Assessing Qualitative Television Audience Research: Incorporating Feminist and Anthropological Theoretical Innovation

During the past 20 years qualitative audience researchers have produced respected theory and applied work in their studies of media audiences. Derived from roots in traditional anthropology, audience studies use methodologies that reproduce power differentials between researchers and participants. This article considers the application of feminist ethnography to the methodologies used in audience studies by exploring developments in recent anthropological approaches to ethnography. Shifting to a theoretical base incorporating feminist ethnography aids in identifying the power hierarchies between researcher and research participant and theorizes strategies to minimize these power differentials. In sum, this article queries the epistemological premises of current audience research practices and advocates a rethinking of this research based on the contributions of feminist ethnographic theory and other emergent anthropological developments.

Over the past 20 years audience “ethnography” has gradually worn away the tight hold textual analysis once held on the study of media texts. The turn to reception in many studies published during the 1980s is an unsurprising shift, as the limitations of personal hypotheses developed in textual readings provide a significant obstacle in trying to understand how popular audiences make sense of television content. Ethnographic media research draws much of its core theory from anthropology—particularly the concept of going into the field and immersing oneself in the culture of another. During the gradual turn toward ethnographic audience methodologies in both cultural and media studies, the field of anthropology interrogated the theoretical base of ethnography, reconceptualizing its form and practice. This critique challenged and modified the theoretical assumptions underpinning ethnography as well as its fieldwork methods. Many of these critiques, however, have not...
been applied to qualitative audience research, a serious myopia on the part of media scholars. This paper explores the shifts evident in recent anthropological approaches to ethnography and considers their application to “ethnography” as a methodology used in audience studies. In performing this evaluation, this paper also identifies ways qualitative audience studies can incorporate new anthropological perspectives by shifting—or at least expanding—their theoretical base. In sum, I question the epistemological premises of current television audience research practices and advocate a rethinking of this research based on the contributions of feminist ethnographic theory and other emergent anthropological developments.

The simple act of doing qualitative audience reception research makes a statement to the media research community (Geraghty, 1998). This methodological decision belies a political choice often deliberately made as such. In many ways, engaging qualitative research methodology denotes a break with the traditional mass communication research paradigm. Media studies did not take qualitative methods or audience reception as its starting point. Rather, post-World War II U.S. media research used quantitative research methodologies, often in experimental settings with a focus on “effects,” that is, scientific causality. The growth of qualitative evaluation in the 1980s resulted from both a sense of inadequacy with the depth of assessment available in existing approaches and from the emergence of wholly new ways of considering media developed by British cultural studies beginning in the 1960s (See Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984).

The rise of qualitative reception research engendered significant controversy and methodological query, inspiring a number of critical evaluations. Somewhat uncontested in the struggle for legitimacy faced by qualitative audience studies is its theoretical basis in traditional anthropology. At its inception, media research employing ethnographic methods adopted anthropological theories of fieldwork requiring extended observation and participation in the culture of study. Researchers largely embraced this practice without interrogating the assumptions of anthropological methods or the power differentials involved in this type of research. Theory building in this area of media studies instead developed out of a need to understand the discrepancy between a culture in traditional anthropological terms and the “audience as culture” as studied by media scholars. The debates central to theory creation in media work center around theorizing the audience, its meaning-making process, and its agency in that process.

A number of assumptions about the nature of media and attributes of the audience are at the heart of the decision to do qualitative research. A belief in an active audience directs researchers to the site of reception,
often into the homes of viewers. Research begins from a belief that studying reception exposes perspectives unobtainable through textual analysis, making Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model a key theoretical presumption for many audience researchers (Nightingale, 1993; Seiter, 1999). Although meaning may be encoded at the site of production, it is decoded in an equally active manner by the audience member upon reception (Hall, 1980). The active audience premise responds to mass communication theory postulating the audience as a homogenous mass, passively absorbing media content. Conceiving of the audience as participants active in making meanings alters the power relationship of viewing, allowing the audience some agency in the process.

Researchers extensively debate the nature and character of meaning-making “activity.” Part of this debate pivots on beliefs of the text—such as whether texts are encoded polysemically, polyvalently, or whether any possibility for textual negotiation exists (cf. Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986). Scholars theorize that audiences engage in textual meaning interpretation along a continuum from passive absorption to active creation. Independent of how one hypothesizes audience activity, ascertaining a precise understanding of “the audience” as a term is difficult. Is an audience a coherent mass watching a specific text, or are such attempts at audience unification even possible? Allor (1988) stresses the way the audience is merely a construction that can exist only within the realm of discourse. The audience lacks an agreed upon or constant real-world referent; it is a word-requiring notation that illustrates its existence only on paper and in speech. Ang (1994, p. 376) also queries the way television audiences are understood, demanding that researchers take into account the diversity within an audience so audience members are not theorized as possessing a “unified individuality.” This counters the way audiences are often constructed in institutional examinations. In many ways, qualitative reception studies demystify a notion of a broad audience by centering on the media use of a few individuals or families.

The subject of qualitative audience studies is not the audience, but a specific, highly contextualized audience. This work does not appeal to claims of generalization, but rather presents the deep understanding, or “thick description” of the isolated or limited case study (Geertz, 1973). The question of whether the audience researcher can or should speak of an audience broader than those included in research remains contested, although most qualitative audience studies certainly do not provide the specifications necessary for generalization as invoked by quantitative researchers. At the same time, understandings gained from qualitative reception studies do offer more information about the process of engaging media than can be limited to those studied. These studies often expose the varied nature of media use (cf. Morley, 1994; Gray, 1992).
In introducing debates about the practice and premises of qualitative audience research, it is necessary to acknowledge the contested use of the term “ethnography.” Geraghty (1998) notes that merely using the term ethnography is polemical and the claim of employing ethnography states something about the research on its face (p. 142). Within the terrain of anthropology, the practice of ethnography connotes a number of images, words, and ideas. Ethnography inspires visions of researchers packing up and stealing away to far-off and unknown lands, immersing themselves in the lives and culture of this unknown “other” for years, only to return and offer the final and complete word on “The Life and Culture of the ______.” Although extreme, caricatured, and stereotypical, this image describes much early ethnographic work, and the consequential connection of ethnography with colonialism produced reflection and reconsideration among anthropologists. The core theory of media ethnography, however, uses the theoretical work done while this early ethnographic practice prevailed. Is this, or could this ever resemble, a qualitative audience study?

I assert that the term audience ethnography is in most cases a misnomer, following critiques made by Nightingale (1993), Seiter (1999), and Gillespie (1995). Most of the existing work identified as ethnography employs fieldwork, but by no means immerses itself in the culture to the extent anthropological ethnography does. Gillespie’s (1995) 2-year study and the near decade of community involvement among the Punjabi Londoners she studies provide a rare exception. This is not hairsplitting on terminology, but a search for deeper understanding about how varied methods produce information. What actually is done as ethnography in television audience studies is most often participant observation. Scholars enter the home—or another space allowing examination of media culture—and observe viewing habits and relations among individuals of the residence. But this is not ethnography. Much participant observation is the equivalent of Geertz stopping in to visit with the Balinese once a week—or even every day for a few hours—but returning home to sleep at the end of the day. Do these participant observation studies provide a deeper understanding of media use than survey data or textual analysis? Unquestionably. However, identifying this work as ethnography diminishes the distinction deserved by research engaging in truly extended field study and obscures the potential of immersing oneself deeper into media use by groups and individuals.

Consider the methodological reasons for the immersion performed by anthropologists. These researchers assume the quality of observation increases by spending extended amounts of time with a group. This is not a quantitative issue, but a matter of consistency, of building trust, or of assuring oneself that the observation is not thwarted by a false perfor-
formance by the group being studied. If anything, existing audience work illustrates the way media texts pervade our lives and culture to an extent far more encompassing than merely the time spent viewing or in the home. As Gillespie (1995) notes, "TV talk"—the embedding of TV experiences in conversational forms—becomes a feasible object of study only when fully ethnographic methods are used in audience research" (p. 23). Media researchers must engage the whole culture and life of the participants when doing ethnography.

Within the existing paradigm of qualitative audience research theory, such a charge may appear simultaneously unrealistic, utopian, and excessively literal in interpreting the anthropological use of ethnographic method. To this I offer two possible and connected solutions. First, we should reevaluate our terminology to better express what our research methods entail. There is nothing substandard about participant observation work and most audience ethnography should be identified precisely as such. Referencing this work more generally as "qualitative audience research" or as "engaging in ethnographic methods" indicates a distinction in the depth of the research process, differentiating participant observation studies from ethnography employing truly extended fieldwork.

Although anthropological ethnographic theory informs many aspects of participant observation methodology, more precise naming of our methods may necessitate some reconsideration of theoretical foundations. We must be wary of uniformly applying ethnographic theory to our models, but extrapolate from that theory to account for the methodological and epistemological differences inherent in living in and becoming a part of a community, as opposed to limited, recurrent observation.

More precise naming is a simple yet sufficient solution to the current discrepancy between how the term ethnography is employed in audience studies and its theoretical origin in anthropology. Additionally, continued experimentation with the methods and practices of doing qualitative audience studies—a topic I explore throughout the remainder of this paper—offers ways to further refine theory and practice. Rethinking the theoretical base of the ethnographic methods used when performing audience studies requires media scholars to examine a number of critiques made by colleagues and to ask probing questions about the way we practice. Because audience studies are wed to a traditional anthropologic model of ethnography, such a venture may seem challenging. The use of emerging innovations in ethnography, such as autoethnography and various other experimental ethnographic styles, holds great possibility for media application (see Fiske, 1990). Additionally, audience studies must move beyond a traditional anthropological model of ethnography for reasons other than methodological naming. Emerg-
ing critiques of qualitative audience studies from within media scholarship also force a reevaluation of our use of ethnographic theory.

Seiter (1990) poses an issue for audience researchers also assessed by anthropologists. Through the lens of a personal research experience, she notes the lack of reflexivity in qualitative audience research and the way that excluding consideration of our subjectivities as researchers may contribute to false interpretations of what audiences do with texts (Seiter, 1990, p. 61). She highlights the inherent power differentials involved in academic research—including the effects of academic cultural capital and competing discourses devaluing television and other media. Seiter merely grazes the surface of potential critique in terms of the possibility for reflexive assessment on the part of researchers. All identity constructs are relevant here, especially gender and ethnicity.

Kauffman (1992) adds to Seiter’s call for reflexivity, arguing that researchers must consider how they are culturally constructed as part of their research process. Kauffman believes researchers must examine their topics and their relation to groups being studied before beginning a project. What lies beneath desires—for example—to research less privileged groups? What happens in the process of speaking for these individuals? What does it mean to possess tools that are impossible for many researched groups to obtain?

Anthropologists continue discussing the issues involved with their tradition of studying others and consequently seek new strategies for minimizing the power inherent in the research process. Although researchers often desire to study groups with relatively little power because of political beliefs about research, such work needs to reflect greater consideration of a researcher’s decision-making process. Scholars must contextualize the entire research project, not just the fieldwork process, assessing how motives and interests lead to certain studies. Analyses of researchers’ identities, their understandings of their place within a culture, and what they intend their research to accomplish contribute significantly to the interpretations they make.

For example, Walkerdine (1986) examines her analysis of a family’s film viewing in relation to her class perception of the family she studies, as well as her own class positioning. Walkerdine assesses the visceral feelings she experiences in reaction to the way the family uses media. Only through reflexivity does she identify occasional moments of identification she shares with the family that result from her working-class childhood. Her assessment provides a fine model for the way researchers must not hide their voices in writing and interpreting qualitative audience data. Whether acknowledged or not, personal ideology, attitudes, and experiences play into even the most “objective” of scholarly writing. Being honest with readers and ourselves about that position
aids in a fully informed reading, better enabling readers to assess research.

Each of these scholars considers the ways a researcher's identity affects the practice of qualitative audience research. Although the role of the researcher is often theorized to only affect data interpretation, the critiques of Seiter, Kauffman, and Walkerdine expose the myriad instances in which a researcher's identity and ideology shape the project, process, and product. Although many acknowledge this influence of the researcher's presence, it is rarely addressed in reporting audience studies research. In many qualitative audience studies, the power differential among researchers and study participants appears only slightly problematic, an irresolvable annoyance. Such a position is wholly insufficient and threatens the utility of every study that does not extensively explore research interactions. Although analysis of methodological practice arises in an occasional article such as Seiter's (1990), or in the introduction of a book-length collection, as in the case of Morley (1992) and Seiter (1999), this is an insufficient methodological foundation. Rather, every study must consider how power differentials affect project construction, observations and interviews, and data analysis. The use of reflexivity to alleviate discrepant power relations has been at the center of anthropological debate about ethnographic practice for over 15 years; yet most audience research studies have not engaged anthropological developments, nor created alternative theoretical positions of their own.

The State of Ethnography in Anthropology

Because much of the methodological theory for engaging qualitative audience research originates in anthropology, media scholars must continue reading and considering theoretical developments in that discipline. A central issue in anthropologic critique is identifying and reducing the inherent power of the researcher. Some consider the process of doing ethnographic work so fraught with replicating and enforcing power structures that the practice is overcome with debilitating criticism. These criticisms, however, provide media scholars with ways to account for power in the process of audience research and strategies for presenting findings with their limitations evident.

Anthropologists examined the issue of power constructions in ethnographic work in *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). *Writing Culture* explores the way ethnographies are written and how rhetorical devices and practices conceal power structures, consequently providing an assessment of ethnographic practice through the lens of postmodern and textual critique. One feminist anthropologist described the book's significance as: "Never before had the power of anthropological rhetoric been subjected to such keen and sophisticated textual analysis, extin-
guishing any remaining sparks of the presumption that ethnographies were transparent mirrors of culture” (Behar, 1995, p. 4).

Writing Culture ushered in another volume, created not in response to the criticisms levied in the book, but in what was left out—female anthropologists and feminist perspectives. Women Writing Culture (Behar & Gordon, 1995) furthered many of the Writing Culture criticisms, inserting a female and feminist voice in Writing Culture’s call for “new” or “experimental” ethnography.¹ Theory and practice identified as feminist ethnography emerged in the field both as a result of and independent from the endeavor of Writing Culture. Feminist ethnography’s critique of the anthropological ethnography tradition extends the reconsideration of ethnographic practice and form and demands increased attention to power issues resulting from difference in identity composition.

Feminist Ethnography
Feminist ethnography began including a feminist voice in anthropology before the publication of Writing Culture, but increased shortly after (see Visweswaran, 1988⁴). Preliminarily, this work focused on bringing feminist theories and methodological perspectives into anthropological practice and on negotiating contradictions making the connection of feminism and traditional ethnographic practices difficult (Strathern, 1987). Feminist ethnography developed as both an alternative and complementary strategy to work drawing on the Writing Culture critique and attempting what scholars identify as “postmodern,” “new,” and “reflexive” ethnography.³ Assessing the similar endeavors of experimental and feminist ethnography, Visweswaran acknowledges, “feminist ethnography can benefit from experimental ethnography’s concern for the constitution of subjectivities, but perhaps more importantly, that experimental ethnography can benefit from a feminist evaluation of some of its assumptions” (1988, p. 28). Noting dissimilarity, Gordon responds to the experimental ethnographic writing techniques put forth in Writing Culture by advocating the need for a different feminist method because of the way experimental ethnographic authority is grounded in a masculine subjectivity (Gordon, 1988, p. 8).

Feminist ethnography calls for writing strategies and methods that expose the power relations between researcher and “participant.” Many of these strategies are theorized from an explicitly feminist position. For example, feminist ethnographers learn about the relationship of women within a culture by studying women’s relationships with other women, rather than their relationships with men, or relationships among men (Visweswaran, 1988, p. 29). Feminist ethnography also advocates re-reading the work of women ethnographers long dismissed because their work differed too greatly from anthropological standards when it first appeared and—more relevant to this paper—confronting questions of
silences and who has a voice within the groups we study (Visweswaran, 1988, pp. 36, 38). Importantly, the efforts to hear voices silenced in previous research extends beyond women to ethnicities and class groups also routinely marginalized.

In assessing voice, the researcher must engage a number of strategies or levels of reflexivity. First, researchers must account for the subject position of their voices—what is it that allows them to write and that provides them access to their study, and from where do their privileges, understandings, and biases come. Visweswaran presents this in the context of the researcher as the betrayer and the subject of inquiry as the betrayed (1994, p. 48). Both she and Stacey (1992) describe fieldwork situations where these identities were created in such harsh terms. The process of exposing information about studied groups—no matter what the level of consent—is ultimately a betrayal because researchers arbitrarily take from subjects bits and pieces of their existence, recontextualizing events and projecting them through the lens of their interpretation. Although this assessment may seem severe, power relations can be exposed only through honestly assessing the effect of the research process on those communities we study.

Feminist ethnographers often negotiate inequities in power relations through reflexive writing that grounds the identities involved and through consideration of how their own identities are “multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic” as a result of ethnic, class, gender, and educational privileges (Visweswaran, 1994, p. 50). Ethnographic method, either as extended time in the field or as a series of participant observations, demands that researchers query opportunities conferred by their identity composition and also consider how their subjectivities affect the interpretations they perform on fieldwork data. One criticism of reflexivity is that it shifts the center away from the subject to the researcher, making such work overly self-focused and indulgent (cf. Hammersley, 1992). The slippery slope is quite obvious here, and there is no amount of methodology or theory that can inform researchers of how much reflexivity is either enough or too much. Wolf (1996) notes, “The challenge remains to write a text that does not position the researcher on center stage while marginalizing those being researched” (p. 35). What happens when a study becomes—to some—indulgent? Do we learn any less than if that reflexivity was entirely absent and readers find themselves looking through the eyes of a researcher they do not know? Of course, we should be wary of shifting the focus too far away from the field of study, but we should not be so debilitated by that possibility that we refuse to engage in any reflexivity (see Cheng, in press).

A final strategy feminist ethnography offers is interrogating silence as well as speech and considering the varied access to speech our respon-
dents possess. Textual criticism and ideological criticism both "read" the silences or absences in texts—a critical strategy applicable to qualitative audience studies as well. This requires considering what is said and also what is left unsaid in the process of assessing the dynamics of research situations. This includes concerning ourselves with the content provided by those who feel able to speak, as well as identifying forces that may prevent others from speaking. Correspondingly, we must recognize the possibility that our understandings of situations are false or only partially true. Often, we may know what one respondent omits only by gaining additional information—a second assessment of the situation or story—from an outside informant. Although this may lead to more "perfect" knowledge, we may consequently be faced with an ample ethical dilemma in determining how to use this knowledge (cf. Visweswaran, 1994; Stacey, 1992).

In building theory, feminist ethnography suspiciously mediates the contradictory demands of feminism's embrace of activities of social change and understandings of postmodern theory that approach attempts at revolution with caution. Gordon describes this as "an irreconcilable difference between feminism's commitment to mass, systematic social change for women, and those strains of postmodernism that find all modern 'revolutions' suspect" (1993, p. 109). Further, feminist ethnography's intervention works in contradiction to experimental ethnography's move toward writing that fosters a sense of mutuality between the self and other. The contradiction occurs because "feminism's relationship to its other is antagonistic" (Gordon, 1988, p. 17). These theoretical negotiations can be of great use to qualitative audience research, specifically the potential of moving beyond the experimental ethnography advocated by Writing Culture to considering the intervention into the researcher-researched nexus emphasized by feminist ethnography.

The critiques advanced by feminist ethnographers are by no means limited to the field of anthropology, nor are they limited to work centering on issues of gender. Feminist ethnography introduces strategies useful in addressing critiques of power differentials identified as problematic by Seiter (1990, 1999), Walkerdine (1986), and Fiske (1990) into audience research projects. Further, feminist ethnography offers ways to negotiate methodological problems identified in anthropology that have yet to be critiqued when applied to audience study (see Abu-Lughod, 1993; Tsing, 1993).

**Feminist Research Practice**

The center of this call is not so much methodological as it is epistemological. The critiques scholars such as Seiter, Kauffman, and Fiske raise
result from a specific epistemological view toward research, one heavily
influenced by, or identified with, feminist theory and practice. The de-
velopment and infiltration of feminist epistemology into fields across
the academy is crucial to rethinking how scholars practice research. In
their anthology on feminist research methodology, Fonow and Cook
(1991) identify "reflexivity, action orientation, attention to the affective
components of research, and use of the situation-at-hand" as four themes
common in work they identify as embodying feminist methodology and
epistemology (p. 2). These techniques provide tools for feminist research-
ers who endeavor to engage in research projects that intentionally ad-
dress the ways traditional research processes can reproduce structures
of power and validate some types of knowledge over others.

For instance, they define reflexivity as "the tendency of feminists to
reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of
the research process" (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 2). This is central to
feminist ethnographic method, as it is through such examination that
power differentials are identified and assessed as problematic. Addi-
tionally, Skeggs (1997) argues that although we are positioned by our lo-
cations of identity, they do not determine us, indicating that by assessing
the way factors of identity affect research, some of their effects may be
surmounted.

Similarly, an action orientation is "reflected in the statement of pur-
pose, topic selection, theoretical orientation, choice of method, view of
human nature, and definitions of the researcher's roles" (Fonow & Cook,
1991, p. 5). This is comparable to the strategy Kauffman (1992) sug-
gests, and involves recognizing the political nature of our decisions to
do research on certain groups and using particular processes. Even deci-
sions against research areas, or decisions to do research in more traditional
ways belie the politics at stake in each moment of the research project.

Further, attention to the affective components of research, described
as the "refusal to ignore the emotional dimension of the conduct of in-
quiry . . . attend(ing) specifically to the role of affect in the production of
knowledge," further advances a feminist methodology (Fonow & Cook,
in negotiating the effect of their research on the communities they stud-
ied speak to this point. The presence of researchers can have serious
affective implications on those who are studied, and a feminist episte-
 mollgy works to recognize and assuage this. Finally, Fonow and Cook
describe the use of situations-at-hand as the way feminist research is
"often characterized by an emphasis on creativity, spontaneity, and im-
provisation of both topic and method" (p. 11). Using such situations
and circumstances results from a concern with the "everyday world" and
elements of life considered "ordinary."
Wolf (1996) edits a similar collection of essays examining feminist methodology, and her introduction exposes the dilemmas researchers face when implementing feminist ideals in fieldwork (see Ribbens & Edwards, 1998). Wolf addresses many of the aspects of feminist methodology noted above, but mainly focuses on the issue of power in research and the various strategies feminist researchers use to mitigate power differentials or limit their effects. Wolf reviews a substantial amount of feminist research that attempts to alter the power dynamics of fieldwork with varying success. She specifically raises the challenge of representing oneself in the field, debates over the use of feminist standpoint approaches, and the difficulty of preventing exploitation—especially when studying groups with less power. Many of the individual research experiences recounted in these assessments of feminist methodology come from the fields of anthropology and sociology and are truly ethnographic immersions in the cultures of study. Despite the prevalence of participant observation research in audience studies that does not yield as much depth, many of the perspectives and strategies can be applied to our practices in order to reduce disparate positions of power.

Although anthropologists and feminist researchers offer significant contributions to the practice and writing of ethnographic studies, the effect of this work is remarkably imperceptible in audience studies. In examining some major audience studies and writing on engaging in qualitative audience study—including the work of scholars such as Allor (1988), Ang (1994, 1996), Brunsdon (1997), Coleman (1998), Fiske (1990), Gray (1992), Jhally and Lewis (1992), Moores (1993), Morley (1992, 1997), Gillespie (1995), Press (1991), Press and Cole (1999), and Seiter (1999)—very little evidence of new developments in theorizing ethnographic research is evident. In thumbing through the bibliographies of these works, most minimally I expect to find Clifford and Marcus's (1986) Writing Culture, which I do in many of the book-length studies and even in an article (Press, 1996). Morley (1997) argues specifically for incorporating the postmodern ethnographic writing strategies into media research—although notes such techniques do not wholly alleviate the problems they seek to address. More significantly, though, I seek works such as Behar and Gordon's Women Writing Culture and other contributions to feminist ethnography, including Abu-Lughod (1990, 1993), Gordon (1988, 1993), Stacey (1992), Visweswaran (1988, 1994), or perhaps even the feminist-antiracist perspectives of Mohanty (1987, 1991) and Sandoval (1991). The work of these scholars, however, is relatively absent. Seiter (1999) appears as an exception, incorporating Stacey (1988) and Visweswaran (1994). Additionally, although Gillespie does not engage the work of feminist ethnographers, she does acknowledge many of their concerns related to power relations between
the researcher and participants and the affect of various subject positions on information gathering and analysis.

The absence of feminist ethnography literature indicates improvidence on the part of media scholars employing ethnographic methods in searching for understanding of media use. In terms of theoretical innovation, anthropologists have already done much of the work for us; we must, however, apply these perspectives to the particular questions of our field. To this point I have illustrated the need for expanded theoretical consideration of qualitative audience research, or more specifically, that media scholars have not been rigorous enough in our use of emerging anthropological theory in the practice of qualitative audience research. To rectify this oversight we must integrate feminist ethnography into the study of audiences. The final section explores what feminist qualitative audience research looks like and poses the challenge of developing such a methodology based on the unique characteristics of television audience study.

**What Does Feminist Qualitative Audience Research Look Like?**

With such an emphasis on theory, the question that begs answer at this point is what does feminist qualitative audience research look like in practice? First, we must allow reflexive voices greater volume. Researchers can employ a number of strategies to increase reflexivity and respond to power differentials when using ethnographic methods. By reconsidering how we perform fieldwork, design research projects, and decide to write about and document our experiences and interpretations, audience studies can incorporate such innovation. As far as altering the way we apply ethnographic methods in the field, I suggest research designs that (a) experiment with “native” study or “studying up,” (b) define the family differently in addition to exploring nonfamily settings, and (c) allow greater interrogation of the multitude of subjectivities occupied by both researchers and those they study.

Native study and “studying up” are both anthropological techniques that attempt to address the traditional anthropological approach of the White Westerner, packing up to study the unknown, native “other.” Native study is often understood as self-study as growing numbers of non-Western anthropologists write on their own cultures and White Westerners explore what is in their backyards (see Trask, 1993). Unquestionably, native study does not extinguish power issues, but it reallocates much of that power into a new—though still problematic—structure (Narayan, 1993).

In calling for native study of audiences many questions of practice develop. Do studies of audiences also have a tradition of studying the
other? Much of the tradition of such study in the context of audiences came about for an explicitly political reason. As media researchers sought to advance conceptions of the audience as active and powerful, often the most denigrated forms (soap operas) and groups perceived as least powerful (women, the working class, yet only occasionally ethnic minorities) were chosen as sites of research. Although qualitative audience study developed in this way for reasons different than in anthropology, it still bears the legacy of a colonizing gaze. Audience research rarely focuses on groups to which the researcher belongs or has belonged (in this second case, the researcher's position as member is greatly downplayed).

I do not intend to call for volumes of work on how bourgeois professors use media, but instead encourage introspection of our subjectivities for unique points of access. Did we ever belong to a different class? Have old friends who are positioned differently than we are? Have access to a specific regional mind frame? Have we belonged to organizations like fraternities or sororities, parents groups, civic or religious organizations that present us access? Are our families' subjectivities different from our own? These are just some of myriad questions that we need to consider when creating new research agendas, questions that may allow us to better assess our position as researchers in the work we do.

Studying up seeks to remedy issues of power as well and is defined in anthropological practice as doing ethnographic work on groups with greater power than ourselves, such as studies of business management and dominant political groups. Again, researching more powerful audiences works somewhat contradictory to the assumption that as media researchers we must vindicate the use of media by the “mass” or denigrated audience. Audience researchers must offer greater reflexive consideration of why these audiences have been a central focus of qualitative audience research and interrogate whether we accomplish altruistic goals when our work lacks comment on the power dynamics of research design. In audience studies, studying up could include researching the media use of industry executives or policy officials—for example, how does the family of an FCC commissioner use media. Additionally, addressing many of the questions enumerated in the previous paragraph may lead us to develop audience studies that also allow us to study up.

Another site for reflexivity in the research process comes through examining the types of audiences we study, which in many cases are nuclear family units. We must consider what a decision to study intact family units expresses and explore nonfamily settings, or at least start applying broader definitions of families. The traditional nuclear family setting is in decline as a normative structure and is imbued with enormous ideological implications. Consequently, we must increase examinations of audiences in other settings and reflect on what we map onto definitions
of family with few nonnuclear explorations within the developing canon. Indeed, existing research can be considered as a starting point or as a baseline, but it is necessary to expand into different definitions of family viewing rather than work at replicating existing constructs.

Another application for experimentation is our own families and the families we interact with in our “nonscholarly” time. The intervention of feminist theory works to displace the notion of research only being valid on an other, especially when it is the position we are least suited to interpret. Fonow and Cook’s (1991) characteristic of using the situation-at-hand resonates here. Seiter’s (1999) study of parents involved in the same parent’s support group Seiter participated in offers an illustrative example.

Perhaps the most crucial strategy offered by a feminist application of ethnographic methods is increased attention to the interrogation of subjectivity constructions—on the part of the researcher as well as of those studied. This is not a new strategy. Walkerdine, Seiter, and Fiske all use this tactic, with varying success and intention. The incorporation of subjectivity into publications is not easily done, but it works to eliminate criticisms of audience scholarship arising because the voices of researchers and subjects are not distinct or grounded, such as when researchers overidentify with those they study (see Gripsrud, 1995). This is more than a paragraph or two in the write-up, but must be part of our work from the earliest moment of design to the instance of publication. Is such self-awareness indulgent? Not to the people we put through our interpretive lens. The qualitative tradition of research has already wrestled with the myth of objectivity; to presume we can study anyone without who we are affecting our interpretations is arrogant. Feminist ethnography does not call for a more self-indulgent research project, rather, it demands that we identify subjectivities affecting assessments of experiences and data that have always been present.

In both practicing and writing feminist audience research, we must consider the ways design, research, and practice decisions affect relations with those we study, and we must include these assessments in our publications. One of the best examples of this is a study by Fiske and Dawson (1996) examining the reception of action films by men in a homeless shelter. Explicit in an article presenting the study are (a) the political stake of the research project in intervening in social discourses and understandings of the origin of violence, (b) the difficulty experienced by the researcher in gaining trust and access to the feelings of these men, (c) the process of research and the challenges faced, and (d) the way obstacles are negotiated. In all, this may require only two pages of the text, yet it offers the reader a deeper understanding of what is recounted, a definite voice behind the research.
Similarly, in her collection of three different qualitative audience studies, Seiter (1999) weaves her own subjectivity and how her status as a professor and mother affected the questions she asked and the participants' responses. Amid descriptions and analysis of the participants' reactions and replies, Seiter acknowledges the way popularly circulated "lay theories" about media effects, senses of acceptable parenting techniques, and the cultural capital of television in U.S. society confound her queries about media use in the home.

Gillespie's (1995) study of television's role in cultural change within a diasporic community offers another exceptional example. In a brief section titled "The Researcher and Her Informants," Gillespie acknowledges the role power relations, detachment, gender, and ethnicity played in the conduct of her research and in the analysis she performed (pp. 67–73). By including this information in her methodology, Gillespie makes the reader aware of the challenges she encountered and the fact that she recognized these axes of power as significant contributors to her process of analysis and ultimate conclusions.

The exploration of subjectivity is not unique to either practice or writing, but must occur constantly in the process of research. Extensive assessments of methodology do not belong only in dissertation and thesis work. We must find ways of integrating greater levels of introspection of our research processes into our article-length works as well, because these decisions affect our interpretations enormously. Incorporating feminist ethnographic methods is also possible through reassessing the way we write up our results and share them with the research community. Innovative writing strategies are evident in research that (a) experiments with allowing research subjects to speak for themselves, and (b) incorporates new strategies of writing—varying form and content.

The first of these strategies describes how we incorporate the voices of those we research in our writing. Anthropology continues to debate this issue, and ultimately there may be no right answer, just varied ways of trying to redistribute power and of assessing the authority inherent within the act of writing (see Wolf, 1996). Some writing offers audience members no explicit voice, allowing a problematic conflation of voices yielding a confused understanding of the "audience" being studied. Within the anthropological tradition, this is somewhat akin to research that speaks of "the X" as the subject of study.

A more feminist strategy allows extended passages to the audience member or presents long lists of replies in the words of varied respondents, as performed by Morley (1994) in his study of television reception by families. Although this does allow the respondent greater voice
in how readers understand the interpretation of the researcher, this should not be taken as wholly liberating. The researcher's power to select who speaks, when, and how still reveals the researcher as the wizard behind the curtain. Similarly, Seiter (1990) includes the entire transcript of an interview, though in most studies the transcriptions would be unwieldy appendices. Other strategies include allowing those we study to read our work and participate in the writing process (see Michaels, 1994). We might share interpretations, allowing comment, and then integrate these comments into our texts.

Such strategies are performed with varying success, and these interventions ultimately work to change the way scholarly writing looks. Again, although I am not calling for a full-scale reinvention of scholarly form, we must remain open to variation in the way our results look and what they report. There will likely be some bad work produced this way, but that should not usher in critiques of the whole-scale failure of innovation.

A number of works in anthropology serve as examples of innovative writing forms. One of the most evocative pieces for exposing the power relations in ethnographic methods and the way different forms of writing exacerbate this is M. Wolf's (1992) *A Thrice-Told Tale*. This book is divided into three sections that report the same research in the form of a fictional story, as transcribed field notes, and in a scholarly journal piece. Although Wolf is not successful in rigorously addressing all the issues of subjectivity, access, and power, this book provides an example of how alternative techniques might work. I am not suggesting that all work must be done in this form of multiple telling, but rather that some comparison of the way work appears in journals and other outlets can be productive.

The writings of Behar (1993, 1996) on issues of representation offer another example of the application of feminist methodology. Her ethnographic account of her relationship with a Mexican woman illustrates how the personal and the interpretive can be effectively balanced. Her work is true ethnography, though, and it remains to be seen how such an account could develop from fieldwork of less depth—such as in participant observation. Behar's more recent book speaks explicitly of the process of doing ethnography from a reflexive position and how the stakes increase for the researcher in so doing. At times her work seems to bend the line between theory and autobiography. Although such self-focus contests standards of research, I maintain we need work like this to learn of the encounters others face in the field, which then aids us in responding to our own challenges. In identifying weakness in existing practice, we set the stage for theory building and experimentation.
Conclusion

Unquestionably, qualitative television audience research faces a complex negotiation with the theory from which I encourage it to borrow. The connections between the depth of study endeavored and whether the subject is constructed as an "audience" or a culture are key points of differentiation between the fields of anthropology and media study. Further, although feminist scholars provide some innovative methods, they are not without some significant critiques and do offer divergent solutions. Critics of the feminist focus on experience acknowledge the way individual experience is sometimes applied to a whole category of people, such as all women, and that insufficient tools exist for understanding differences in experience (see Scott, 1991). Additionally, Morley (1997) warns of relativistic excess in incorporating reflexivity into audience study and writing, while also valorizing the potential use of anthropologic advances for media study, illustrating the tendentious nature of this endeavor.

Nonetheless, much of the theory and the experimental writing conducted under the name of feminist ethnography are applicable to audience studies and can assist us in developing better ways to practice and write qualitative audience research. Most crucially, we must continue to examine the theoretical core upon which research practices are based. Although we have our own debates—polysemy and definitions of audience are of little concern to anthropologists—it is essential that we keep tabs on other disciplines and assess how debates in other fields apply to our own.

At many points in writing this piece, I stepped back to examine my own voice, which at times may sound harshly critical of a method I have often passionately attempted to justify to those thinking outside my paradigm. Despite my call for reflexive work, my own identity has been conspicuously absent. As a new Ph.D. just entering the field, I am struggling with the legacy of audience research in charting the trajectory of my own research. I am uncertain of "who am I" to offer such criticism, but simultaneously aware that the applications of feminist ethnography that I see can benefit the practice of audience studies. I am further aided by coursework requirements forcing me out of my own field, helping me to view ethnographic methods through a more interdisciplinary lens that may not avail itself as easily once I am more firmly established in the field. At no point should this be read as a critique calling for the end of ethnographic methods, a condemnation of their current practice, or the work of a researcher who doubts their usefulness. Perhaps the voice behind these words can be best understood as one who believes in the aims, foundations, practice, and results of qualitative audience research and consequently must challenge its practice in pursuit of improvement.
Much work has already been done for us, now we must incorporate it into a new way of practicing.

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1 This was not the first time a feminist intervention was made. This Bridge Called My Back (Moraga & Anzaldua, 1983) first appeared in 1981, and, although it challenged the traditional form of ethnographic writing, its feminist (and non-White) pedigree prevented it from finding a place at the center of ethnographic discussions (Behar, 1995, p. 3).
2 This piece responds to discussions of experimental ethnography, such as those of Clifford (1983) and Marcus and Cushman (1982), that were prior to Writing Culture.
3 Feminist ethnographers found the experimental ethnography advocated in Writing Culture placed them in an irreconcilable bind leading to exclusion. According to Clifford (1986), the voices of women anthropologists were absent from Writing Culture because “feminism had not contributed to the theoretical analysis of ethnographies as texts” and feminist ethnography “has not produced either unconventional forms of writing or a developed reflection on ethnographic textuality as such” (pp. 20–21). (The solo female voice in Writing Culture belonged to a literary critic.) Behar summarizes the position Clifford constructs for women ethnographers as, “To be a woman writing culture became a contradiction in terms: Women who write experimentally are not feminist enough, while women who write as feminists write in ignorance of the textual theory that underpins their own texts” (Behar, 1993, p. 5).


Assessing Qualitative Television Audience Research


