Confronting Visuality in Multi-Ethnic Women's Writing
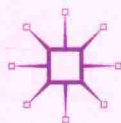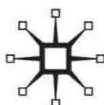
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Introduction

What's (Still) Wrong with Images of Women?

Confronting Visuality in Multi-Ethnic Women's Writing argues that women's literature has an important role to play in bridging a divide between critical analyses of women's images and the reliance on objectifying structures in mainstream media. The works considered here were published between 1970 and 2010, a period during which visual representations of women came under intense critical scrutiny, and as a result, representational practices evolved, though not in ways that early feminists would have anticipated or approved. Throughout this period, writers (in addition to feminist scholars, media workers, and activists) sought to understand, as Griselda Pollock put it in the title of her 1978 article, "What's Wrong with Images of Women?" and to intervene directly in visual relations to change the ways women were represented, the low status afforded to "women's genres," and working conditions for female artists and media workers. Despite this intensive engagement with visuality, however, women's very real social and political gains have been met with a "postfeminist sensibility" in the media that draws on feminist ideas and rhetoric but frequently puts these to the service of decidedly antifeminist aims and representations (Gill 247).[1] However, these developments have made it more difficult than in the past to respond to problematic media trends from an explicitly feminist perspective, and this problem is compounded by a growing sense of uncertainty among feminist media critics about the proper subject for feminist critique. In contrast, I suggest that women's literature has largely avoided these problems because instead of "fixing into images," as Sue Thornham suggests much feminist media criticism has done (52), it situates images of women within larger contexts of visuality and in doing so provides a fuller picture of how images serve the interests of dominant power structures. Additionally, women's literature offers a way to make the rich history and theoretical vocabulary of feminist

critique accessible to readers in a way that theory alone often cannot do. Though the cross-cultural tradition of confronting visuality in women's writing has been largely overlooked for a variety of reasons, this tradition is increasingly relevant in an age when more explicit feminist critiques of media are met with suspicion and hostility and when feminist criticism itself sometimes seems uncertain about "what—if anything—should be the target of critique" (Gill 271).

Certainly, performing feminist media analysis today is increasingly challenging. Following what Andrea Stuart has referred to as a split within feminism between "professional feminism" and "popular feminism," the feminism made popular by the media came to combine feminist values and rhetoric with antifeminist aims and representations. "Popular feminism" seems to rely on feminism primarily as a way to "inoculate" against charges of sexism, creating confusion about what the term *feminism* really means in contemporary media culture. This confusion is evident in recent debates about nostalgic television shows such as *Mad Men* and *Game of Thrones*.[2] Though the "old-timey, misogynistic societies" at the center of both shows differ,[3] what both shows provide is, essentially, "a chance to see people do misogynist, racist things without facing consequences" (Doyle). Nevertheless, despite the fact that female characters in the shows are routinely subject to bigotry and sexualized violence, debates about these shows focus less on whether they are sexist and more on whether they are actually feminist.[4] Fans and critics argue that the shows are feminist based on their "complicated, edgy female characters" (Zeisler), with some even suggesting that the misogynistic settings allow the strength of the female characters to emerge—a sentiment Tracie Egan Morrissey voices in discussing *Game of Thrones*: "While the realm that [Martin] has created isn't exactly woman-friendly, the hardships and limitations it creates for its female inhabitants lends itself well to the rich development of their characters." Feminist critique of programs like these is challenging because they "suture" together feminist and antifeminist ideas (Gill 270). Thus the female characters are depicted as active, sexually desiring agents in the stories even as they are also harassed and exploited on the basis of their gender and though male characters in the programs are free to voice and act on sexist ideas with relative impunity. Judith Williamson calls this "sexism with an alibi: it appears at once past and present, 'innocent' and knowing, a conscious reference to another era, rather than an unconsciously driven part of our own" (1). However, Rosalind Gill also notes that in this context, "[feminist] critique becomes much more difficult—and this, it would seem, is precisely what is intended" (268).

Indeed feminist scholars and activists have struggled to respond to today's postfeminist sensibility (247). Even Gloria Steinem has recently

seemed uncertain about how to interpret the "resexualization of women's bodies" (Ross 62). When Steinem was asked at a 2010 conference if she felt discouraged that "young women today can dress like hookers and be OK with being treated like a piece of meat, whether it's in a music video or in social situations," she replied, "my question to the young woman who is dressing as you describe is: Is she doing it because she wants to? Is she body-proud? Is she sexuality-proud? Because then, I say, great. Is she doing it because she feels she has to? That she won't be popular otherwise? Then, that's wrong" (qtd. in Strachan).

Though Steinem's response perfectly reflects the core feminist values of female agency and sexual empowerment, it overlooks the extent to which these values have been co-opted—and distorted—by popular culture and contemporary media. Indeed in today's media landscape, men no longer objectify women, but women are instead presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because its suits their liberated interests to do so (Goldman; Ross 62). However, as Gill points out, the fact that the "resulting valued 'look' is so similar" belies the fact that women are "just pleasing themselves, and following their own autonomously generated desires" (260). Nevertheless, the confusing combination of feminism and antifeminism in contemporary media has resulted in a situation in which feminists increasingly seem unsure of how to respond, and those who do object to this state of affairs are subject to inevitably personal and vitriolic attacks (Gill 268; Ross 87).

It would seem, then, that four decades of feminist critique and intervention into visual relations has resulted in a kind of critical impasse where, despite having a "more secure institutional base than in the recent past and a vocabulary of theoretical languages" (Gill 271), "the very sophistication of media studies makes it harder and harder for feminists to actually object to any kind of representational practice" (Viner 20–21). Liesbet Van Zoonen concludes that the "theoretical and empirical sophistication of feminist media studies has not only jeopardized its relevance for a critical feminist media politics but also diminished its potential as a comprehensive cultural critique" (26). For example, as we acknowledge the pleasure that some women can derive from watching shows such as *Mad Men* and *Game of Thrones* or the sense of agency some women might achieve by dressing in sexually provocative ways, it becomes difficult to find justifications for critiquing these practices as part of the hegemonic construction of gender identities.[5] Indeed in this atmosphere, some have argued that terms like *objectification* and *sexism* are outdated and in danger of losing meaning entirely (Williamson 1).

Nevertheless, the prevalence of sexualized violence against women, increasing numbers of women with eating disorders, and a burgeoning

demand for cosmetic surgery among even very young girls,[6] along with the fact that women today are so systematically objectified, attacked, and vilified in the media, illustrate the need for a feminist response capable of connecting the rich history and body of feminist work on media with today's media practices and viewers. As Gill contends, the challenge is to "articulate the politics that can engage effectively with this new [postfeminist] sensibility, and move forward to more open, equal, hopeful and generous gender relations" (271).

Women's literature has an important role to play in making the connection between feminist criticism and today's media culture and consumers. *Confronting Visuality* focuses on multi-ethnic women's literature that has moved in tandem with feminist media studies throughout the contemporary period. However, works by Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, Margaret Atwood, Louise Erdrich, Gish Jen, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Alison Bechdel are also able to deal differently with issues of gender and visuality than are feminist media studies. These writers have unique tools to work with in considering what it feels like for women to be immersed in American media culture and can use the identification between readers and literary characters to foster greater critical awareness in readers about how issues of gender, race, and sexuality become visible (or remain invisible) through contemporary visualization practices and technologies. Via literature, writers are able to situate images of women within larger contexts of visuality and provide a fuller picture of how images serve the interests of dominant power structures. In the texts considered here, the point is not to change any given image, which women may or may not even agree is problematic, but to change the entire context for viewing women and the ways that women see and relate to what has been called "the shared legacy of women's images" and their meanings (Henninger 5). This is particularly relevant in the current "postfeminist" climate that makes critique of individual images of women so difficult as well. Rather than arguing for or against specific representations of women, the writers instead actively oppose *visuality* itself and claim the right "to look at that which authority wishes to conceal," particularly with regard to women (Mirzoeff, "Introduction" xxx). I follow Nicholas Mirzoeff's definition of visuality as "a specific technique of colonial and imperial practice, operating both at 'home' and 'abroad,' by which power visualizes History to itself. In so doing, it claims authority, above and beyond its ability to impose its will . . . Visualization demonstrates authority, which produces consent" ("Introduction" xxx). Visuality has three component techniques as a means of authoritarian control: classification, separation, and aesthetics. Mirzoeff explains that "when the three components work together, they form . . . a complex of visuality, in which the sense that the arrangement is

right reinforces the classification, makes separation seem natural, and, in turn, what is right comes to seem pleasing, almost beautiful" ("Introduction" xxxi). Though the works included in *Confronting Visuality* emphasize different components of visuality, they all consider the way that aesthetics supports the work of classification and separation. In other words, in these works, images are interesting not in and of themselves but because of the ways they aestheticize the classification and separation of individuals and groups on the basis of gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on. Focusing on images, therefore, is a way for these writers to confront the operation of visuality more generally and make visible the power structures that sometimes remain unseen or attempt to hide behind irony or even the rhetoric of feminism.

The writers included in *Confronting Visuality* exemplify diversity in women's writing about visuality and consider specific legacies of objectification. However, common strategies of resistance surface from this diversity. None of the writers advocate either rejecting visual technologies outright or promoting falsely positive representations of women. Instead they take an activist stance with regard to visuality and intervene in visual relations by seeking to train their own readers to be critical viewers of images. This approach rests on two important assumptions. First, it inherently assumes that readers are also, inevitably, spectators and consumers of a variety of media. Second, the writers assume that literature does not merely mirror social concerns but provides a space within which social realities can be transcended and contested.

Although some men's literature also registers the increasing importance of the visual in contemporary culture,[7] the writers included here also share an awareness that, despite the ways that visuality differs depending on other social characteristics, gender continues to distinguish the construction of men and women within mainstream media and to specifically reflect on the difference that gender makes in looking relations. This emphasis on using literature to equip readers with critical vision is also an important way that this group of women writers asserts the continuing relevance of literary forms even in the midst of dramatic social changes to reading practices in the contemporary period. These writers recommend and employ literature as a medium within which to critically comment on issues of visuality, and in their works (which take the form of novels, short stories, and graphic narratives in a variety of literary genres), they bridge traditional divides between image and text as well as high and low culture.

Women, Visuality, and the Pictorial Turn

The ever-increasing body of criticism on visuality and literature has largely overlooked the cross-cultural tradition of confronting visuality in contemporary women's writing. However, this oversight seems to stem from a desire to understand the full complexity of visuality and to avoid suggesting that there is a single, common female experience of visuality. The time during which the works included in *Confronting Visuality* were written saw both images of women as well as the lives of women change considerably, along with the critical tools available to analyze and discuss women's images. Central to the evolution of feminist media criticism was the development of increasingly complex models of spectatorship and audience studies.

The contemporary period gave rise to both modern feminism and modern image culture, and Amelia Jones has described the two as having a "symbiotic relation" with one another ("Introduction" 3). Both arose during a profound cultural transformation that W. J. T. Mitchell has termed *the pictorial turn* and defines as "a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality" (Mitchell, *Picture* 16). Although this move toward visualization has its roots in the development of technology that extends the human sense of sight, it has accelerated in recent decades due to the speed with which imaging technologies develop. Additionally, as human sight has become extended in unprecedented ways—out into space and within the human body, for example—contemporary imaging technologies have led to a dramatic increase of images in Western culture.[8] As scholars grappled with understanding the changes brought about by the move toward visualization, feminism proved to be "one of the ways in which we can most usefully come to an understanding of the image culture in which we are suspended" (Jones, "Introduction" 3).

Certainly, for modern feminists, the pictorial turn has had enormous implications. Beginning in the 1960s, second-wave feminists found themselves in a situation where images of women were ubiquitous and media culture was becoming pervasive.[9] Consequently, as Gill explains, "unlike their mothers and grandmothers, second-wave feminists were bombarded daily by representations of womanhood and gender relations in news and magazines, on radio and TV, in film and on billboards" (9). Given this, it is not surprising that media became a major focus of feminist research, critique, and intervention. Betty Friedan initiated a focus on images in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which traced the postwar construction of America's ideal image of femininity (what Friedan called the "happy housewife heroine") through media representations she found in women's

magazines and advertisement images (23),[10] and in 1966, the National Organization of Women, with Friedan as its first president, declared media to be one of the major sites of struggle for the revived women's movement (Van Zoonen 26). Since that time, a focus on the media and on visual representations of women has been hardwired into modern feminism.

Much of the early work in feminist media studies focused on developing a critical vocabulary for discussing existing images of women and intervening directly in representational practices by creating alternative images, whether by showcasing the work of female artists or changing working conditions for women in media industries.[11] Women also worked to penetrate the burgeoning field of communication studies, which "did not seem to be very interested in the subject 'woman'" even by the mid- to late 1970s (Van Zoonen 25). As the Women's Studies Group of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) complained in 1978, "we found it extremely difficult to participate in the CCCS Groups and felt, without being able to articulate it, that it was a case of the masculine domination of both intellectual work and the environment in which it was being carried out" (*Women Take Issue* 11). However, feminist media studies also began to emerge as its own interdisciplinary endeavor via the launching of the journal *Women and Film* in 1972 and the publication of foundational articles such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975 and Gaye Tuchman's "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media" in 1978.

While this early work was enormously important in building a foundation for feminist studies of media, it was quickly critiqued for being too reductionist and for failing to account for the incredible diversity in the way the media visually construct women and how women interact with images. Van Zoonen explains how, beginning in the 1980s, scholars developed ever more sophisticated models of spectatorship and a thorough understanding of the ideological workings of aesthetics and media (26). For example, because early work in gender and media focused largely on reception analyses rather than audience studies, critics writing in the early 1980s such as Annette Kuhn suggested that this early work constructed an abstract, ahistorical spectator with little connection to the lived experiences of women who actually view media ("Women's Genres"). A move toward studies of real audiences, such as Janice Radway's 1984 examination of female readers, shifted scholarship from a focus on reception to a focus on audience, and this resulted in increasing recognition that women's viewing practices are inflected by a myriad of factors in addition to gender, including race, sexuality, and class, among others.

The move toward audience studies helped reveal a gap vis-à-vis race in early studies of female spectatorship, which some scholars have attributed

to the reliance on psychoanalytic theory in reception analysis. Laura Mulvey's influential arguments about spectatorship were built on a psychoanalytic model to demonstrate how the patriarchic subconscious of society shapes the experience of watching films as well as cinema itself. In the mid-1980s, critics such as Jane Gaines charged that "the psychoanalytic concept of sexual difference is unequipped to deal with a film that is about racial difference and sexuality" and that "the psychoanalytic model works to block out considerations which assume a different configuration" (12).[12] This charge was echoed by bell hooks in 1992 when she contended that "feminist film theory rooted in an ahistorical psychoanalytic framework that privileges sexual difference actively suppresses recognition of race" (*Black Looks* 123). hooks's work, which resisted the psychoanalytic framework of feminist film theory and insisted on the materialist arguments of critical race theory and cultural studies, was itself foundational in helping "to bridge feminist and critical race theory by arguing that gendered viewing practices are also intersected by racial identity" (Kearney 589).[13]

In the 1990s, other critiques began to problematize the assumption of heterosexuality in media texts and reception practices. Writing in 1991, Pratibha Parmar pointed out that Mulvey's model of spectatorship "presumes heterosexuality to such a degree that it often appears to demand it" (20), and in 1993, Alexander Doty sought to reconfigure film spectatorship via queer theory and argued that queerness is central to, rather than subtextual within, mass media texts. Mary Celeste Kearney explains that Doty "encourages scholars to consider the many ways in which consumers, particularly those in the LGBTQI community, reconfigure media narratives in order to find pleasure" (590). Consequently, scholars such as Judith Mayne, Teresa de Lauretis, and Mary Ann Doane began to explore the critical possibilities within traditional and alternative cinema for cross gender identification. As a result of this work, studies of media expanded to recognize ways in which "images in contemporary culture make many forms of address to more than one audience, and allow the possibility of multiple identifications by the spectator" (Evans and Gamman 32).

Essentially, feminist critics came to recognize, as Rita Felski points out in questioning the possibility of a "single, common femaleness," that "the many empirical differences of race, class, sexuality, and age . . . render notions of shared female experience untenable" (182). As a result, the critical focus in feminist studies of media shifted to examining the differences between groups of women and even individual female spectators.[14] From Mulvey's initial assertion that male and female spectators view cinema differently, scholarship expanded to recognize positions for looking that Mulvey did not originally account for in the somewhat simplified structure of the male and female gaze she proposed—including "queer spectatorship,"

bell hooks's "oppositional gaze" and "black looks," and E. Ann Kaplan's "imperial gaze," among others. By the mid- to late 1990s, work by Beverley Skeggs and Hilary Radner illuminated the important role that social class plays in the way women engage images of femininity, and in the new millennium, Katherine Henninger has demonstrated the importance of region on women's participation in visual relations. The study of visuality thus fragmented as feminist scholars focused in on specific groups or types of female spectators, attending to the differences that race, ethnicity, region, and sexuality make to looking relations.

Literary studies was relatively slow to address issues of visuality raised by contemporary media,[15] but as literary scholars began to publish work throughout the 1990s and 2000s focused on issues at the intersection of literary studies and visuality—including ekphrasis, spectatorship, looking relations, witnessing, surveillance, and spectacle—they tended to replicate the pattern of examining issues of visuality in narrow sociohistorical contexts. Consequently, there are a number of excellent volumes focused on explorations of visuality in specific ethnic or regional groups, such as Henninger's *Ordering the Facade: Photography and Contemporary Southern Women's Writing* and Eleanor Ty's *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*, or on particular literary genres, such as Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman's edited collection *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, or in the works of specific writers, a number of which I discuss in the individual chapters that follow.[16] However, *Confronting Visuality* is the first book-length examination of issues of visuality in a contemporary, cross-cultural context. Yet this cross-cultural approach is important because it reveals that despite the diversity between the writers included, they identify similar concerns about visuality and similar strategies for intervening in it. And these common strategies have the potential to serve as the foundation for a new (or newly recognized) feminist approach toward media, one that navigates some of the pitfalls that currently threaten feminist media studies in today's postfeminist climate.

For example, while recognizing differences in the ways groups and individuals participate in visual relations is important to identifying specific and effective strategies for resisting or embracing visual images, so much focus on the differences between women has also played a role in the current critical impasse in feminist media studies. As Van Zoonen questions, "If meaning is so dependent on context, can we still pass valid feminist judgments about the political tendencies and implications of texts? For we don't know how audiences will use and interpret texts . . . If one interpretation is not by definition better or more valid than another, what