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An Ethnography of Political Identification: The Birmingham School Meets Psychoanalytic Theory

Kimberly Chabot Davis

Scholarly work on the topic of identification—on how readers and viewers identify with cultural texts—has suffered from a rift between two fields of inquiry, psychoanalysis and ethnography. Practitioners in these two fields often view themselves as antagonists propounding antithetical knowledge claims. Psychoanalytic film and literary theorists locate meaning in the text, arguing that identification is a function of textually embedded codes that suture the spectator or reader into particular subject positions. In contrast, ethnographers working in media and cultural studies decry such textual and theoretical determinism, arguing that any study of how identification or interpretation takes place should be based upon interviews with actual audience members rather than speculations about “implied spectators.” This perceived rift has led many audience researchers to ignore new psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity focused on the fluidity and intersectionality of identity, and thus they continue to adopt essentialist ideas about group difference in their studies of patterns of consumption. This is clearly a case in which disciplinary boundaries and enmities have prevented a fertile exchange of ideas about identification with cultural texts.

Borrowing insights from both camps, I offer a hybrid methodology in my own case study of identification, in which I interviewed readers and viewers of a cultural style I call “sentimental postmodernism.” This mixed-code style combines the emotional strategies of sentimentality and melodrama—chiefly their solicitation of identification—with a postmodern critique of identity politics and essentialism. While I invoke psychoanalytic and post-structuralist concepts concerning spectatorship and identification to explain the audience responses to these texts, I also use the ethnographic data to question and revise existing theory. In my work, audience ethnography and theories of sub-

jectivity are dialectically engaged with one another rather than at odds. Valerie Walkerdine employs a similar hybrid methodology in her book *Daddy's Girl*, in which she presents an “ethnography of the unconscious” desires and defenses of working class girls, as they interact with popular cultural representations of girlhood (122).¹ Likewise, Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing* offers an empirical study of female fans of Hollywood movie stars in order to revise psychoanalytic identification theory. While these two studies address the complexities of gender identification, my ethnography focuses on forms of identification that are either ignored or underemphasized by psychoanalytic theory—fluid identifications that cross traditional identity boundaries, enabling audiences to forge a consciously political sense of self that subverts rather than supports the status quo. By engaging in an ethnography of “political identification,” I combine the Birmingham School's attention to the politics of cultural consumption with a psychoanalytic emphasis on emotion and the formation of subjectivity.

Such a methodological mediation is still relatively rare, given the lasting power of the schism between the Birmingham School and psychoanalytic theorists. One of the essays that inaugurated the rift was David Morley's “Texts, Readers, Subjects” (1980), in which he attacked psychoanalytic film theory, typified by the journal *Screen*, from the position of the Birmingham cultural studies school. Complaining that apparatus or “suture” theory treats readers merely as “bearers or puppets of their unconscious positionings” (167), Morley instead describes the reader as an active participant in the construction of meaning and the “struggle in ideology” (165). Similarly, Stuart Hall has spoken out against textual determinism, stressing that audiences do “interpretive work” (“Encoding/decoding” 134). Implicitly criticizing a psychoanalytic reading

strategy that locates Oedipal narratives within texts, Hall argues that “the meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and for ever. . . . The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates” (“Notes” 235). Thus, he contends, cultural products are “never whole, never fully closed or ‘sutured’” (Grossberg 56), because their meaning depends on surrounding social contexts and the audiences that interpret them. The theories of Hall and Morley sparked a flurry of ethnographic work on the consumption of media texts, work that implicitly challenged the premises of psychoanalytic theory.² Since ethnographers believe that identifications can not be determined by the text alone, they view psychoanalytic critical reading strategies as an inadequate explanatory tool.

In response, many psychoanalytic critics have reacted defensively against the cultural studies call to investigate consumption. Mary Ann Doane disdains the practice of ethnography because it is based on the “working assumption that the primary effects of the media concern consciousness” rather than the unconscious (*Camera Obscura* 146). She complains that audience research reveals only easily articulated responses rather than hard-to-access unconscious reactions. By adhering to the common critical practice of viewing the female spectator as “a concept, not a person” (*Camera Obscura* 142), Doane neglects to consider the possibility that human audiences could offer any knowledge about the process of spectatorship, or even the functionings of the unconscious. Her logic—that viewers have nothing useful to tell us about the workings of the human mind—ignores the fact that the principles of psychoanalysis were predicated upon case studies of patients. While I dislike her condescending attitude toward real viewers, Doane makes an important defense of theory, arguing that “forms of abstraction are crucial to thought itself and are not necessarily in conflict with the ‘real.’ Our abstractions are our realities. We live them every day” (*Femmes Fatales* 10). I completely agree with this point, but it could unfortunately be used as an apology for not testing one’s theories in real-life situations or on real human subjects. People need abstractions, but theories can also become

untethered from reality. Reflecting on psychoanalytic theories of female spectatorship, Miriam Hansen voices the criticism that ethnographers level against such theoretical elitism: “we need to grant the ‘ordinary’ female viewer a certain interpretive capability, a reflective distance in relation to the roles she is expected to assume” (172). Like Hansen, I value the responses of “ordinary viewers” as rich sources of information concerning the process of identification.

Psychoanalytic critics like Doane might complain that my ethnography privileges easy-to-access conscious responses and ignores the unconscious. I believe that such an argument underestimates the fluid connections that can be forged between the unconscious and conscious minds, and between the psychic and the socio-political, particularly through the process of identification. In *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Kaja Silverman underscores the ability of the conscious mind to access and change the process of the unconscious (3–5). Although film viewers often unconsciously identify with dominant social positions portrayed on screen, Silverman argues that they can be re-educated by radical films to identify with and idealize “disprized bodies” in subordinate social positions (26). She concludes: “These are not lessons that we can ever unconsciously learn, they must be taught to us over and over again at the only site at which knowledge is possible—at the site, that is, of consciousness” (226–7). Even though Silverman analyzes textual codes with the use of psychoanalytic theory rather than focusing on reception (other than her own), her insights resonate with my work on the political identifications of audiences of sentimental postmodernism. My ethnography investigates the moments at which unconscious identifications surface into the conscious mind and thus become open to politicization. Like the experimental films Silverman analyzes, sentimental postmodernist texts aim to push identifications out of the unconscious and into the light, where they can be consciously considered and perhaps influence political praxis. And as Silverman implies, such texts may have the power to alter our unconscious psychic investments and alignments as well. My study attempts to ground some of Silverman’s theoretical speculations by investigating audiences’ own experiences of identification.

While I use ethnography to test and revise the suppositions of identification theory, I also employ post-structuralist theories of subjectivity to avoid the sociological determinism exhibited by many audience studies. I speculate that the history of disciplinary enmities between ethnographers and psychoanalytic critics has unfortunately led audience researchers to ignore new psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity focused on the fluidity and intersectionality of identity. Lamenting that “cultural studies has shied away from psychology since the former’s inception” (7), Valerie Walkerdine contends that “cultural studies desperately needs the very work on subjectivity that it rejected along with Screen Theory” (56). Unlike most audience studies, my study of identification is informed by the recent work of psychoanalytic feminist and queer theorists such as Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and Silverman, who aim to deconstruct the essentialism of earlier Freudian models of subjectivity. These Lacan-influenced anti-essentialist critics have re-theorized identity as multiple and layered rather than unitary, and fluid rather than static.³ Lesbian theorist Sallie Munt, for example, describes a “multivalent self” based on a useful model of “intersecting plates, so that the ground of the self shifts and recombines with the intervention and chafing of other selves, which sculpt a new self based on intersubjectivity” (2). Judith Butler’s work also focuses on the intersectionality of identity, on the “crossings of identifications of which [the subject] is itself composed” (*Bodies* 115). This reconceptualization of subjectivity leads to a view of identification as a more fluid process that can not be predicted by a single identity, such as the gender or race of a viewer or reader.

These crucial insights have had little impact on empirical investigations of audience response, which often conflate identity with identification. Partly because of the field’s origins in sociological understandings of group identity, audience ethnographies continue to be plagued by the problem of the “creeping essentialism that lurks behind the classificatory move” (Ang, *Living* 116). Many studies of reading focus on a single axis of identity, thereby reducing audience members to their gender, race, or class, and perpetuating the notion that belonging to a particular identity cohort necessarily determines one’s response to the text’s ideology and which characters one might identify with.

For example, Janice Radway’s single-axis study of female romance readers would have benefited from a consideration of how class, religion, race, and educational background could result in more diverse patterns of interpretation. Similarly, in his study of audiences of the British news program *Nationwide*, David Morley organizes the viewers into a schematic grid according to socio-economic status, thereby privileging class difference as a predictor of interpretation and identification. Jacqueline Bobo’s study of “the black female audience” for *The Color Purple* implies that all black women identify with this film and novel in the same unitary way; no attention is paid to the complexities of individual subjectivity.

In contrast to these examples of sociological determinism, my audience ethnographies are informed by anti-essentialist theories of subjectivity, in that I investigate how multiple axes of identity can complicate a viewer or reader’s positioning.⁴ For example, in my study of audience responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (the novel, film, and musical versions), I look at differences in identification patterns and interpretations among a group of gay men, differences influenced by their political affiliations, gender-identifications as effeminate or macho, and adherence to either an essentialist gay identity or an anti-essentialist queer model. Only half of the gay men that I interviewed identified with the effeminate gay character Molina, and many in fact identified with Valentin, the macho political prisoner who could be read as either straight or bisexual. As one self-described black gay political activist said: “I see myself like Valentin, trapped, not allowed to be the full round circle that I could be, in a hostile situation. Since my identity and my sexuality have a political base, I identify with Valentin rather than Molina.” It is important to consider that identities are multiple and layered, and that there are many different ways of experiencing even a supposedly singular identity, such as femininity or homosexuality. Such cross-group identifications between gays and straights highlight the fact that a singular identity category can not wholly define people or their ability to relate to others. The man in the previous example is not only homosexual and male, but is also queer, black, feminist, leftist, a social worker, a college graduate, and masculine-identified.

The multivalent identification of one heterosexual fan of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* poses a serious challenge to unitary theories of identity employed by many ethnographers. This fan identified with Valentin's leftist politics but also with Molina's rejection of politics, since he has become jaded about the efficacy of his past activism in the 1960s. While he identified with Valentin for being masculine, he also connected with Molina's gender flux since he used to impersonate female singers when he was an adolescent. Now he defines himself as straight like Valentin but his experimentation with homosexuality in college gave him a kinship with Molina. The layering of such multiple and contradicting identities enabled him to experience a network of identifications with various groups. My ethnographic work thus highlights that subjectivity can be experienced as a palimpsest, in which previous identities are never completely erased; such a finding challenges the suppositions of many audience researchers and of earlier psychoanalytic film critics such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, who treated identity and identification as static rather than dynamic.

While anti-essentialist theories of subjectivity have informed my ethnographic focus on multivalent identifications, I also aim to question some key premises of psychoanalytic theory. Challenging the psychoanalytic assumption that "secondary identification" is primarily an unconscious process, I contend that identification is a form of articulation that can involve a conscious negotiation between self and other.⁵ My study of feminist viewers of the film *The Piano* underscores this point. The widely divergent responses to *The Piano* among the women I interviewed highlight the fact that identification is an ideological process, rather than one that simply devolves from the female body or psyche. Feminist viewers of *The Piano* recognized that their identification and/or disidentification with the protagonist Ada was influenced by their own adherence to particular feminist ideologies, such as difference feminism, postmodern anti-essentialist feminism, victims-rights feminism, power feminism, lesbian separatism, Marxist feminism, or combinations thereof. Many postmodern feminists in the group identified with Ada not simply as a woman, but as someone who shares their ideology: "Ada is bucking all the gender categories that

she's got. I'm also interested in taking apart gender as coming from some biological essence." Some feminists consciously rejected an identification with Ada because she did not fit their image of an ideal feminist heroine. One woman said: "I don't think it's a good message as far as women's control over their own lives. She's definitely an object of the male gaze through the whole thing." This woman's work as a counselor at a rape crisis center led her to read the text as a representation of female victimization, which in turn led her to disidentify with the female protagonist.

As these examples suggest, identification can often be affected by a viewer's conscious understanding of the politics of gender identity, a possibility ignored by critics such as Anne Friedberg, who asserts that "identification with a film star does not entail a cognitive choice" ("Denial of Difference" 36). Rooting their work in the essentialist premises of Freud and even Lacan, spectatorship theorists Doane and Laura Mulvey neglect to consider female viewers as self-aware subjects for whom gender is only one of many identity formations.⁶ Much like many audience researchers, their exclusive focus on gender difference leads them to underestimate the differences *within* each gender, caused by other social identities such as race and class, or by political ideologies such as anti-racism or a particular kind of feminism. My ethnographic work counters a psychoanalytic privileging of unconscious over conscious responses by highlighting that identification is also a process of social articulation in which audiences can actively participate. I do not mean to suggest that studying conscious responses can reveal all the complexities motivating various identifications, but I want to urge psychoanalytic critics to pay more attention to the interrelated nature of conscious and unconscious identifications, as does Kaja Silverman.

Another key problem with essentialist models is that they define identification as a process of recognizing sameness, disallowing that identification may also entail an awareness of difference. Working with Lacan's concept of the mirror stage in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey reduces identification to the simple pleasure of recognizing oneself as in a mirror (17–18). Freud's identification theories have generally emphasized sameness over difference: "identification endeavors to mould a person's ego after the

fashion of the one that has been taken as a model" (*Group Psychology* 106). Claiming that identification "disallows difference" (36), Anne Friedberg asserts that "identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo" ("Denial of Difference" 45). In the recent book *The Perverse Gaze of Sympathy*, Laura Hinton echoes these theorists by focusing on "identification as resemblance," or a search for one's own "self-ideality" (26). Jackie Stacey has criticized those who view identification as a recognition of similarities that perpetuates static views of the self; alternatively, she looks at fans whose identifications with female stars "involve the productive recognition of differences between femininities" (171). My study also focuses on people identifying with subjects whom they recognize to be different from themselves. Many of the gay men in my study of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, for example, identified with the gay character while simultaneously asserting that they are not as effeminate and apolitical as he is. The concept of a singular identity is simply a fallacy, since there are many ways of experiencing any identity. As Judith Butler reminds, "femininity itself might offer an array of identificatory sites" rather than a single one (*Bodies* 239). Likewise, many women identified with Ada McGrath in *The Piano* "as a woman," but experienced that identity in multitudinous ways.

In opposition to these theories which treat identification as a process of self-recognition, my case study revealed a significant incidence of cross-group identification. A large number of these viewers and readers were able to cross the boundaries of "difference" to identify with their social others. For example, male feminist viewers of *The Piano* identified with the silent woman Ada rather than with the controlling male characters, heterosexual readers and viewers identified with the gay character in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and white mainstream viewers of the television program *Northern Exposure* were able to identify with Jews, Native Americans, and gay characters. A few psychoanalytic critics have drawn attention to cross-group identifications, or vacillating identifications, as a positive form of psychic fantasy enabled by popular texts. Invoking Freud's essay "A Child Is Being Beaten," which addresses the fluid positions of desire in fantasy, Eliza-

beth Cowie argues that films offer spectators the opportunity to try out many subject positions (mother, child, male, female). Critical of the concept of suture with its notion of fixed identities, she contends that viewers identify with types of desires in an Oedipal scenario rather than with identities (72–3). Cora Kaplan makes a similar argument concerning a literary text in her essay "*The Thorn Birds*: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity." Cowie and Kaplan, however, see such fluid identifications as scripted within the text, rather than investigating whether audiences could be moved to become conscious of such fluidity. It is one thing to experience an identification with the other in an unconscious fantasy space, and quite another to admit to such an identification and perhaps to use that identification to build political coalitions in public space. Whereas Cowie and Kaplan tentatively suggested the liberatory possibilities inherent in such a fluid textuality, I have seen such possibility realized among this audience group, whose conscious experiences of cross-group identification enabled them to forge and strengthen their own political identities as leftists.

While a few psychoanalytic critics address the phenomenon of cross-group identification positively, many others view it as a means of domination or submission rather than a reflection of liberal or radical empathy. For example, Laura Mulvey admits that female spectators may identify with an active male protagonist, but she calls such an identification a sad act of transvestitism ("Afterthoughts" 30). I take issue with the suggestion that "transvestite" cross-gender identification is to be lamented as illusory, a kind of false consciousness for women. In my study of *Northern Exposure*, many women viewers identified with the androgynous and feminist male characters Ed and Chris; such identifications could be read as progressive rather than retrograde, a reflection of an anti-essentialist feminist sensibility and a rejection of gender stereotypes. Not only have many theorists deemed retrograde any identification of socially subordinate people with those in dominant social positions, but they often disdain identifications of the powerful with the powerless as an aggressive act of colonization. Based on my interviews with various viewers and readers who are taking up the political challenge to identify against their own group interests, I question the Freudian and

Lacanian premise that cross-group identification necessarily involves an imperialist erasure of the other. Identification, Freud reasons, operates like a hostile, colonizing incorporation that “behaves like a derivative of the first, oral phase . . . in which the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such” (*Group Psychology* 105). In her reading of Frantz Fanon, Diana Fuss asserts that “identification . . . is an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of self” (*Identification* 145). Freud and Fuss wrongly conclude that identification always involves turning the other into the same, thereby erasing difference.

The theory of incorporation cannot account for the fact that many members of my audience group experienced a more ambivalent identification process, which involved a recognition of incongruities and a respect for difference rather than a desire for assimilation. Among my audience group, I saw many instances of ambivalence in which people both identified and disidentified with the same character, a finding which underscores the contradictory, multiple, and fractured nature of subjectivity. For example, many politicized gay men identified with the seemingly heterosexual political prisoner Valentin but were critical of his machismo. White environmentalists identified with the earth-worshipping philosophy of the Native Americans on *Northern Exposure*, and welcomed the Indians’ criticism of white culture and rationalist beliefs. This experience of cross-group identification did not lead these white viewers, however, to presume a mastering knowledge of the experience of disadvantaged minorities. These viewers’ selves were not completely swallowed up by the other, and vice versa. As cognitive film theorist Berys Gaut has argued, identification is partial or “aspectual” rather than whole, since two subjects are never equivalent.⁷

Although some psychoanalytic critics have addressed ambivalence or vacillation in identification, theorists still underscore hostility as a core element of such identifications. A common argument is that an ambivalent identification involves both a connection and a refusal, sympathy as well as hatred. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud points out that the “sons hate their father but they also simultaneously love and admire him”

(Fuss, *Identification* 34), and thus he reasons that identification “can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as a wish for someone’s removal” (*Group Psychology* 105). Likewise, Judith Butler notes that “identification is always an ambivalent process” (*Bodies* 126) since it can include “unresolved aggression” (143). However, I do not read the ambivalent identifications among my audience groups as necessarily indicative of hatred or aggression lying beneath outward sympathy. Many of these people were able to identify while also recognizing their differences in respectful and non-hostile ways, in the ethic of “live and let live.” Instead of reading ambivalence as reflective of the aggressive and violent underpinnings of the universal human psyche, as do these psychoanalytic theorists, I see ambivalent identification as a positive social development, an awareness of difference that prevents a colonizing incorporation yet leaves room for sympathy and connection. For example, many of the male feminists in my study identified with Ada’s struggles against patriarchy yet did not forget their own complicity with patriarchy; nor did they presume to understand all that women experience.

More so than Freud, Lacan acknowledges that identification involves the recognition of difference, but he sees these moments as frustrating for the individual, who despairs that he can never equal his ideal other. Lacan argues that the subject is always alienated and split between self and an ideal image/other. While Lacan’s concept of the split subject prefigures post-structuralist notions of identity as contradictory and unstable, I find it problematic because it is predicated on a premise of psychic hostility just like Freud’s theories—that the self and other are “rivals” rather than teachers or potential allies.⁸ There is no consideration in Lacan’s theories that encounters with the other could help to broaden and enrich the self. Lynne Layton has similarly criticized Butler (and Lacan) for “restricting subjectivity to a narcissistic elision of otherness” (218).

Jessica Benjamin’s theory of intersubjective “identificatory love” and Kaja Silverman’s work on “excorporative identifications” offer a welcome alternative to Freud and Lacan’s view of identification as a hostile take-over. Their theories aptly describe the ambivalent identifications I found among my audience groups. A

theorist of the school of relational psychoanalysis, Benjamin argues that Freud's theory of "internalization implies that the other is consumed, incorporated, digested by the subject self.... The joy of discovering the other, the agency of the self, and the outsideness of the other—these are at best only fuzzily apprehended by internalization theory" (*Bonds* 43). Her theory of "identificatory love" describes a relation that involves the "ability to share feelings and intentions without demanding control, to experience sameness without obliterating difference" (*Bonds* 48). She posits that such a "mutual recognition" of the subjecthood of the Other could lead to a transformation of the self, and she explicitly connects identificatory love to the political projects of feminism and anti-racism. Instead of looking at ambivalent identification as a form of unconscious hostility or alienation, I read it along with Benjamin as a sign of mutual recognition—a positive form of co-feeling or "double identification" that fosters respect for the unknowable difference of the Other (*Shadow* 107).

In a similar critique of Freud's emphasis on incorporation, film theorist Kaja Silverman describes an alternative form of "heteropathic" or "excorporative" identification as a "lifting of the psyche up and out of the body . . . into other sites of suffering" (*Male* 275). In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, she focuses on texts which enable a male identification with abject femininity. Silverman argues that this masochistic and empathetic form of identification "works against the consolidation of the isolated ego" (275) and against the "imperialism of the self" (265), thus offering a powerful political attack on masculinity and violence. In her more recent book *The Threshold of the Visible World*, Silverman expands her theory beyond cross-gender identification. She discusses excorporative identification as an "active gift of love" (74) that involves "forming an imaginary alignment with bodily coordinates which cannot be assimilated to one's own" (71) and that may in fact be culturally devalued. She builds her theory upon analysis of political films such as Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*, which encourages spectators to idealize black, gay bodies. I concur with Silverman's hope that cross-group identification can work as an agent of "psychic and social change" (*Threshold* 85).

Like Benjamin and Silverman, I hesitate to read an

identification with the other as merely self-serving. My ethnographic work has convinced me of the potential of cross-group identification to foster a desire for progressive political coalitions. In studying the identifications of audience members, I have seen many examples of what Sallie Munt calls the "visiting self, which leans into the experience of others and listens and learns" (4). For many of the people I interviewed, identification is "an amalgam of experience and desire, a process not of exclusion, but of 'pivoting.' This sensibility produces a sense of belonging, a sense of 'we,' which is not an attempt to universalize" (Munt 4). For example, many feminist men who identified with Ada in *The Piano* did so in an excorporative way with radical political significance. Several men used their own marginalized identities as racial and sexual minorities to empathize with Ada's experiences. A man who defines himself as queer hated both male characters in *The Piano* for objectifying Ada, and he empathized with Ada's frustrations with the limitations of heterosexual men. As a gay man, he also connected with Ada's muteness and her expressive piano playing: "you could really say that about a number of groups that have been oppressed, such as homosexuals, that there's an outlet, an escape that they find in artistic expression. I myself wrote a story where not muteness but an inability to feel tactilely was kind of a metaphor for being homosexual." One African-American male similarly understood Ada's experience of oppression as parallel to his own: "there will always be sexism, just like there's always racism that keeps you down at the bottom of the ocean." These examples are testaments of the potential for coalitions among subordinate groups, and cultural texts may play a significant role in fostering such counter-hegemonic alliances.

I also saw subversive potential in the ability of people in dominant social positions, such as heterosexuals, to identify with those in the minority. For example, several heterosexual viewers and readers were surprised by their identification with Molina in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, which worked to destabilize their belief in a clear opposition between self and other. In addition to the cross-group identifications revealed in my interviews of *Kiss* fans, I also noted the transformative power of identification among an audience group that I observed informally—my students at the University

of Virginia, where the student culture is not known for being gay-friendly. While some homophobia marked the class discussions of the first few chapters of *Kiss*, the heterosexual students' sympathy for Molina grew exponentially to the point of intense grief at his death. A closeted gay student in our class was so encouraged by this outpouring of empathy that he came out to his classmates during our discussion and was treated with remarkable sensitivity. These examples illustrate Jessica Benjamin's point that cross-group identification can entail a respectful recognition of the subjecthood of the Other, a recognition that has the power to transform the self. Studying readers and viewers of cultural texts has helped me to question and complicate psychoanalytic theories about identification, often predicated upon an overly deterministic understanding of both identity and textuality.

In my hybrid methodology, ethnographic analysis of audiences has led to a direct engagement with psychoanalytic theory, rather than to a rejection of it. I aim to bridge a gap between two fields that have much to teach each other. Recent anti-essentialist psychoanalytic theories offer the best means of moving audience research beyond a problematic reification of demographic categories of identity. Although psychoanalytic theorists see empirical work as inimical or irrelevant to their textual exegesis, I have found much evidence to corroborate their new postmodern understandings of identity as mutable, ambivalent, and multiple rather than static and unitary. Yet I also remain skeptical of the tendency to adopt psychoanalytic ideas wholesale as a master key decoder, rather than testing their application at particular moments of cultural articulation. Ethnographic work can thus be an important means of refining and opening up new ground for more nuanced theorizing about subjectivity. Just as the founders of psychoanalysis revised their ideas through encounters with patients, critical theory about subjectivity and identification can be greatly enriched by an interface with the object of critical speculation—spectators and readers. I hope that my ethnographic work stands as an important reminder that these objects of speculation are in fact subjects whose own narratives have much to tell us about the meaning and political significance of cultural texts.

NOTES

¹See the essay collection *Changing the Subject*, edited by Julian Henriques et al, for articles that combine empirical research with psychoanalytic and post-structuralist theory. While these social scientists use empirical research with human subjects to test and revise psychological theories, they do not explore the consumption of cultural texts by audiences. See also Lynne Layton's *Who's That Girl? Who's That Boy?*, which uses her clinical work as an analyst to question some premises of postmodern gender theory. Layton also explores the role of popular culture in the formation of gendered subjectivity.

²See Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance*; Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads*; and David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience*.

³For other non-psychoanalytic analyses of intersectionality which examine the imbrication of multiple identities, such as race and gender, see Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, and Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations."

⁴Other fine multiple-axis ethnographies are Walkerdine's *Daddy's Girl*, which investigates the imbrication of class, gender, and age, and Purnima Mankekar's recent book *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*. Employing post-structuralist theories of subjectivity, Mankekar studies the multiplicitous identities of Indian women as they are shaped in the interaction with state-supported television texts.

⁵For the distinction between primary and secondary identification, see Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*.

⁶There has been some debate about whether the work of Freud and Lacan should be considered essentialist or anti-essentialist. While psychoanalysis is a theory of the social construction of the psyche, Freud nonetheless based many of his ideas about gender on the recognition of biological difference (e.g. woman as castrated). As Jane Gaines argues, because Freud "strikes a mean between the biological and the social" ("Women" 80), his ideas have been used to support biological essentialism. On the other hand, Lacan has been hailed as an anti-essentialist who focuses on discourses rather than bodies, but his notion of the "subject position" nonetheless relies on essentialist underpinnings (Fuss, *Essentially* 29). Even more problematic, Diana Fuss argues, is his universalizing treatment of woman as lack (*Essentially* 12). For a reading of Lacan as anti-essentialist, see Doane's "Women's Stake: Filming the Female Body" in her book *Femmes Fatales*. She argues that psychoanalysis is anti-essentialist and merely uses "the body as a prop, a support for its description of sexuality as a discursive function" (172).

⁷Television critic Tamar Liebes also discusses the complex mixture of disidentification and identification. For example, Liebes sets out a few of the many possibilities: wanting to be like someone but knowing that you never can be; hating someone but fearing you are like them; identifying with someone but wishing that you were different from them.

⁸See Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*, 22.

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