however, a divide within feminism that also generates concern about efforts to outlaw sex-oriented media. From this view, at issue are the First Amendment and personal freedom. Feminists who oppose the anti-pornography movement argue that state control of any form of expression, sexual or otherwise, invites the erosion of free speech as well as many of the gains the women's and gay and lesbian movements have struggled for (Strosser 1995). The debate illustrates how feminism has never been a monolithic movement but one driven by different interests, values, and politics.

Feminist media criticism of pornography will intensify if only because of the growth of sex-oriented media. Two technological innovations—the VCR and the Internet—have revolutionized the business of pornography, transforming a once-marginal enterprise into a vibrant industry. In addition to the social and political implications of sex-oriented media, feminist media criticism must also address the economic and technological factors that drive the industry. Prestige films such as *Boogie Nights*, on-line sex-related products, and the rise of adult film production companies that employ quasi-Hollywood production and marketing techniques reduce some of the stigma that once tainted pornography.

Moreover, the movement of AT&T into the phone sex industry (originally through 900 numbers) and the development of pay-per-view by Time Warner and Cablevision mean that some of the most powerful media companies in the United States are now selling sex (Schlosser 1997).

Finally, the trend toward globalization will be crucial in the evolution of feminist media criticism. Globalization has a profound influence on the nature and ideological content of media around the world. Because corporations like Disney and Time Warner are such formidable players in the global economy, the United States exerts a disproportionate influence on how audiences receive and incorporate media in their everyday lives. For example, researchers at Harvard Medical School have found that the introduction of U.S. television to the island of Fiji is correlated (although not definitively linked) with a rise in eating disorders and body-image consciousness among teenage Fijian girls (Goode 1999; Reynolds 1999). This finding is especially intriguing because Fijian culture has traditionally valued healthful eating and a more voluptuous female body shape than the idealized images of femininity popularized in the United States.

Another prominent area related to globalization and media criticism is communication in developing countries. Feminists studying this area of communication investigate how the dominance of U.S. media colors representations of developing countries while patterning the formation of foreign policy. Jo Ellen Fair's work (1996) reveals that images of African

women in Western media culture are informed by American conceptions of African American women and fail to consider the particular experiences of African women. In her study of U.S. media depictions of famine in the Horn of Africa, Fair demonstrates how Western media draw from blaming-the-victim notions of African American women and, consequently, depict African women as culpable for widespread poverty.

Feminist scholars such as Fair, H. Leslie Steeves, Bella Mody, Johannes Bauer, and Joseph Straubhaar foreground how the globalization of media influences the lives of women in Third World countries by perpetuating hegemonic ideologies of these women. In addition, these researchers highlight the role that global media play in international communications, in development policy, and as instruments to benefit Third World women in the development process (Steeves 1993; Mody, Bauer, and Straubhaar 1995). This area of scholarship animates the need for feminist scholarship to speak to and engage the concerns of non-Western women.

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