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A

**WOMEN'S SOAP OPERA VIEWING AS FEMINIST PRACTICE:**

**A GENDER CONTEXT PERSPECTIVE**

by

DANNIELLE BLUMENTHAL

A dissertation submitted

to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

The City University of New York.

1997

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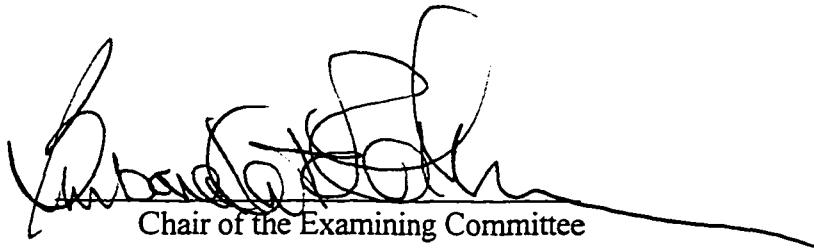
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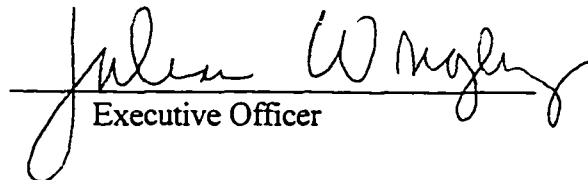
### III. APPROVAL

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction for the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1/29/94  
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Executive Officer

Dr. Barbara Katz Rothman

Dr. Catherine Silver

Dr. Lindsey Churchill

Dr. Michelle Fine

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

#### **IV. ABSTRACT**

### **Women's Soap Opera Viewing As Feminist Praxis:**

#### **A Gender Context Perspective**

by

Dannielle Blumenthal

Advisor: Dr. Barbara Katz Rothman

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the extent to which soap opera viewing among women constitutes a form of feminist praxis. In the course of this study, 91 women were surveyed, 42 were interviewed formally, and many more were informally interviewed. Other methods of study included subscription to a fan magazine, review of online viewer bulletins, and qualitative content analysis.

The study was framed by both a cultural feminist approach and a gender context perspective. From these, a number of conclusions were drawn, all of them supporting the view that soap opera viewing is indeed a form of feminist praxis.

The first conclusion, drawn from the standpoint of the viewer, is that soap operas are a feminist text because they glorify women's unique capacities while simultaneously presenting a model of equal ability between men and women.

Second, feminist cultural critics are coming to recognize the soap opera as a feminist text. For these scholars, the soaps' feminist aesthetic derives both from the gynecentric form of the programs and from the ability of women to control our indulgence in representational culture and to enjoy it, whether others approve of it or not.

Third, the gendered social contexts surrounding women's soap opera viewing support the contention that this activity is empowering. Women resist opposition from others in order to continue viewing. We also see them as a form of self-care. Finally, soap operas serve to connect women with each other, in a supportive network of viewers.

## V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you...

To God, for the many miracles that brought me to the completion of this degree. I recognize Your guiding presence in my life.

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To all of those whose contributed to this research: my family, friends, and all the women who sent in a survey and/or allowed me to interview them. I appreciate your assistance in bringing this study to completion.

## VI. DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Andrew Blumenthal, who is my soul mate and twin, whom I love with all my heart. Andy, you are kind, brilliant, handsome, mature, and you have real integrity. I have learned so much from you, and you are such a truly wonderful person. Your love is real and solid, and I know that I can always count on you to be there. These past four years, you have helped me to complete this degree in every way possible. You have loved and supported me, and have provided a "sounding board" for me, through this whole process. Out of love for me, you have--among numerous other things--watched Minna so I could go to school and write my papers, shlepped countless books, clipped every newspaper and magazine article you thought would interest me, and handed out surveys for the dissertation. You have helped me not only by your actions, but also by simply sharing yourself and your life with me. Your presence in my life continually inspires me to go beyond what I thought were my own limitations. I am so very proud of you and of our beautiful family. May we grow, together, forever.

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forget the many hours we have spent together at school, in the library, in the computer lab, and writing on the chalkboard in Prof. Silver's office. My wish for you is that you continue to grow up as beautifully as you are now, with the same love of learning that you have always shown, even from your first days here on earth. You and Daddy are my whole life.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my parents-in-law, Gerda and Fred Blumenthal. They have spent countless hours helping me out: baby-sitting Minna, driving me home from school at night, and just plain being supportive. Their help has enabled me to obtain this degree. Mom and Dad, you are two of the most generous people I have ever met.

## VII. TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	TITLE PAGE .....	i
II.	COPYRIGHT .....	ii
III.	APPROVAL .....	iii
IV.	ABSTRACT .....	iv
V.	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vi
VI.	DEDICATION .....	viii
VII.	TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	x
VIII.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
	<b>Purpose</b>	
	<b>Terms</b>	
	<b>Personal Interest</b>	
	<b>Methods</b>	
	<b>Frameworks</b>	
IX.	A CULTURAL FEMINIST STUDY.....	14
	<b>The Personal As Intellectual And Political</b>	
	<i>On The Eligibility To Speak As A Feminist</i>	
	<i>Cultural Feminism: My Own Orientation Towards Feminism And Its Context In A Conflicted Arena Of Discourse</i>	
	<b>Feminist Study And The Academy: Research As Praxis</b>	
	<i>Questions Addressed By The Study And Their Limitations</i>	

*What Makes A Mode Of Study Feminist? On  
Gender-Liberatory Research*

**Feminist Perspective-Taking: Some Aspects**

*A Totalistic Understanding: Being  
Interdisciplinary*

*Fluidity and Multiple Viewpoints: Perspective  
Over Theory*

**Feminist Qualitative Methodology: Some  
Aspects**

*Subjectivity As A Stance*

*Ethical Concerns*

**Calling All Resources: Adapting Feminist-  
Compatible Qualitative Methodologies**

*Ethnomethodology*

*Psychoanalytic Methodology*

**Methods**

*Survey*

*Interviews*

*Content Analysis*

*Magazine Subscription*

*Going Online*

X.	<p><b>THE GENDER CONTEXT PERSPECTIVE AND ITS ANTECEDENTS .....74</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>“Effects”</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>“Gratifications”</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>“Audience Response”</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>Feminist Perspectives</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><b>A Gender Context Perspective: Women’s Soap Opera Viewing As Interrelated Components Of A Feminist Praxis</b></p>
XI.	<p><b>FEMINIST PRACTICE, COMPONENT I: THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN WOMEN VIEWERS AND GENDERED TEXT .....92</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><b>Women Viewers On Soaps vs. Talkshows: Feminine Oriented Emotionality As A Primary Source Of Enjoyment</b></p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><i>On Soaps: Feminine Oriented Emotionality as an Attraction</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;">VENTING</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;">TRUTH</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;">JUSTICE</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;">ROMANCE</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;"><i>On Talkshows: Masculinized Emotion Displays As A Turnoff</i></p>

**Women Viewers On Feminism: The Interplay  
Between Identity Construction And Meaning  
Construction In The Act Of Viewing**

XII. FEMINIST PRAXIS, COMPONENT II:  
FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP ON THE  
GENDERED SOAP OPERA TEXT .....136

**Arriving At A Feminist Aesthetic**

**Academic Conceptualizations of Soap Opera  
Form and Content**

*Form*

*Content*

**Feminist Scholarship on Soap Operas: The  
Feminine Aesthetic as a Feminist Aesthetic**

XIII. FEMINIST PRAXIS, COMPONENT III: THE  
GENDERED SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF  
WOMEN'S SOAP OPERA VIEWING.....158

**Overcoming The Social Devaluation Of  
Women's Soap Opera Viewing**

*The General Subordination Of Women's  
Culture And The Particular Subordination  
of Soap Operas*

*Negative Stereotypes Of Soap Opera Viewers*

*Facing Down Opposition In Order To Keep  
Viewing*

**Soap Operas As Self-Nurturance: Setting Aside  
Time Away From Caring for Others**

*A Larger Frame: Selfishness Vs. Caretaking In  
Women's Gender Socialization*

*Ladies First: Taking Time Out For The Soaps*

**Soap Operas As Communal Womanspace**

*One Of Many Ways Women Create Supportive Spaces For Each Other*

*Soap Operas As A Particular Occasion For Woman-Bonding*

XIV. CONCLUSION.....206

**Summary of Findings**

**Implications of the Gender Context Perspective for Feminist Research**

*A Fuller Understanding Of The Implications For Feminism Of Women's Cultural Activities*

*Expanding The Universe Of Feminist Discourse*

XV. APPENDIX: SURVEY RESPONSES .....211

**Viewing Habits**

**Feelings/Opinions About Soap Operas**

**Issues Related To Feminism**

**Demographics**

**Written Comments**

XVI. BIBLIOGRAPHY .....240

## VIII. INTRODUCTION

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the extent to which soap opera viewing among women constitutes a form of feminist praxis. This is part of a broader program of feminist scholarship and of action research in general, fusing political with intellectual objectives in the interest of helping to create a better world. In particular, I believe that women's empowerment will have positive consequences for society as a whole. The latter is my political interest, which goes hand in hand with the challenge that faces me intellectually: how to define what "women's empowerment" is, or can be said to mean. This issue brings us back to the aim of this dissertation, which is to take as a case study a specific cultural activity, soap opera viewing, which is predominantly engaged in by women (Waldrop and Crispell 1988). Here, I will analyze how engaging this activity is purposeful, transformative, and empowering for women.

## Terms

In order to delimit the parameters of this work, and to clarify what is meant by the vocabulary used here, I am going to briefly explain, from the outset, what the major terms refer to<sup>1</sup>:

- Women/women soap opera viewers: In a larger sense, "women" here means "social women," people whom society genders as such. More specifically, "women soap opera viewers" refers to social women who engage in soap opera viewing and/or related activities. Even more narrowly, all the women in the surveys/interviews classify themselves as heterosexual, and most are White, at least high school educated, and middle to upper (household) income. All live in the United States. Therefore, the findings and discussion about "women soap opera viewers" are not universal, but are limited only to certain "types" of social women, and should be read with this in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of these, like "feminist," will also be explored in greater detail later on in the study.

- Culture:women's culture: "Culture." like "women." is a term used in this study both generally and specifically. In general, "Culture is the way of life--the values, beliefs, and customs--that distinguishes one group from another". (Billson 1995:4) "Culture" is also used in a narrower sense, as symbolic or representational culture, such as "art, music, literature and other symbolic products" (Tuchman 1976:193, citing Gans 1966:550). "Women's culture" refers to general or representational cultural activities which women predominantly engage in. Soap opera content is one example of women's representational culture: needlepoint, knitting, and quilt-making are other examples<sup>2</sup>. On a more general level, paid occupations such as nursing, secretarial work, modeling and prostitution are examples of women's culture. Domestic-related work and/or leisure time activities (paid or unpaid), such as

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2 The paradoxical fact that women's culture can be seen simultaneously in two opposing ways--as representing women's experience and therefore authentic for women, or as upholding male privilege and therefore alienating for women--is at the root of the feminist debate surrounding it. The question of whether to value or devalue women's unique experiences under patriarchy is at the heart of this study. As a cultural feminist, my stance is that women's culture serves patriarchy only to the extent that men control it, that cooption is a key to conceptualizing feminist culture (see Barrett 1982), but clearly there are other valid approaches to this problem.

housework, food and/or clothing shopping, and cooking are other examples. "Women's talk" (e.g., gossip), considered here as it relates to soap opera viewing, like other related activities (not only watching itself, but reading about it, etc.) blurs the boundaries between general and representational culture, because these are at once part of a "way of life" but also involve creating representations of life, through mental interpretations and through written and spoken language. Therefore, from the perspective of this study, soap opera viewing and its associated activities are treated as "women's culture" that exists on both levels.

- Soap opera viewing: In this study, the term "soap opera" refers to the daytime serials broadcast daily (during weekdays) over the three major television networks in the United States: ABC, NBC, and CBS. Some scholars consider any type of serialized drama to be a soap opera, and distinguish only between daytime soaps (such as "All My Children") and evening soaps (such as "Melrose Place"). For the purpose of this study, however, the term "soap opera" refers only to the daytime soaps. I have limited this study to daytime soap operas because they are recognizably different

from nighttime ones, particularly in regard to their slow pace and women-centered storylines. The latter is important for this study because we are looking at the interaction between mass culture that is produced for women, and actual female viewers. Whereas evening soaps are targeted to a primetime viewing audience which is not seen as gender-specific, daytime soap operas are made to appeal to women, the perceived daytime audience (King 1991). "Soap opera viewing" is an umbrella term for soap opera viewing and all activities associated with it, such as taping the shows on the VCR for later viewing, viewing/discussing the shows with others, reading about them in periodicals, and so on.

- Feminist/cultural feminist: This term will be explored more fully in Chapter 9, but briefly, a feminist is defined ideologically and in terms of practical activity, as anyone who recognizes the reality of women's oppression, and who works to dismantle it. I am a cultural feminist, someone who thinks about, and tries to accomplish, the empowerment of women culturally (not politically, psychologically, or economically, although these would be desirable coproducts or byproducts of this work). This term also

refers to one who recognizes and valorizes women's gendered, experiential and/or biological differences from men.

- Praxis/feminist praxis: The term "praxis" is associated with Karl Marx. It has been interpreted as meaning "conscious physical labor directed towards transforming the material world so it will satisfy human needs." (Katz Rothman 1989:170). Here this interpretation is extended to mean not only physical but mental, or representational labor, (and not only conscious, but unconscious, too) that transforms images and experience to meet human needs. This notion follows, first, from the phenomenological/ethnomethodological premise that social objects do not just exist "out there" in space, but are mediated through a continual process of interpretation and construction by the subjective and socially-oriented mind. Second, picking up where ethnomethodology leaves off, psychoanalytic thought suggests that people interpret what is "out there" via a complex process involving, in large part, their own unconscious needs and impulses. Third, feminist thought adds the political implications of subjectivity to the mix: that the privileged perceiver sees the world in accordance with her or his own needs and values, producing, at least in a mainstream

social-scientific research context, value-embedded, masculinist research that is presented as “objective” and that therefore dominates the discourse. All of this leads to the commonsense idea that people (researchers or not) interpret and construct the world, at least partly, as they wish to see it. Assuming that this is so, from a feminist point of view, we can use this idea to suggest the outlines of cultural feminist praxis: physical and/or mental labor which, preferably consciously (but also unconsciously), transforms and coopts culture so as to “combat dominance and move toward self-organization,” to “push toward thoroughgoing change in the practices of...the social formation” (Benson 1983:338<sup>3</sup>). Including mental labor as part of feminist praxis is key to defining a feminist aesthetic (Barrett 1982).

- Gender context perspective: This is a methodological approach that I have developed, based upon earlier cultural feminist scholarship (Shrage 1993, Walters 1995), to ascertain whether women’s cultural activities constitute feminist praxis. It will be explained in detail in

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3 Cited in Lather 1986:258n.

Chapter 10. Concisely, this approach advocates co-determining feminist praxis, in three ways:

- ⇒ Women viewers' interpretation/cooption of the gendered text: together with
- ⇒ Feminist scholarly interpretation/cooption of the gendered text: together with
- ⇒ The gendered social context of viewing. This is comprised of three major components:
  - \* The prevailing attitudes in the dominant culture towards women and women's practices: and
  - \* Whether and how women use this activity as an opportunity to take time out from their gender roles in order to pursue self-nurturance: and
  - \* Whether women use this activity as an opportunity to create supportive communal space/s.

### **Personal Interest**

I began watching soap operas as a very young child. One of my earliest memories is of watching an emotionally turbulent scene on Edge of Night while at the babysitter's: though I don't remember what happened, there is a blurry image remaining in my mind of the scary actress who carried that scene on the show. Although I can't quite recapture it, when I think about that memory, I feel afraid. Soap operas have always affected my emotions strongly, and throughout my life I have stayed in touch with them off and on. When my daughter was born a few years ago, and I was home enough to watch them seriously, I found myself drawn to them at the same time as I began the Ph.D. program in sociology. However, for some time I refused to connect the two "worlds," to ask how it was that the same person could study for Classical Theory exams on the one hand, and sit spellbound in front of "Days of Our Lives" on the other. Further, I was unreflective about the connection of these with my "real world," my everyday domestic responsibilities as wife and mother.

As my studies progressed, however, I felt a need to integrate my life, to discover the connections between sociological research and my gendered existence as a homemaker. It was at this time that I began to articulate to myself

how boring I found much of traditional sociology. This is because mainstream sociological research is "alienated" (Stanley 1990), and fails to ground the process of research in the conditions of everyday life. The result is a lack of meaning to the reader, the feeling that, "OK, that's nice, but so what?" Simultaneously, I found myself thinking that my housework, soap operas, trips to the supermarket, could be sociologically interesting. More than interesting, it was fascinating to me, because although I had read many feminist critiques of sociology, and I had read women's literature, I had read very little in the texts that tried to communicate the implications of the commonest of the common in housewives' lives, the everyday world of housewives, food shopping, changing diapers, etc. Further, while watching soap operas, I would think, My God, I am enjoying this so much. Why? How do these shows appeal to me as a person, as a woman? What does it mean for my life that I watch these? Thus, little by little, I began to ask myself how each of my worlds, academic and domestic, could enrich the other, and whether the gendered paradigms that I had unwittingly been following were useful for me anymore. Unsurprisingly, I found that they were not terribly useful, and that sociology grew more and more interesting when it took into account my everyday life, and how gender wrapped itself around these. Soap operas, it seemed to me, were a part of my life that appealed greatly to me and to many women, and yet I hadn't read or heard much about them at all in the

literature. At first, in a distanced sense, I began thinking about why, if the shows are geared to women, and so many women watch them, they had been studied so little, and even less from the perspectives of the women who watch them. More personally, I wanted to explore whether my viewing conflicted with my perception of myself as a feminist, or whether it was/is consistent with approaching my studies and my life with a view towards empowering women.

### **Methods**

For this study, I have surveyed 91 women, formally interviewed over 38 of them by telephone, and informally interviewed many more in-person. Further, I subscribed to a fan magazine, downloaded approximately 500 pages of online viewer bulletins, and of course, as a viewer and as a researcher, analyzed soap opera form and content itself.

### **Frameworks**

In this study, the overarching framework is a feminist interdisciplinary one. I have asked the question, 'To what extent is soap opera viewing by women a feminist, socially-oriented activity?' In answer, I have concluded that women's soap opera viewing can be seen, to a large extent, as feminist praxis, but that

seeing viewing in this way is highly dependent on the way this activity is examined. My own perspective derives from several things.

First, it derives from how I use terms related to feminism, such as “a feminist perspective,” and how I situate myself in relation to feminism and feminist research. As stated previously, I am a “cultural feminist,” and approach women’s empowerment from the perspective of locating and valorizing women’s differences from men. In this study, I will discuss how this approach is located among the various schools of thought within feminism; how this study in particular is a form of feminist praxis; and how my conclusions are based on a perspective that contributes to reshaping traditional positivistic/masculinist conceptions of “what scholarship is.” My approach also depends on how the research is situated, not exclusively within sociology, but from an interdisciplinary standpoint subsumed to a feminist framework of analysis. Like all feminist studies, the research is value explicit. Like many of them (because there are feminist empiricists), it is interpretively oriented rather than positivistic.

These aspects of feminist research, as well as other feminist methodological treatments of research data that are incorporated here, will be delineated in detail.

Additionally, I make use of a particular approach, a “gender context perspective.” to making my case for seeing soap opera viewing as feminist. As mentioned above, there are three “ingredients” to this perspective: feminist scholarly interpretation of the gendered aspects of soap operas, women viewers’ interpretation of the gendered aspects of soap operas, and the gendered social context in which women view. Together, these enable one to deal with the question of how one can determine the “feminist-ness” of a cultural practice such as soap opera viewing.

In sum, this dissertation is devoted to a detailed discussion of soap opera viewing as a transformative feminist activity. It begins with a consideration of what feminism is, moving towards how cultural feminism, together with a multidisciplinary approach, shapes the analysis, and progresses through an examination of soap opera viewing as feminist praxis, using the gender context perspective as a foundation.

## IX. A CULTURAL FEMINIST STUDY

### **The Personal As Intellectual and Political**

#### *On The Eligibility To Speak As A Feminist*

Unlike mainstream social-scientific researchers, feminist academicians do not present their work as value-neutral. Rather, feminist study is unalienated: it is situated, practiced, and produced within an unfair world, and is concerned with pursuing justice, seeking to “find the new world only through criticism of the old.” (Marx 1978 [1843]:13). Although feminism is humanistic in nature, directed against domination in general, it is also concerned more specifically with eliminating the source of women’s oppression, commonly called “patriarchy.”<sup>4</sup> Patriarchy is “father-rule,” meaning the systematic domination of women/femininity by men/masculinity, and/or ideologies, social structures, languages, and so on that privilege men/masculinity over women/femininity. Therefore, one cannot separate a feminist approach to research from one’s

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps too commonly, as Judith Lorber (1994:3) argues, but I think the term is still descriptive enough to be useful.

personal identity. If the work is feminist, then the researcher herself (or himself) must claim to be a feminist too.

But who is eligible to make this claim? If we were to look for an "ideal type" of feminist, I think it would have to be someone whose "standpoint" (see Harding 1993) allowed them to comprehend a woman's experiences of multiply based oppression. Black feminist theorists, therefore, are well-situated to address the question of who may speak as not only a Black feminist, but any type of feminist. In "Defining Black Feminist Thought," (1993 [1990]) Patricia Hill Collins states the problem of "who may speak" eloquently. According to Collins, neither biological equipment alone, nor "the right ideas" alone, are sufficient to qualify someone as a Black feminist:

I am to develop a definition of Black feminist thought that relies exclusively neither on a materialist analysis--one whereby all African-American women by virtue of biology become automatically registered as "authentic Black feminists"--nor on an idealist analysis whereby the background, worldview, and interests of the thinker are deemed irrelevant in assessing his or her ideas. (Collins 1993[1990]:33; emphasis added)

If neither biology nor ideology adequately serve to define someone as a feminist, what does suffice? Without eliminating either, Collins tries to settle for

a combination of the two. Although she asserts that "I reject exclusionary definitions of Black feminism" (p.32), she does insist that "Black women intellectuals are central to Black feminist thought" (p.33). For Collins, both biology plus ideology, plus being an "intellectual," are necessary criteria to identify someone as a Black feminist. Biology provides the experiential basis for feminist thought, as well as an identificatory means for providing leadership to others who are similarly oppressed, while intellectual ability/ideology are the vehicles for creating possibilities and alternatives that will lead to emancipation.

I understand why and how Collins formulates Black feminism as she does: she is attempting to marry biology, experience, thought, and emancipatory practice in her definition. However, her criteria don't fully satisfy. For one thing, biological criteria are only a starting ground to rest one's feminist identity upon, for it is the social mediation of one's "natural" sex, race, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, and so on that constructs a social hierarchy based upon gender. Although biological criteria are related to one's existence as a social woman, these are not determinate of an experience of oppression, therefore of feminist consciousness. For example, a male transvestite, who dresses as a woman, would likely move through the world experiencing the kinds of oppression that women do. Conversely, a biological woman who looks and

dresses as a man would likely experience male social privilege. Therefore, I am suspicious of any formulation that relies in any ultimate sense upon biologisms to determine one's stance towards the world.

Rather, I tend much more towards an idealist view than does Collins, taking a stance that emphasizes how an ongoing contributor to social stratification is social interaction, which is in turn based upon choices (ideas) as to how to construct oneself in relation to others. If members of society interact with each other to construct hierarchy, we can similarly choose to construct mutually a nondominative power structure. As public service announcements on television often remind us, children are not born racists (or sexists), but they learn to discriminate in those ways from other people. Thus to me, anyone who "thinks feminist" is a feminist, regardless of their biological makeup. At the same time, I think most would find it obvious that those most likely to have a feminist consciousness and understanding--which are fundamentally conducive to "thinking feminist"--are (social) women--we who have the experience of being oppressed because society has constructed us as lesser gender, and who want to climb out from under. A (social) man who wished to speak as a feminist would have to make both an intuitive and an intellectual leap to understand "where I am coming from." This is so just as I recognize the limitations of the experiential

bases of my own feminism. for because I belong to the biosocial categories "White." "heterosexual." "physically able." "young." etc.. I am socially privileged over those who do not exist in these spaces. Therefore, my thinking may be feminist, but like that of a White man, it is naturally limited by my lack of experience: I cannot lay claim to an experience-based understanding of the multiple oppressions that women of color, bisexual/lesbian women, handicapped women, elderly women, etc. go through. Nevertheless, our minds are expansive, and I do believe that we can make that intuitive and intellectual leap, to empathize with others' oppression and commit ourselves to ending it.

I now turn to a definition of what it means to "think feminist." for there are many different schools of feminist thought. My own particular orientation towards feminism, vs. that of others', will be discussed in greater detail below. At this point, I offer what I consider the most inclusive version of feminist ideology, one that can then be expanded upon or modified. This definition is offered by Patricia Maguire (1996), who, tellingly, defines feminism as a plurality ("feminism[s]") from the outset:

1. Feminism(s) acknowledges that women, despite their diversity, face some form of oppression and exploitation. A commonality is the diversity of women's struggles in response to these varied oppressions....feminism(s)...affirms and celebrates women's diverse strengths and resistance

strategies. Women are not, nor have they been, helpless, hopeless victims.

2. Women experience their oppressions, struggles, and strengths differently, given their multiple identities, which may include race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, physical abilities, and our nation's place in a changing international order.
3. Feminism(s) includes a commitment to uncover and understand the web of forces that cause and sustain all forms of oppressions.
4. Finally, feminism(s) expects a commitment of women to work individually and collectively in everyday life to challenge and transform the many systems, structures, and relationships that sustain the varied forms of oppression. (pp. 107-108)

To "thinking feminist," I add another criteria for anyone claiming to speak as a feminist, one that is implicit in Collins' formulation, and one that is stated openly in Maguire's definition of the term (another example of how feminism inextricably marries consciousness and action). To be a feminist, one must engage in feminist praxis: resisting patriarchy through productive activity that transforms and eliminates sexism. Although Collins is rightfully concerned that Black feminists must provide leadership/build coalitions with others, and therefore should look the part (visibly Black and female), I tend, again, towards a

more idealist view, and believe that ideology is what ultimately counts. I am theoretically open to considering anyone with "the right ideas," regardless of their biological makeup, a feminist.

Overall, then, I consider myself eligible to speak as a feminist. This is primarily because of my ideology, which is based on my own experience of sexism (recognizing that I remain privileged in a variety of ways, and would have to empathize with others' experience in order to gain a fuller understanding of multiple forms of gender-based oppression). It is also because of my praxis, for I have taken an active stance against women's subordination and for our empowerment, by professionally specializing in understanding/interpreting the circumstances surrounding women's dis/empowerment: making a wider audience conscious of my assessment of these circumstances; and drawing upon this consciousness to help create a fairer world.

*Cultural Feminism: My Own Orientation Towards Feminism And Its Context In A Conflicted Arena Of Discourse*

In "A Gender Diary," (1990) Ann Snitow offers many "names for a recurring feminist divide" (p.14). Despite--or actually because of--our

commitment to ending women's oppression. feminists disagree over the dimensions of women's subordination. for understanding what's gone wrong is key to understanding how to make it right. Snitow's "divide" differs from other formulations of feminist difference in that it is not focused on more fully developed socio-political theoretical frameworks within which patriarchy is variously understood (e.g., liberal vs. Marxist/socialist vs. radical feminism<sup>5</sup>). Rather, she focuses one major issue that polarizes feminists, that cuts across existing formulations, the debate over "equality and difference." This controversy is comprised of two intertwined questions:

- Intellectually, what can we argue that women actually have in common?
- Politically, what can feminists unite around that will empower women?

Snitow discusses the different names that feminists on one side or the other call themselves, or are called: minimizers vs. maximizers, radical vs.

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<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of feminist differences which does draw upon more synthesized theoretical formulations, see Jaggar (1983).

cultural feminists, essentialists vs. social constructionists, cultural feminists vs. poststructuralists, and so on. However, all are addressing the same issues surrounding equality vs. difference, of whether women are, or should be considered, different from men after all, and whether empowerment means focusing on sameness or difference.

The ramifications of our intellectual commitments and strategic choices in this regard are far-reaching. Ontologically speaking, they affect how we see ourselves as being in the world. Who are we? Are we different beings, because we are women? Epistemologically--how much do we hold onto the category "woman" in thinking about how we know, and what we know? Methodologically, how can/should the notion of "womanhood" affect our approach to academic study? In political terms, this debate shapes the policies for which we fight: for example, do we want employers to offer equal opportunity to pregnant women as to anybody else, or can/should they bar the latter from working at jobs classified as hazardous? (See Kenney 1992).

In this study, the divide is classified as the dissension between liberal (equality) and cultural (difference) feminists. Liberal feminists have historically argued "that women's and men's souls and rational faculties are the same: in other

words, that women and men are ontologically similar.” (Donovan 1990 [1985]:8) Therefore, the latter tend to argue for equality of opportunity for women, who are disprivileged, with men, who are privileged, and to minimize sex-based differences. Today, in the United States, women tend to identify the feminist movement with the liberal feminist voice, with a striving towards equality of opportunity (Henry 1994). This is ironic given the political efforts of women’s organizations to achieve recognition and support of women’s differences by the State--a cultural feminist effort (Bystydzienski 1992:38). In fact, Bystydzienski argues that it is women’s organizations that create a voice for cultural feminism among women legislators. Left to themselves, the latter are “pressured toward assimilation and conformity with existing norms” (e.g., sameness with men) when they enter “male-dominated institutions,” such as the political arena. “Women’s organizations,” however, “especially feminist groups, provide affirmation and sustenance for women officeholders,” providing “alternative arenas in which their identities as women can be validated.” (ibid:39) Thus, although contemporary women in the United States take both liberal and cultural routes towards empowerment, it is the liberal voice that is perceived by women as mainstream.

Perhaps this is because liberal feminism is easier to understand, and therefore simpler to agree with. The term alludes to equality, a sense of fairness:

unlike cultural feminism, it doesn't get into the messy business of specifying what women "are," what constitutes our "groupness," etc. We may agree, in theory, that "women" are "different," but how? What constitutes cultural feminism, and who gets to decide its parameters? Thus, as is to be expected, "cultural feminism" has a long and diverse history of meaning, and in a moment I will unpack the term and describe the sense in which I use it here.

First, however, I begin by locating myself among the proponents of "difference," the cultural feminists. Actually, perhaps it is a mistake to characterize the equality-difference conversation as an authentic controversy, for few are so polarized as to argue the extreme of either position. I think most would agree that women and men are both different and the same, that it's just a question of how, when, under what circumstances, and a matter of what one chooses to focus on. Yet in my work, I do focus on the differences between women and men, in particular on ways that women can take control of these and use them in empowering ways. This is because, whatever the reasons, there are differences in the way men and women move through the world, and these are at least partially rooted in the social mediation of biological "givens." From a political perspective, it is these differences that have been used against us to justify our subordination. Therefore, my intellectual and political approach to feminist study

is to argue that women should strive to identify and coopt our uniqueness (experiential, constructed, whatever) and use it as a source of empowerment. Again, this is not to deny the increased strength that comes from drawing upon our similar abilities with men, but to emphasize one set of strategic choices over another--that is the re-valuing, re-defining, and celebrating of our womanhood. This is a route that I personally find empowering as well.

So I am a cultural feminist. From the outset, that is from 1845, when Margaret Fuller's book, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, "initiated the cultural feminist tradition." (Donovan 1990 [1985]:32) cultural feminists emphasized the transformative capacity of women's uniqueness for humanity as a whole. As Donovan puts it,

...feminists holding these ideas look for a broader cultural transformation. While continuing to recognize the importance of critical thinking and self-development, they also stress the role of the nonrational, the intuitive, and often the collective side of life. Instead of emphasizing the similarities between men and women, they often stress the differences, ultimately affirming that feminine qualities may be a source of personal strength and pride and a fount of public regeneration. (ibid.:31)

The "most basic assumption" of cultural feminism, says Carla Freccero (1990), is "the belief that there is something that characterizes women which is

fundamentally different from what characterizes men. whether the difference is initially constructed or not." (p.310) As cultural feminists such as Linda Alcoff (1988), Ien Ang (1990), and Mary Ellen Brown (1990a, b) argue, it is empowering for women to coopt and delight in our differences from men. Alcoff puts it this way: Cultural feminists "have not challenged the defining of woman but only that definition given by men." (1988:407)

This leads to the question of essentialism: what is "woman" exactly? How would feminists define this term? Teresa de Lauretis (1990) describes what she says is the "majority" approach, which I like because it is flexible and inclusive:

...for the great majority of feminists the "essence" of woman is more like the essence of the triangle than the essence of the thing-in-itself: it is the specific properties (e.g., a female-sexed body), qualities (a disposition to nurturance, a certain relation to the body, etc.), or necessary attributes (e.g., the experience of femaleness, of living in the world as female) that women have developed or have been bound to historically, in their differently patriarchal sociocultural contexts, which make them women, and not men. One may prefer one triangle, one definition of women and/or feminism, to another and, within her particular conditions and possibilities of existence, struggle to define the triangle she wants or wants to be--feminists do want differently. (p.257)

Because cultural feminists emphasize gender difference, scholars in this mode are heavily preoccupied with the project of actually defining feminist culture. French cultural feminists, such as Helene Cixous (1986) and Luce Irigaray (1985), emphasize the "reality" over the relativity of women's (socially constituted) differences from men. These psychoanalytically inclined theorists, like Nancy Chodorow (1978) in the U.S. focus particularly on the pre-Oedipal relationship between daughters<sup>6</sup> and their mothers, and its implications for the differential development/consciousness of women from men. They urge women to rediscover and celebrate these differences. Cultural feminism is often identified with such an objectivist stance, and in practical terms has acted upon an understanding of what "women" are/do versus what "men" are/do. This has led to its identification with the antipornography struggle (King 1990), prominently represented by the feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. From a cultural feminist perspective, the reasoning behind their opposition to pornography is that such cultural forms misrepresent women, objectifying and degrading them for the consumption of men<sup>7</sup>.

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6      Approximately from the daughter's birth through 3 years of age.

7      Pornography has also been linked to the sexual assault of women by men, but I am focusing on a theoretical perspective posed by cultural feminists towards

However, not all cultural feminists would agree with an objectivist stance, which suggests there is an underlying "truth" to cultural representations--in this instance pornography--that "truth" being the "realization" that in pornographic representations, women/femininity are "objectively" degraded, treated as objects for and by men. Rather, there is also a recognition, as Jane Flax writes, that

Like any mode of thinking, feminist theories themselves are not free from the effects of gender....current gender-structured social practices create men who have difficulties acknowledging interdependent relations between people. These same social practices produce women who have difficulties acknowledging differences within relations. In either gender these social practices produce a disposition to treat experience as all of one sort or another and to be intolerant of differences, ambiguity, and conflict. In feminist theories these difficulties underlie and are reflected in the treatment or lack of acknowledgment of differences among women... (1990:226)

Instead of preoccupying ourselves with issues of "truth," Flax suggests "it is...necessary...to displace truth/falsity with problems of meaning(s)." (ibid.:222)

In deconstructing meaning, feminists need to "analyze how our own experiences

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pornography, rather than on aspects of the antipornography movement which argue for the link between representation and action--that this form of culture leads to violence against women.

predispose and enable us to think in certain ways but not others.” (ibid.:227) In other words, cultural feminists can to (re)discover and valorize women’s distinct ways of knowing and being not from an objectivist standpoint, but from a perspective that acknowledges that differences are rooted in concrete relations of gender, as well as other sociodemographic factors.

The debate among cultural feminists over women, gender, and essentialism corresponds to the dual historical roots of this strain of thought, both in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth. For although cultural feminism is locatable among early feminist thought, it has also been characterized as growing out of the radical feminist movement of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s (Snitow 1990, citing Echols 1989). Cultural feminism, while advocating a “celebration of being female.” (Snitow 1990:14), was a retreat from the radical feminist notion of separatism. Radical feminists, like cultural feminists, seek a woman-defined womanhood, but whereas cultural/“womanist”<sup>8</sup> feminists envision self-defined

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8 Womanist feminism refers to a school of thought which attacks the tendency of cultural feminists to gloss over the experiences of non-White women, effectively erasing them from the discourse. Womanism is a more race-conscious version of cultural feminism--that is, one which focuses on difference from the multiple standpoint of race and gender, and which locates itself in opposition to the (generally implicit) racial hierarchy of mainstream feminism. A womanist, says Alice Walker, is

women within a larger, mixed-gender community, radical feminists see the latter as an impossibility. Radical feminists argue that this is not because of any wish on their part to see men as the enemy, but because of the insistent reality of the

A black feminist or feminist of color...

Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *wilful* (sic) behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one...

A woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...and women's strength....

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist....

Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Allan 1995:6, rearranging Walker 1983:xi-xii)

The major difference, then, between womanism and cultural feminism is explicit racial consciousness: womanists emphasize the "struggle against multiple oppressions." (ibid: p.8) at least racial oppression, that cultural feminists tend to gloss over. However, both womanists and cultural feminists agree that women's culture has the potential to transform the consciousness and the experience of all humanity, for the better. Personally, although I agree with the womanist critique of feminism, I prefer to keep the term "cultural feminist," because the term does not theoretically exclude the incorporation of multiple consciousnesses and oppressions into the discourse, and because it alludes to both a feminist critique of culture and a particular perspective within feminism.

war between the sexes: a war that women did not start, but in which we find ourselves stuck:

Even novice Furies are accused of thinking or saying that "men are the enemy." This is a subtly deceptive reversal, implying that women are the initiators of enmity, blaming the victims for The War. Its deceptive power is derived from the fact that the Fury in every woman does fight back against males and male institutions that target her as the enemy. The point is that she did not create The War, but rather finds herself in a set-up in which fighting is necessary for Surviving. An obvious consequence of this situation is the fact that patriarchal males are the enemies of women. However, the fighter role of Furies is a derivative status, necessitated by the fact that women are the primal objects of patriarchal attack. (Daly 1978:365)

A difference between radical and cultural feminism, then, is that radical feminists contend that women cannot self-define in relation to men, who have historically acted to colonize women's identity. However, cultural feminists tend to define the category "women" in relation and sometimes in opposition to a masculine Other, even as we simultaneously talk about women acting to redefine ourselves (see Alcoff 1988). Although Audre Lorde tells us "not to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house," broadly speaking, cultural feminist strategy represents just that: taking precisely those areas of life and feeling to which women have been "relegated" by men, and seizing them as a transformative source of power and strength. This is power that derives directly

from powerlessness, directly from domination and Otherification. From this perspective, the master kept some tools and threw others away, and those tools can be a woman's treasure, depending on what she does with them. This is the cultural feminist approach that I take: to reclaim what women already do, what we are trained to do even though it's considered useless, and to seize, coopt, and control it. A perfect example of this, the focus of the present study, is the viewing of "those trashy soap operas" by women.

### **Feminist Study and the Academy: Research as Praxis**

#### *Questions Addressed By The Study And Their Limitations*

This study addresses the overall question of whether White<sup>9</sup>, heterosexual women living in the United States are engaging in feminist praxis when they watch U.S. daytime soap operas, and/or when they engage in viewing-related activities (hereinafter grouped under the umbrella term "soap opera viewing"). According to the model I have set up to answer this question, soap viewing is

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9 Since most of the viewers I surveyed and interviewed were White, I don't feel comfortable generalizing these results to women of color.

feminist praxis to the extent that we can answer “yes” to the following subquestions:

1. Do women viewers interpret soap operas as a feminist narrative?
2. Do feminist scholars interpret soap operas as a feminist narrative?
3. Does the gendered social context of viewing allow for soap operas to be seen as a feminist narrative?
  - a) Do women resist gender-based social opposition for watching soap operas?
  - b) Do women see soap opera viewing as an opportunity to take care of themselves?
  - c) Do women use soap opera viewing as an occasion to create a sense of community with other women?

*What Makes A Mode of Study Feminist? On Gender-Liberatory Research*

Feminist research is not only a form of critical theory but also a form of action research, that is, it fuses intellectual with political activity, with the intent of effecting positive social change (see for example Fine & Vanderslice 1992, Wolf 1992, Fine & Weis 1996, and Thomas & Rappaport 1996). Feminist academicians do not approach research as a "product," dislocated from everyday life, a form of alienated knowledge. Instead, we are continually aware that our studies are grounded in, and grow out of, the conditions and experiences of everyday life, and attempt to situate the end-product of our research within that life. By resisting the alienation, particularly the pretense of neutrality, imposed upon scholarship by mainstream social-science research, the very fact of conducting research as a feminist, in context, in relation to ourselves in the world, is empowering (Stanley 1990:11). The pretense of neutrality, or value-embeddedness, is a way of concealing power--the ideological power of the dominant forms of discourse. These forms are located in a masculinist notion of social-science scholarship that denies the links between women's experiences and modes of thought, and what is presented as "real" or "objective" scholarship. As Dorothy Smith explains, it is this denial that feminist research exposes and

dislocates, and it is this dislocation that reveals women's subordinate place in the social order--giving us a space from which to liberate ourselves:

As we explored the world from this place in it, we became aware that this rupture in experience, and between experience and the social forms of its expression, was located in a relation of power between women and men, in which men dominated women....The forms of thought, the means of expression, that we had available to us to formulate our experience were made or controlled by men. From that center women appeared as objects. In relation to men (of the ruling class) women's consciousness did not, and most probably generally still does not, appear as an autonomous source of knowledge, experience, relevance, and imagination. Women's experience did not appear as the source of an authoritative general expression of the world. Women did not appear to men as men do to one another, as persons who might share in the common construction of a social reality where that is essentially an ideological construction. (Smith 1987: 51)

Personally, am intensely aware of the relationship between my personal and professional lives, and of the way I have drawn upon feminist studies to bridge them. For me, from the very beginning, attending graduate school was a possibility for me, a way "up," professionally, as well as a way of holding on to my values, particularly my belief that one should work to create a better world, and that one's work should be flexible enough so that one can spend a great deal of time with the family. However, because I have chosen feminist studies, rather

than something more "mainstream." I sense that it will always take extra effort to be recognized for my work. I feel it in my gut when Harding (1993[1991]) writes.

It has been a struggle for feminists to learn precisely how to claim on behalf of our research, scholarship, and politics the perspectives that arise from our "despised" identities as women....We have claimed the historical realities of our lives as the places from which our thought and politics not only do begin but also should begin. It has taken courage to claim these identities for such purposes when the gatekeepers of the intellectual traditions have insisted for centuries that we are exactly not the kinds of persons whose beliefs can ever be expected to achieve the status of knowledge....It is an extraordinary achievement, then, to have shown that the perspectives provided by our devalued identities can be epistemologically powerful, and that the unselfconscious perspective claiming universality is in fact not only partial but also distorting... (pp.143-144)

Every time I write another piece of this dissertation, which itself grew out of my own circumstances, I feel I am doing something worthwhile, something that will advance the status of women. Thus for me, feminist research is immensely empowering, because it powerfully brings together the personal, the professional, and the political.

## **Feminist Perspective-Taking: Some Aspects**

### *A Totalistic Understanding: Being Interdisciplinary*

This study crosses disciplinary lines, because, like other feminists, I believe that better, more interesting research is generated when one approaches a topic in a variety of ways. As the feminist philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer points out, "...Just as feminist philosophy has benefited by the use of strategies of textual, representational, and psychological analyses, so too feminist scholars of literature and art have profited by employing philosophical views to illuminate their own studies." (1993:ix)

Further, mainstream sociology, as it is shaped in the U.S. today, provides little nourishment for specifically feminist endeavors, and as Judith Stacey and Barrie Thorne (1993 [1985]) argue in "The Missing Feminist Revolution in Sociology":

Feminist sociology, however, seems to have been both co-opted and ghettoized, while the discipline as a whole and its dominant paradigms have proceeded relatively unchanged. Sociological teaching and professional life reflect this ambiguous relationship to feminism. Courses on "sex roles," gender, and women abound. But rare are the courses on sociological theory or methodology that even include feminist literature, let alone those that attempt to use feminist questions to rethink sociological canons. When we design

courses in the sociology of gender or especially in feminist theory. we find ourselves assigning very little work by sociologists, while our feminist colleagues who teach comparable courses in history or anthropology are comfortable assigning readings primarily from within their own disciplines. (pp.168-169)

Sociology today remains predominantly positivistic and quantitative in its approach, emphasizing the scientific model, with its consequent linearity of thought and detachedness of tone (among other consequences). This is not to say that there isn't a great deal of progressive/feminist/qualitative work out there (because there is, and I am so glad), but that this type of research is non-mainstream, as my year's subscription to the American Journal of Sociology, frequent glances through local college catalogues' sociology offerings, and classified advertisements for social researchers ("heavy quantitative skills, must be proficient in SAS/SPSS") attest. Like other feminist scholars, I find myself partly drawing upon existing sociological research, and partly reinterpreting and reinventing it as I go along.

*Fluidity and Multiple Viewpoints: Perspective Over Theory*

For any study to be comprehensible, it has to be placed in some sort of a frame of reference. Feminist study is no different. However, although it is necessary for the work to be situated, I'm suspicious of calling upon the god

“theory” as a way of doing that. It is not so much the idea of sifting out the wheat from the chaff that bothers me, but the masculinist, positivistic ways that the term “theory” has historically been used that disturb me. As Mary Eagleton writes,

Why theorize? How to theorize? A suspicion of theory is widespread throughout feminism. Faced as we are with a long history of patriarchal theory which claims to have proved decisively the inferiority of women, this caution is hardly surprising. Many feminists see theory as, if not innately male--women are capable of doing it--then certainly male-dominated in its practice and masculinist in its methods....Feminism would argue that the impersonality and disinterestedness of theory is fallacious, masking the needs and partiality of the theoretician.... (1991:5-6)

There certainly are good reasons for feminists to distrust theorizing as a component of analysis. Despite the fact that sociology now treats gender as “a central variable of social analysis.” (Yeatman 1987 [1986]:157) “...the ruling paradigms or theoretical frameworks in social science are flawed by a masculinist bias which is indicated in an arbitrary privileging of the public aspect of social existence.” (ibid.) Public life becomes the theoretical “norm,” the standard against which private life is found theoretically lacking, unstimulating, useless. Further, social life continues to be dualized in the social sciences according to a public/private dichotomy, that has “the effect of making the public domain falsely appear as self-sustaining, and of encouraging thereby an equation of social life

with public life. In this context, it is not just that 'the economy' looms larger in theoretical terms than 'love' but that 'love' disappears altogether from theoretical view." (ibid:159)

The distorted identification of "the social" with "the public" is only one example of the negative effects of equating masculinist bias with objective theorizing. In contrast, in much of feminist thought, truth is not somewhere out in space, but is socially constituted, and shaped in practice by unequal relations of power. The researcher is an integral constituter of, rather than a detached observer of, the data. Further, mainstream theory tends to be value-embedded, under a pretense of neutrality, rather than being placed before the reader as value-explicit (see for example Stanley 1990, Harding 1993, Longino 1993).

Yet refusing to generalize is no way out, as Eagleton convincingly argues:

How can one be "outside" theory? To look for some pure, experiential, non-theoretical space is utopian....to value the experiential over the theoretical is not fundamentally to challenge the binary opposition, merely to reverse it. The oppositional structures of patriarchal thinking remain firmly in place and hierarchical modes of categorization are sustained. (Eagleton 1991:5)

So how has feminism attempted to make theory fairer to women?

Elizabeth Gross (1987 [1986]) describes how at first, feminists tried to include women equally in existing theory, but eventually recognized the need to reinvent it, because the exclusion of women was part of the problematic construction of mainstream theory itself:

The project of women's equal inclusion meant that only women's sameness to men, only women's humanity and not their womanliness could be discussed. Further, while women could now be included as the objects of theoretical speculation, their positions as the subjects or producers of knowledge was not raised.

In other words, in adopting the role of the (male) subjects of knowledge, women began to assume the role of surrogate men. (pp.191-2).

The next phase, of reinvention, was one that attempted to remedy the structural deficiencies of masculinist theory, bringing in women/femininity as sites of knowledge production, questioning methodology, and so on. Briefly, feminist theory is committed to contextualize inquiry: "question the value of the criteria of objectivity and scientificity."; assume "contiguity" between subject and object rather than "a space or gulf" between them; intertwine theory with practice; and explore "new forms of writing, new methods of analysis, new positions of enunciation, new kinds of discourse," as a way of "rejecting leading models of

intellectual inquiry” because they systematically disprivilege women. (pp.200-203)

In so briefly summarizing feminist reshapings of theory, I do not mean to oversimplify, nor to present superficially, the developmental processes that “feminist theory” has undergone, but rather to communicate a sense of the difficulties I face, in common with other feminists, in conceptualizing a research framework along traditional, positivistic theoretical lines. These concerns are not necessarily the exclusive province of feminists, as Stanley (1990:13) points out, but they become feminist insofar as they are integrally related to “a specifically feminist ontology....it is the experience of and acting against perceived oppression that gives rise to a distinctive feminist ontology; and it is the analytic exploration of this in the research process that gives expression to a distinctive feminist epistemology.” (ibid.:14) In other words, it is the experience of having theory used against women, and the fact that women recognize this and pursue remedies for this injustice, that makes these responsive and innovative knowledge strategies distinctively feminist.

At this moment, though, I must be honest with the reader. Although I recognize the dilemmas that feminist analysis confronts in regard to mainstream

models of theorizing, and even as I understand the commitments I can make to reshape theory, it is difficult for me to imagine a practicable alternative to the theorizing if one disposes of the masculinist, positivist model. At the most basic level, if there is no truth waiting to be discovered, then how can I discover and explain it? I reject the notion of squeezing the data into the theory--so how do I generalize? Further, if, as Sandra Harding (and others), suggest, knowledge is indelibly grounded and contexted, a tool of power, and an interplay between knower and known, it seems silly to rigidly hold on to the idea that research can really yield anything that is "real," over and above the "relative." Sure, we can try to be democratic about deciding who is right (Longino 1993), and we can debate whose "standpoint" should be privileged (Harding 1993). We can even try to define feminist theory in ways that sound sympathetic and politically correct: to be "derived from experience analytically entered into by enquiring feminists," "continually subject to revision," "reflexive," "accessible to everyone," "not to be treated as sacrosanct," etc. (Stanley and Wise 1990:24) Yet in the end, we are still left with the problem: If feminists repudiate the notion of scientific objectivity, the distinction between knower and known, then why pretend that we can come up with any detached truth about the world? Even grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1994), which I use here, and which allows for an interplay

between empirical data and theoretical concepts, leaves untouched the idea that we can indeed make abstract statements about experience.

At the same time, unless we are content with having, as Betty Friedan called it, "the problem that has no name," we are forced to make generalizations--to find commonalities and patterns of subordination and empowerment--to use these as strategies for empowerment. As a relativist in a world where humans need generalizations, at least to some extent, in order to advance knowledge projects, I have settled on a compromise: to throw out the word "theory" altogether in my own research, because at least in the U.S. (see below) it cannot be disengaged from its positivist/masculinist roots, and to turn instead to "perspective." What is written as "theory," I cannot ignore, but I read it as "perspective," a possibility, a way of communicating ideas without writing them in stone, "to be endlessly pored over like chicken entrails," as Stanley and Wise (1990:24) put it. Where theory is reified, singular, and prescriptive, perspective is fluid, multiple, and interpretive. Here, "perspective" is employed as "theory" is used in "the British cultural studies tradition," that is so progressive methodologically as well. Specifically, this notion of perspective is similar to "some of the television research that has come out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies," which uses "theory...not so much a matter of a

particular set of assumptions, hypotheses, and so on as...an intellectual practice of questioning what seems to be obvious in both one's own and others' thought, a process to be applied and reapplied continuously." (Streeter 1984:75) In this study, perspective is used together with methodology holistically, in the most useful sense of grounded theory, so that conclusions arise "during actual research...through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection." (Strauss and Corbin 1994:273). Not only that, but ideas also arose and were integrated after the research was completed, through an "inquiry" process tied to writing up the data (see Richardson 1994).

My conclusions, therefore, do not identify any "ultimate truth" but rather offer a way of seeing what is going on, provisionally, for the purpose of making a point. I do not pretend to be a universal knower, but rather just a particular person whose identity is categorizable along particular lines. For instance, as a "cultural feminist" I find soap opera viewing empowering, but I could look at them as a "liberal feminist," or "social constructionist" and come out swinging, decrying the shows completely. Moreover, from a "gender context perspective," the methodological formulation that I draw upon in this study, it will be shown that soap operas are empowering to both me and the women I studied. However, if we shift or multiply the gender context perspective, adding to it a "racial context

perspective.” and/or a “sexuality context perspective.” and/or a “class context perspective.” soap opera viewing may be seen as profoundly disempowering to the woman viewer who does not share these characteristics, who is continually Otherified, silenced, and often completely removed from the narrative. This is not to even mention the fact that 30% of viewers are thought to be men (Waldrop and Crispell 1988): can soap opera viewing be a form of feminist praxis for them as well, or does it act to silence and therefore to disempower them? This brings up the already-raised question of how much the categories of gender/identity really hold up (see Lorber 1994)--whether men can identify themselves with womanhood and be strengthened, be “doing feminist praxis,” in viewing soap operas, whether gender is just a convenient social assignment that is of questionable analytic value in real life.

In sum, from my perspectives, I have found soap opera viewing among women to be a form of feminist praxis, but am aware that this is probably untrue for every woman viewer, or it may be only partially true for a woman who fits one, or two, but not all the categories soap operas focus upon and valorize.

### **Feminist Qualitative Methodology: Some Aspects**

Feminists have contemplated whether feminist research has a singular identity (Jaggar 1983, Kaplan 1987), or whether there even is such a thing (Harding 1987, Smith 1987, Fonow and Cook 1991). Nevertheless, it is true that feminist scholars have brought to sociological paradigms a shift in emphases, for example, away from jargon to plain English (Dworkin 1974; Morgan 1970) and away from abstract theorizing to the linking of theory with everyday experience (hooks 1984). When I talk about how feminist thought has contributed to my research work, I am really referring to its broadening my thinking about the acceptable limits of "how we know" (epistemology) and "how we go about finding out" (methodology).

For example, feminist epistemology argues that women's experiences, rather than the experiences of men alone, should be included in formulating knowledge about the world (Code 1991). This attitude makes a study such as this one possible, whereas previously it would likely have been considered trivial due to its association with "dumb housewives." Before second-wave feminism revolutionized our notions of what is "important" to study, anything associated strictly with women was glossed over or ignored (see Epstein 1981, 1988), even

though as early as 1911, the social theorist Georg Simmel had called attention to the “naive identification of the ‘human’ with ‘man.’” (Simmel 1984[1911]:67) I am not, however, talking about method, since I agree with Sandra Harding (1987) and Liz Stanley (1990) that feminists have not offered any new or different techniques for doing research: in the end, after all, a survey is a survey is a survey. In Feminist Praxis, Stanley makes the point nicely when she says that

...there is no one set of methods or techniques, nor even a broad category of types of method (“qualitative”), which should be seen as distinctly feminist. Feminists should use any and every means available for investigating the “condition of women in sexist society.” (1990:12)

And yet, although I agree with Stanley that neither qualitative nor quantitative research techniques are “distinctly feminist,” I do see the methodologies associated with qualitative research techniques as highly compatible with feminist research<sup>10</sup>. For this study, my research took place in a qualitative manner, one that is compatible with feminist research, intended to “help the researcher develop an overall feeling and a totalistic understanding of

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10 Much of this analysis, which synthesizes a qualitative stance with a feminist one, is drawn from the Qualitative Methods class I took in Fall 1996, team-taught by Professors Michelle Fine and Collette Daiute. These points were clarified not only through the professors’ excellent lectures, but also through the incisive classroom discussion which took place around these topics.

the phenomena at hand" (Klein 1985:50), as well as to advance the status of women.

This is not to say that feminist qualitative methodology is monolithic, but that there are recognizable similarities between feminist and qualitative approaches to doing research. My intention here is not to present a treatise on the compatibilities between the two, but to show how I have incorporated these approaches into the methods of study in several significant ways.

### *Subjectivity as a Stance*

Feminist qualitative researchers commonly dispute the simple notion of "objective" study as it is presented in mainstream social scientific work. For instance, Liz Stanley (1990) says we ought to be continually aware of ourselves-in-the-research, how the work that we do is grounded in our own experiences. Harding (1993) is well-known for her focus on "standpoint epistemology," which she argues makes for a more rigorous, or "strong objectivity,"--that is, that by admitting and using subjectivity we can arrive at more rigorously objective findings. It is already common, at least in British cultural studies, for nonfeminist as well as feminist researchers to see their work "as engaged with and part of a

series of cultural and historical developments and processes...as embedded in society, not outside society looking in." (Streeter 1984:75)

Because feminist qualitative researchers situate subjectivity as a crucial part of our work, we face powerful questions surrounding self-disclosure. How much of our own lives do we expose in the name of "sharing our subjectivity," and recognizing its influence on the work, and how much can we keep to ourselves? There are other issues surrounding subjectivity in the work. To what extent do we allow that the answers we claim to defend are not the only response, but a possible, defensible one? How much do we "preserve the category," even when it seems to be falling apart, or irrelevant, from the perspective of the people we are studying (e.g., "the soap opera viewer")?

My stance in this project has been to present it as embedded in a larger social context in general, and to ground it in my own life experience in particular, but not necessarily to "tell all." Although I am deeply implicated in the work, I do not feel the necessity to explain the exact particulars how I have felt the brunt of sexism, but am content to "leave it there." I do not present my conclusions as the only right answer, but as an answer that I have arrived at from my own stances, since I am simultaneously locatable as a subject of study (as a soap opera

viewer myself), and as a researcher trying to understand the feminist implications of soap opera viewing. In this study, the category "soap opera viewer" is preserved even though the women I spoke to might not categorize themselves in that way (or at least only in that way), because it is felt to be an useful one for the purpose of analysis. Yet at the same time I attempted (using all available information) to think about what could have been disembodied voices and answers of "the soap opera viewers" in terms of their local, historical contexts. Whether handing out surveys, conducting informal conversations on the street, or conducting more formal interviews with soap opera viewers, I familiarized myself with the context surrounding their soap opera viewing, realizing that viewing does not take place in a vacuum but in the viewers' particular world, and noting the implications of the latter for their viewing.

### *Ethical Concerns*

Closely related to subjectivity as a stance is the ethical concerns arising from feminist qualitative research. There are always questions: how do you develop a relationship with your informants, and then speak over them as is required by the analytic process? The "rape model of research," in which the researcher pushes her way into the informants' lives, then exploits their words to

advance her career, is a troubling specter. Other problems abound: is the researcher's discussion of the informants' personal life not traitorous to the trust that develops between researcher and subject? Is it not colonizing to assume you have interpretive authority? This last point has become so difficult for some feminist scholars that they have rejected the notion of "speaking for others" altogether (Alcoff 1995). How far should the researcher go to get information, how much can she push the boundaries of informed consent? As Michelle Fine puts it, "the dirtier the data, the more delicious it is." For feminist research in particular, it is a vexing problem: you are trying to get into a social arena in which there is an unequal power relationship, and to expose it so as "to help women." How much can you intrude into their lives, how much can you speak over them and define their lives according to feminist categories? Further, how will the data you elicit be used--will it be coopted by others to disempower the very people you are trying to help? (Fine & Weis 1996)

These are only some of the ethical dilemmas feminist qualitative researchers face. In doing this study, I came up against them over and over again. First, I constantly wrestled with the issue of exploitation for "the greater good." I disliked the feeling, as I was interviewing women, setting them at ease, that I was just using them, trying to advance myself with their words. I felt this way even

though I consciously tried, also, to create an atmosphere of equalization, cooperativeness, and non-dominance when I interviewed women for this study, neither presenting myself as "the expert," nor intruding upon their time, nor trying to tell them what they meant by what they were saying. However, it felt exploitive to relax them, then "pick their brains," trying to elicit "data." It felt dishonest to anonymously download the bulletins that soap opera viewers were sending each other on America Online, even as I knew that technically, this was public domain.

At study's end, then, I was left with the unfortunate fact that even as I sought to empower women with my research, I got my data in ways that were less than fully collaborative. Now, I am left with an unresolved dilemma about ethical concerns and feminist research. On the one hand there is this sorry, sad, pessimistic feeling in my heart, that one must be technically ethical but ethically "ruthless" in order to be a researcher; technically ethical in obtaining informed consent, restricting oneself otherwise to publicly available information; but ethically "ruthless" in seeking out whatever data is "fair game," analyzing it without regard to how it may eventually be used. This approach seems to have a kind of researcher integrity--at least to the data--to recommend it. On the other hand, I have a hopeful and optimistic sense that perhaps it is possible to be honest

with one's subjects: to collaborate openly with them: to accept the limitations of what they want to share: to think about how to present research in a way that won't cause subjects harm: and still end up with a useful analysis. I continue to wrestle with these two positions, wondering how I will work the research process in the future.

### **Calling All Resources: Adapting Feminist-Compatible Qualitative Methodologies**

#### *Ethnomethodology*

Feminist methodology and ethnomethodology (and psychoanalytic techniques, see below) are complementary approaches to doing research. Although there is a feminist critique of ethnomethodology that holds that it is as reflexive as the society it critiques (Rogers 1992; Bologh 1992), in general, both emphasize the discovering of routine social productions, albeit for different purposes. Whereas feminist work seeks to uncover how gender is produced and reproduced in society, ethnomethodologists want to know how every social norm, particularly the seemingly mundane ones, are constructed and ordered on an everyday basis (Garfinkel 1967). In fact, the two concerns have been merged in a

number of studies (Grant 1983; Coltrane 1989; Nilan 1991; England and Brown 1992; Tewksbury 1993), the best known of which is Kessler and McKenna's Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach (1978).

One might wonder how ethnomethodology works in a perspective-based research project, since it has been called "the antitheory theory" (Orenstein 1984).

Ethnomethodology is commonly understood this way because this approach to sociology literally works from the bottom up, questioning the explicative power of systematic theories, that name and order what social actors do, when we don't truly know what the latter make of their own activity! First, ethnomethodologists argue, sociologists have to undertake the immense project of understanding fully how social beings construct reality, what is meant by those constructions, and how we defend ourselves against the possibility of being "found out" as social rule-breakers, before we impose a theoretical construct on whatever seems to be going on. However, in this study, I am relying on ethnomethodology not so much for its theoretical implications as for its power to guide fieldwork. Primarily via Harold Garfinkel (1967), ethnomethodology has introduced a number of epistemologically and methodologically useful ideas to sociology, some of which I made use of in constructing my specific research methods: the epistemological importance of the most mundane activities for understanding social behavior:

“indexicality” (that social behaviors have specific meanings in specific contexts); “passing,” (how social actors attain acceptance through imitation); and the idea that social rule-breakers are considered, on some level, “immoral” by other “members” of society.

With respect to the significance of mundanity: this study, from beginning to end, is steeped in the everyday. I chose soap opera viewing as a topic of study precisely because it is an routine activity that is commonly understood one way by members of society, but which in fact is construct-able quite differently from the perspective of the actual viewer. A number of my interview and survey questions concern how soap opera viewing “fits into” (or doesn’t fit into) women’s everyday lives, what their habits of viewing are, what they think nonviewers think of them (are they “immoral,” and why?) Notions of “passing” come in here too: how do soap opera viewing women hide their habit so as to seem more acceptable to others in society? Soap opera viewing was approached as an “indexical” activity, and therefore my research focused on how its sociological meaning translates from situation to situation--a group of nannies sitting on a park bench talking about the soaps, vs. a group of college students watching in the dorm, vs. a confrontation between a wife and her husband over whether she should be viewing or not.

Finally, as I conducted my research I was continually aware of Garfinkel's (and Goffman's [1959]) overarching methodological admonition that people will try to present themselves in the best possible light--to pass--to be acceptable. This affected everything I did to get information, from the way I phrased questions, to the way I approached people, to the style in which I spoke to them. At all times I was concerned to minimize women's defensiveness or fear of being seen "in a bad light." Thus, when I introduced myself to women viewers before interviewing them, I told them I was a soap opera viewer myself, doing a project on soap opera viewing for school. This was so that they would see me as part of their "soap opera viewing group," rather than as part of "an academic group" which would not necessarily be sympathetic to what they had to say. In the end, my concern with the defensiveness this study would provoke in viewers, given that soap opera viewing is such a widely stigmatized activity, led me further beyond ethnomethodology. For although Garfinkel, Goffman and others could tell me that social actors would try to protect themselves against being "found out," I found in psychoanalytic methodologies an understanding of the intrapsychic mechanisms that function in such defensiveness. In the next section, I discuss how these came into use in my formulation of survey and interview questions, as well as in the other methods I used in studying women's soap opera viewing

*Psychoanalytic Methodology*

The goal of psychoanalysis is to explain "what makes people tick." In psychoanalytic thinking, people go to great lengths to bury such truths about themselves, because to know the self, in all of its unpleasantness, to face directly one's anxieties and aggressions and libidinal impulses, is both painful and scary. So much so, in fact, that people employ a variety of mechanisms to keep their unpleasant feelings unconscious--out of sight, out of mind.

It was Talcott Parsons (1964) who first legitimized the use of psychoanalytic thinking for sociology, relying on psychoanalytic theory to explain the process of primary socialization, and the ways that personality is linked with social structure (1950, 1964). Today, psychoanalytic theories of development are used by sociologists in a wide variety of ways, for example in studies of occupational sociology (Merton 1940, Silver and Spilerman 1990), the family (Miller 1983, Stern 1985), and modern culture (Lasch 1979, Rustin 1991). Feminists, in particular, have seized upon psychoanalysis, some repudiating Freud's perceived sexism (Millett 1969), others defending the powerful ability of psychoanalysis to describe gender difference without prescribing it (Mitchell 1974, Chodorow 1978, 1989).

However, to my mind, psychoanalysis (like ethnomethodology) is most forcefully used in sociology when its methodology is incorporated into an empirical research project. In general, its theories are less potentially explicative than its methods. This is because, as has so often been pointed out, Freud's theories of intrapsychic and psychosocial development rely heavily on a White, upper-middle class, patriarchal, nuclear family model, consisting roughly of: the authoritarian, distant father, the dominated wife/omnipresent mother, and the pampered two or three children who might also have a nanny to help care for them. Of course this type of family is by no means a ubiquitous one, so we cannot with any faith universalize the type of personality development that supposedly takes place within it. The bottom line is that Freud learned a great deal from the people who could afford to pay his fees, and who could take three to six days a week to visit with him (Freud 1963:140)--not necessarily about human condition in total, but about the way the mind defends itself against feelings of displeasure (Freud 1929<sup>11</sup>). By seeing the same patients nearly daily, over time, Freud was able to identify and distinguish the mechanisms by which their minds operated--mechanisms that can help the sociologist understand more meaningfully

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11 In "Civilization and its Discontents," The Standard Edition, Vol. XXI: 76.

what social actors mean when they explain their values, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior.

Of course one can also argue, hypothetically, that the intrapsychic mechanisms Freud discovered are properties generalizable only to the monied, White upper class that Freud knew, and that we should not globalize these either when we are constructing methodology/methods for social research. However, I would argue in response that, simply from personal experience alone, one can see that diverse people manifest the effects of these in everyday life. Having witnessed this myself, repeatedly, I am comfortable employing psychoanalytic concepts in a methodological way, and have used them to guide this research project. In doing so, this study goes further than Hunt (1989) suggests: she urges sociologists to use psychoanalytic techniques in fieldwork mainly to get in touch with their own biases, and to identify how they are imposing personal issues on the people they are studying (transference) or how research subjects are doing the same to them (countertransference). Here, as Craib suggests (1990:136) other "irrational," defensive properties of the mind are taken as something to be grappled with when asking women about their soap opera viewing, since it is a socially stigmatized behavior:

- Anxiety "is a reaction to the perception of an external danger--that is, of an injury which is expected and foreseen. It may be regarded as a manifestation of the self-preservative instinct." (1966:394)
- The unconscious is a conceptual place in the mind where thoughts are held that would be disturbing if the person became aware of them (Freud 1938).
- Resistance is the process by which a person attempts to avoid accessing painful memories that have been repressed and are now held in the unconscious: it acts to distort the original memories. Repression (see below) is proportional to the extent of the resistance (ibid.:59).
- Repression is a case of "amnesia," or selective forgetting. (Freud 1963:58) by which a person attempts to shield their psyche from pain.

In preparing to the survey instrument and interview guide for this study, I was aware that women would likely feel anxious about discussing their soap opera

viewing with me formally: that at least some of their reasons for viewing were probably "unacceptable" to them on a conscious level, and therefore were kept held in their unconscious: and that my questions would therefore provoke resistance and repression on their part.

In order to get around this problem, I had to, first, make them feel less defensive, and second, use psychoanalytic techniques for circumventing whatever anxiety was left. The first task, as discussed previously, was accomplished mainly by identifying myself as someone who was no threat to them, who watches soap operas too, and who would not judge them badly for whatever they had to say. The second was accomplished by taking Freud's advice and using viewers' identifications, associations, and projections to understand their soap opera viewing. Thus in the survey, I asked them such questions as: what they felt was most/least realistic about the shows (to see what they identified with); and whether they would like to be/befriend/romance, or have ever dressed or acted like, a certain soap opera character and why (using the mechanisms of identification and projection to attain interpretive insight). Similarly, in the interviews, rather than ask viewers directly why they watch soap operas, I asked them what they like or dislike about the programs. In other words, I asked them to tell me what comes to mind when they think of the show (association), and to

cast their emotions onto the narrative (projection). The same course was followed when asking them about how they defined and understood the term feminism, and when asking them how they would describe themselves. Overall, my goal was to use these psychoanalytic techniques to determine what common emotions were raised by the questions, to get a less defended sense of what the viewers felt.

### **Methods**

Thus, with a great deal of methodological concern in mind, I stepped out into the world to investigate women's soap opera viewing empirically. All the while, I asked myself, what are all the possibilities available to me for obtaining useful data? Because of my schooling in feminism, ethnomethodology and psychoanalytic studies, I was keenly aware of the limitations of any one sociological method. Consequently, my research strategy was to try to attain a multidimensional view of the situation. To address the issues from a variety of perspectives, I located and used as many sources as possible for learning about the significance of women's soap opera viewing in contemporary society:

- Via surveys, and formal and informal interviews, I recorded women soap opera viewers' viewing habits and perceptions of soap operas and feminism.
- Via viewing multiple soap operas, I qualitatively studied the soap opera genre and content itself.
- Via subscribing to a soap opera magazine, I studied the mass culture that caters to soap opera viewers, as well as viewer opinions/mail.
- By going online and downloading over 500 viewer bulletins, I followed relatively uncensored viewer interaction.

### *Survey*

The survey sample was nonprobability-based, using convenience, voluntary, and snowball methods of obtaining women to fill out the survey. It was given out as a stamped, self-addressed unit, for women to fill out and return by mail at their convenience. Between 300-400 surveys were given out; the final

sample size was 91. The survey asked women viewers to answer the following types of questions:

- Viewing habits: duration and frequency of viewing, method of viewing, number of soaps viewed.
- Social aspects of viewing: how often viewers watch, discuss with others.
- Intrapsychic aspects of viewing: frequency of strong emotional reaction, frequency of thinking about soaps when not viewing, desire to be/befriend/romance a soap character, whether viewers ever dressed or acted like soap character.
- Identification with viewing: extent to which soap operas/plots are seen as realistic, to which soaps are seen as helping with real-life problems.

- Opinions about feminism: agreement/disagreement with attitudinal statements relating to feminism. whether viewer considers herself a feminist. how she defines this term.
- Demographic information.
- Availability for interview.
- Whether viewers had any comments on viewing in general or the survey in particular.

Where did I get my sample from? The whole point of this study is to look at the everyday experience of women watching soap operas. Therefore, I looked for a cross-section of women to answer my survey, being careful to ensure diversity in the respondents. First, I asked friends and family both to fill out surveys, and to hand them out to people they knew. Second, I canvassed my own neighborhood in the Bronx, at varying times of the day and in varying locations. So I got everyone from at-home mothers, nannies, nurses, high school students, and lawyers to take a copy of the survey and to take one (or more) for a friend. Ultimately, I covered a number of neighborhoods in the Bronx, Manhattan, and even Hollywood, Florida

(where I spent 10 weeks). Also, my sister-in-law sent e-mail messages on both Prodigy and America Online's soap opera bulletin boards, asking for volunteers to participate in my study.

To communicate a rough sense of whose voices are speaking in the survey sample, following is a summary of some demographic data obtained from the survey responses<sup>12</sup>. This group of women is not a fictional universal, but a characterizable population, tending most of all to be White and heterosexual, but also to be employed (but home-involved), middle to upper-income, college/vocationally educated, and young adult-young middle-age.

In terms of occupational status, 67% (n=89) were employed, 44% (n=88) were homemakers, and 19% (n=86) were in school. Of course, these categories are not exclusive, as women tend to manage multiple roles. Some of the viewers worked at conventionally feminine jobs, such as teacher, housekeeper, receptionist, or secretary. Others were occupied in traditionally masculine jobs, such as TV producer, lawyer, engineering consultant, and so on.

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12 See Appendix for the complete marginals.

In terms of sexual orientation, 100% (n=84) of the women who responded to this survey question identified themselves as heterosexual. Their marital status was less uniform--57% (n=89) were married, not separated. 59% (n=79) had between 1-3 children.

Respondents' household earnings were also concentrated in the middle-to-upper income levels. Only 14% (n=74) earned less than \$25,000 in the past year, 28% between \$25-49,000, 28% between \$50-74,000, and 30% earned \$75,000 or more. Very few were on unemployment (1%), social security (7%), welfare (2%), or disability (0%) (n=91).

The women's ages ranged from 11 to 79, but 85% (n=88) were between the ages of 18-49, an age span which has been called "the most important demographic group for advertisers" ("Nielsen's," *Soap Opera Weekly* 12/5/95:8).

Other background variables that viewers were asked about included education, race, and religion. In regard to education, of those over age 25 who answered this question<sup>13</sup>, 70% had attained at least a college/vocational degree (18% had obtained a master's degree or higher). 82% (n=87) were White, while

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13 N=76.

nearly all of the non-Whites identified themselves as Black/African-American (16%). 75% (n=80) were affiliated with some form of Christianity; 23% were Jewish.

### *Interviews*

Aside from obtaining quantitative information about the survey participants, another purpose of the surveys was to recruit women soap opera viewers for telephone interviews. In total, 38 women were recruited in this way<sup>14</sup>.

The telephone interviews were conducted with female soap opera viewers throughout the United States, with clusters in New York, New Jersey, and Florida.

My approach towards the interviews was exploratory and open-ended, which enabled each conversation to be very personal, frank, and to provide material that could only emerge spontaneously from the viewer. However, I also relied on a loose interview guide so as to impose some structure and uniformity on the interview process.

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14 Two more viewers were interviewed in person, one additional woman sent me a self-conducted interview on audiocassette, and another interview was self-administered, bringing the total number of interviews to 42.

In doing the interviews, I sensed that the viewers felt comfortable talking on the telephone, given that this allowed them greater distance and anonymity than a person-to-person discussion. This makes sense given that distance and anonymity are integral to the soap opera viewing experience in the first place (see Seiter 1994 on the particular difficulties of interviewing television viewers).

The preference of respondents for indirect questions has been formative of the interview guide that evolved over the course of the study. As I have mentioned, direct questions are too provocative: soap operas are an enjoyable pastime for viewers, and they don't like being hassled about it. I used these basic questions, in conjunction with the respondent's survey, to refer to, while at the same time taking the interview in whatever direction led me to the substantive information I sought<sup>15</sup>:

- Viewing habits: What is your soap opera routine? Would you watch more soap operas if you could?
- Social aspects of viewing: Do you discuss/watch with others?  
What do you think other people/nonviewers think of viewing?

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15 38 of the 42 interviews were structured according to this questioning pattern.

- Identification with viewing, meaningfulness of viewing to the viewer: Which plots/characters do you like/hate and why?
- Comparison of soaps with talkshows: Do you like talkshows? How do they compare with soaps?
- Opinions about feminism: Do you consider yourself a feminist? What do you think of feminism, how do you understand it? Do you think that soaps are feminist and why or why not?
- Self-inventory: How would you describe yourself? What things do you like, dislike about yourself? Are you happy with your personal/romantic life? Your professional life? What are your aspirations for each? What are the major highlights, disappointments of your life?

It is important to note here that, since the questions evolved over time, and since every interviewee was different, not all questions were asked of all viewers. Some women were impatient, or not totally receptive, and I had to be intuitive about that and not just "stick to the form." Despite the limitations in standardization

inherent to this approach. it was a necessary step to explore viewers' feelings more fully.

Along with the more formal telephone interviews, I engaged in a number of informal conversations with women about soap opera viewing in the course of handing out surveys. This, along with my research log, forms an another source of data for this study--the informal, unguarded comments women make about soap opera viewing.

#### *Content Analysis*

Another way that I studied soap opera viewing was simply to continue viewing soap operas for the duration of this study. The "live" text provided the material for a firsthand analysis of the genre. Watching the soaps also reminded me that I am both "researcher" and a "subject" of this study, and must therefore locate myself within both of these perspectives.

#### *Magazine Subscription*

By subscribing to a fan magazine (I subscribed to Soap Opera Magazine from 2/28-7/18/95), I experienced what it is like to be an even more involved

viewer. Soap opera periodicals are a source of industry information. Further, a "fan-zine" is interesting in terms of seeing how it addresses its audience: for the letters that viewers write in; and for the actors/producers' discussions of what they think fans want to see.

### *Going Online*

Finally, yet another source of data for this study was the downloading, over several days' time (9/18-9/19/95), of approximately 500 pages of soap opera-related comments from America Online. These comments centered on two soap operas that I am very familiar with, "Days of Our Lives" and "General Hospital." From these I distilled many that were relevant to this study. The advantage of downloading online comments, of course, is that one obtains relatively uncensored comments from people who feel no need to defend against a researcher's questions. The inherent disadvantage of cyber-anonymity, however, is that I cannot be sure that a given remark comes from a woman and not a man. However, available data suggests that most viewers are women (Waldrop and Crispell 1988). Therefore it is likely that most soap opera onliners are female, but just to be sure, I primarily draw upon comments "signed" with female names.

## X. THE GENDER CONTEXT PERSPECTIVE AND ITS ANTECEDENTS

The gender context perspective consists of three interrelated components, or questions, that together allow us to determine whether woman's soap opera viewing is feminist or not. These concern the interplay between women viewers and gendered text, between feminist scholars and gendered text, and the gendered social contexts of viewing, respectively. In this chapter, we will examine the literatures surrounding the relationship between textual analysis and audience response, which will not only provide a sense of how audience interpretation is a critical part of this analysis, but will also give a sense of the larger conversation surrounding the question of feminist culture and cultural praxis, into which we can situate the gender context perspective.

### **"Effects"**

An early tradition in mass media studies is centered around "effects," or "cultivation effects"<sup>16</sup>. From the inception of these studies, the media was

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16 The mass media tradition of content analysis is not considered in this section because the latter types of studies are explicitly centered around the show.

thought of as having a particular, objectively recognizable content and/or message, that in turn affects the media consumer in particular, measurable ways.

Consequently, one of the major ways that soap operas have been criticized is for their negative effect on the listener (in the early years) and/or the viewer. The usage of "effects" to undermine womens' love of soap was in practice by the time that Lazarfeld and Stanton's Radio Research: 1942-1943, which includes the earliest studies on soap opera viewing, was published. Robert Allen (1985) has described in detail the unfolding cultural debate over soap operas' merits that took place in the 1940's. Daytime serials were accused of being not only immoral, but unhealthy as well. Most notable among the critics was Dr. Louis Berg, who claimed, using himself as a test subject, that soaps created anxiety in viewers (Allen 1985:21-22, Buckman 1985:163). Soon, a scholarly paper appeared (Warner and Henry 1948) which "concluded" that (female) soap opera listeners exhibit "stereotyped thinking," have less "imagination and...personal resources," and see the world "in terms of...men and women having trouble maintaining stable relationships." They added that listeners evidence more

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not the viewer, so they contribute little to the development of a sense of interplay between the two (even though it should be mentioned that content analysts are theoretically part and parcel of the audience response/reader response critique that the "objective" text is subjectively situated).

"dissatisfaction and antagonism." have lesser "knowledge of people." "the desire for control." and see men as "passive people subject to the control of women."<sup>17</sup> (pp. 38-39) Of course, these negative "effects" attributed to soap opera viewing were not linked to the possibility that the researchers were anything less than neutral about whether these "women's shows" were worthwhile. That most viewers were female was treated in an offhand, matter-of-fact manner, rather than made central to the analysis. The researchers took for granted that the soaps had an "objective" content that affected the "passive" viewer, which they, as socially recognized authorities, were qualified to measure.

Today, effects research asks subtler questions that undermine the credibility of the (always assumed, seldom problematized) woman soap opera viewer. For example, some research asks whether viewers have a distorted image of reality because of their soap opera viewing. Nancy Buerkel-Rothfuss and Sandra Mayes (1981) found that "there appears to be an important relationship between what a person watches on daytime serials and what he or she believes to

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17 At the time, nobody pointed out the possibility that Warner and Henry, as men, could have been personally biased against women soap opera listeners, although their conclusions were extremely one-sided. Re-reading their conclusions, it strikes me that the researchers were threatened by the fantasy which soaps offered to their women listeners, in which men are "passive" and "subject to the control of women".

be true about those aspects of the 'real world' which tend to be portrayed with exaggerated frequency on soap operas." (p.114) In "Exploring The Effects Of 'Love In The Afternoon': Does Soap Opera Viewing Create Perceptions Of A Promiscuous World?" Rodney Carveth (1992) concludes that, at least when it comes to "perceptions about romantic and sexual relationships, this influence is weak, and easily overcome." (p.16)

Not all effects researchers treat television as having a one-way effect on the viewer. Some effects researchers have crossed the line towards the gratification perspective, which provides a more active model of viewer participation. In particular, Elizabeth Perse admits that "the interaction of viewing motives, attitudes, and behaviors, provide a more complete picture of the viewing experience." (1986:175-6) In other words, the effect of television use on the viewer can also be conceptualized as the effect of the viewer and her identity on television use. Thus, in the case of soap opera viewing, "Lonely viewers are less likely than nonlonely viewers to watch soap operas to seek excitement or as a vehicle for social interaction. Primarily, the lonely use television to fill idle time." (Perse and Rubin 1990:48)

Thus, not only the problematic linear relationship that effects researchers have drawn between television usage and viewer perceptions, but also the relatively passive viewer model presented by this tradition, have been challenged even by those working (at least partially) within this school of thought. Those of the "gratifications" school have turned away from this paradigm, disagreeing that mass media consumers/television viewers are reducible by researchers to passive dupes. They focus on audience activity, but only insofar as it determines viewing behavior. Others, of the "audience response" or "interpretation" school (in the mass media--this same topic has been addressed under different names in literary and aesthetic studies) also focus on audience activity, but for a different reason: they problematize the assertion that there is something objectifiable and identifiable in the content of the shows that exists apart from the person viewing them. The objectivity model has also been challenged by feminist researchers, who do not see the scholar or analyst as detachedly, neutrally, "writing up the data," but rather as bringing to the table a full set of subjectivities and a political agenda (whether articulated or not) which is at least partially determinative of the research results. Each of these intellectual developments, gratifications, audience response, and feminist studies, will now be discussed in turn. Then, their contributions to the development of a gender context perspective will be outlined.

## **“Gratifications”**

As mentioned above, dissatisfaction with the passive viewer model presented by effects school led to the development of the “uses and gratifications,” or “gratifications,” tradition in mass media studies:

The guiding premise behind media gratifications research was neither new nor revolutionary when posed in Blumler and Katz’s landmark volume The Uses of Mass Communications in 1974. It suggested simply that we “ask not what media do to people, but ask what people do with media.” This transposition voiced the concerns of many mass communications researchers who felt the need for a shift to a vision of the mass communication process that more clearly embraced the concept of an active audience. (Palmgreen, Wenner, and Rosengren 1985:11)

Within this focus, there are three identifiable sub-perspectives: the “functional, which has a ‘needs-gratifications’ focus; the “structural-cultural, which emphasizes the social regulation of both media content and exposure behaviors; and the action/motivation, which stresses the individual as purposive actor.” (Levy and Windahl 1985:111) An example of gratifications research as applied to soap opera viewers is Alan Rubin’s 1985 study, “Uses of Daytime Television Soap Operas by College Students,” in which he identified four motives

for soap opera viewing among American college students (71% of the sample was female, but again this went un-discussed): "orientation," meaning "seeking to ascertain how others think and act"; "avoidance," referring to "escapist, tension release, time-consumption" purposes; "diversion," meaning "entertainment, amusement, relaxation"; and "social utility," which refers to an "interaction or social utility motive" (p.248).

Again, because the gratifications model leaves untouched the notion of objective content, and does not problematize the neutrality of the viewer/researcher, it was left for others to develop these areas. However, it was a positive contribution for this type of research to conceptualize the viewer as not only active, but to see that activity as arising from the viewers' positioning in the world.

### **"Audience Response"**

Audience response studies, also called "audience reception" and "audience interpretation" studies, arise from mass media research, from the paradigm of an active rather than a passive viewer. Such studies are closely linked with "reader-response" theories arising from literary studies. These types of studies

problematize the notion of a "text" that lies outside the reader or viewer--most agree that there is no such thing. Thus the foundational assumption of theories focused on the viewer is that the notion of text is reducible to "the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force." (Fish 1980) In other words, there is no objective text, only an interaction between image and the subjective, interpretive mind. Robert Allen points out that although audience-interpretive scholars are a fairly diverse lot, they ask similar questions, such as: "What is a text? How is it made to mean? What is the relationship between the world in the text and the world brought to the reading experience by the reader? To what degree is the sense-making capacity of the reader a product of external forces? In a world without texts determinative of their own meaning, what is the role of the critic?" (1987:106-107)

These type of questions have been applied to soap opera study in particular. Allen gives one example of how audience interpretation theory explains varying impressions and understandings of the soap opera "text":

The size of the soap opera community, the complexity of its character relationships, and the fact that soap opera characters possess both histories and memories all combine to create an almost infinite set of potential connections between one

plot event and another...The range of latent relationships evoked by the gaps between scenes is dependent upon the viewer's familiarity with the current community of characters and his or her historical knowledge of previous character relationships. In a very real sense, then, the better one "knows" a soap opera, the greater reason one has for wanting to watch every day. Conversely, the less involved one is in a given soap opera's textual network, the more that soap opera appears to be merely a series of plot lines that unfold so slowly that virtually 'nothing happens' in any given episode... (ibid.:86: emphasis added)

Sonia Livingstone (1990) has also found that audience members ascribe different meanings to the same soap opera narrative depending on their feelings about the characters (p. 72).

Audience response critics think it is important to study the television audience not only because interpretation creates textual meaning, but because, as Ien Ang (1994) writes, "Television audiencehood is a pervasive social and cultural reality in the late twentieth century....However, our understanding of what all these practices and experiences mean...has remained scant." (p. 367) Not only is audiencehood a pervasive reality, but is unclear whether or why professional scholars' interpretations of the text should be treated as "objective," while the viewers' thoughts are "subjective." This is a political concern--who has the

power to define meaning? In this vein, Ellen Seiter (1994) reminds us that "audience studies have been an attempt, in part, to verify empirically the kinds of ideological findings constructed by (White and middle-class) critics." (p.387) At this point, feminist perspectives pick up where mass media and reader response theories leave off, problematizing the role of women as interpreters of and participants in culture, and reshaping the paradigms of cultural study.

### **Feminist Perspectives**

A feminist perspective on research points to gender/power issues in the making and interpretation of culture, and therefore challenges the alienated, detached scholarly models that have prevailed in the past. These earlier paradigms conceal the values and interests of the researcher: perhaps that is why they have been called boring: "I must admit I do find most of current communication research rather dreary and uninteresting, both in topic and method..." (Tannenbaum 1985:41)

Feminist researchers, for example, examine critically the devaluation of television study in society. Television study suffers because viewing is popularly linked "with a lack of education, with idleness and unemployment," and is

furthermore seen "as an 'addiction' of women and children," having "connotations of feminine passivity, laziness, and vulgarity." (Seiter 1994:388; emphasis added) Furthermore, the notion of "women as audiences" is complicated by feminist scholars like Virginia Nightingale (1990), who dislike the matter-of-fact objectification of women that goes along with this term:

The experience of reading about women as audiences is reminiscent of reading anthropology. "Women" are objectifiable, somehow a unified whole, a group. The qualities that divide women, like class, ethnicity, age, education, are always of less significance than the unifying qualities attributed to women, such as the inability to know or say what they want, the preoccupation with romance and relationships, the ability to care for, to nurture, others. (p.25)

Until the early '70s, no media researcher thought to ask explicitly about the relationship between women, their status in society, and the phenomenon of soap opera viewing. Rather, the phenomenon of women viewers was taken for granted: studies did little to bring out gender as a focus of study. What studies did exist in this vein were sparse--for few general studies of soap operas existed anyway. After the 1940's, the furor over soap operas died down, and except for a few studies (Whan 1958, Herzog 1961), little was heard of soap operas in the literature until the early 1970's. At that point, soaps again begin to emerge as a

topic of general interest (Stedman 1971, LaGuardia 1974 and 1977, Weibel 1977), as well as a focal point for scholarly research (Newcomb 1974, Katzman 1972, McAdown 1974). Simultaneously, the cultural wars over soap opera viewing rose again, with writers from various backgrounds rising to their defense (Adler 1972; Newcomb 1974; Lopate 1976; Soares 1978). However, with the exception of Carol Lopate's brief allusion to gender bias in public opinion about the soaps, none thought to interject the possibility that soap operas are denigrated precisely because women enjoy them--and that women's immersion in the form is a way of countering the one-sidedness of a masculinized culture. This is likely because Lopate was writing from an early second-wave feminist consciousness, which was yet to become fully recognized by the mainstream. So when the dust settled, there were those who simply were "against them," or found them "silly."

For a long time, this facade of gender neutrality characterized soap opera research. While the soap opera fans continued to retreat to "the closet," mass communications researchers took up soap operas (albeit to a limited extent) as a subject of study (see for example Compesi 1980; McGhee and Frueh 1980; Buerkel-Rothfuss and Mayes 1981; Greenberg et al. 1982; Carveth and Alexander 1985; Rubin 1985, Karp 1985; Rosen 1987; and Carveth 1992). A number of the mass-communication-type studies are content analyses (for example Arliss,

Cassata and Skill 1983; Estep and Macdonald 1985; Greenberg and D'Alessio 1985; Nelson 1992; Rubenstein 1986; Lowry and Towles 1989; Reep 1992; Rittenhouse 1992; Rogers 1992a; and Frentz and Ketter 1992). only a few of which focus on gender specifically. Others are centered on the audience (like Whetmore and Kielwasser 1983; Lemish 1985; Livingstone 1989, 1990a, 1990b), while a few examine the function of soap operas within the larger culture (like Cambridge 1992; Morello 1993; and Nariman 1993).

Beginning in the early 1980's, however, feminists started to focus on the gender aspect of soap opera viewing, asking why women like soap operas when they seem to negate women's liberation<sup>18</sup> (Modleski 1982, Ang 1985, 1990, Browne 1987, Geraghty 1991, Brown 1990a and 1990b, Press 1990, and Nochimson 1992). Women's love of soap operas seemed particularly illogical to

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18 Parallel analyses of women's relationship to woman-oriented literature [as opposed to television soap operas, which are also woman-oriented], should be noted here. One of these is a discussion of women's reading "confessional" magazines (Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel 1959). Simonds (1992) studies women and self-help books. Radway (1984) looks at women's readings of romance novels. Most recently, Kristof (1995) asks why women-oriented comics in Japan so prominently feature graphic rape storylines.

some in the face of continuing gender inequality<sup>19</sup>. However, the problem of how to decide whether culture, such as soap opera/viewing, is "feminist" or "antifeminist," remains, for a few reasons. First, inherent in the feminist movement is the idea that "speaking for others" (Alcoff 1995) is offensive: many feminists find it unacceptable to try and "decide" for "all women" what is "good" for them (us). By what process does feminist theory arrive at an "objective" sense of what is empowering? Also, we must consider the social context of viewing--how do the ways in which soap operas are seen and used in the world affect our consideration of whether it is feminist to view them? These are questions that feminist researchers currently address, and approaches to which are synthesized in what I call the "gender context perspective."

### **A Gender Context Perspective: Women's Soap Opera Viewing As Interrelated Components Of A Feminist Praxis**

Bringing all of these considerations together, I suggest that we shape them into a perspective, a means of studying culture with an eye towards asking

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19 For detailed expositions of continuing gender inequality, see for example Epstein 1988, Rothman 1989, Goldberg and Kremen 1990, Bystydzienski 1992, Kenney 1992, Henry 1994, and Lorber 1994.

whether women who participate in it are practicing feminism. I call it a "gender context perspective" because this approach isolates gender from race, class, and other complicating factors. This approach is holistic, seeing art and life as constituting a context for each other, as mutually constituted. In this stance, there is no external "text," per se, but only gendered people interacting with a gendered image--viewers, scholars, or people surrounding those who participate in cultural consumption. The gender context perspective brings together these three viewing situations and puts them into dialogue with one another, motivating us to see culture as a continuous interpretive production, and a physical process of usage, by those women who consume it, those sensitized to gender issues who study it, and who surround consumers and scholars alike. Specifically, this approach asks us to consider the following when assessing feminist praxis by woman consumers of culture:

1. How do women viewers interpret the gendered text?
2. How do feminist scholars interpret the gendered text?
3. How does gendered social context interact with viewing?
  - a) Do women viewers face opposition from society because of their viewing?
  - b) Do women viewers see viewing as an opportunity to escape social obligations and take care of themselves?

- c) Do women viewers use viewing (and its associated activities) to form a sense of community with other women?

These ideas build upon a number of works published recently by feminist cultural critics. Suzanna Walters (1995) is one of the feminist scholars on this, the cutting edge of feminist cultural analysis. She urges us to decide whether culture is feminist by engaging collaboratively with the viewer, not just sticking to the text:

Cultural criticism...prefers to position itself as an island, a world unto itself. The social context of the production, distribution, and reception of certain images is thus largely ignored....Why are women absent in so much of feminist cultural criticism?" (pp.144-146)

Walters urges a specifically "feminist cultural studies" (p.152) which is not derived from cultural studies, but from a feminist framework. She suggests, as I do, that we look overseas for guidance, because

British cultural theorists look at people--a daring thing to do in an intellectual milieu that has boldly declared the end of social relations. More important, this ethnographic impulse is informed by a sustained and developed political sensibility, so that the studies have the richness and vitality that only an engagement with lived experience can produce. It seems deeply contradictory for feminist

film theorists (for example) to consistently avoid discussion of women while speaking eloquently of the construction of woman in and through representation. (p.157-158)

We need not just sit there and watch women watching television, or restrict ourselves to interview them. We ought to be thinking more broadly:

Methodologically, this approach would entail a move away from the focus on either the isolated text or the aggregate viewer and move toward an engagement with the lived experience of actual women, an engagement with "material girls." I want to stress that this engagement need not be seen literally, as interviews or ethnographies. Rather, the methods increasingly used by feminist cultural critics are refreshingly eclectic, merging sophisticated textual analyses with social history, genre criticism with object relations, interviews with fan mail. Indeed, these intertextual, contextual critics are redefining what we mean by "audience" and what we mean by "empirical research." (p.159)

In arguing for a context-of-viewing perspective, Walters is joined by Laurie Shrage (1993), who says that "Contextual criticism should aim to describe features of the context of reception of a piece of art and to explicate how those features interact with some aspects of the artwork. In regard to film, some important feature of the context of reception might include an audience's cinematic habits." (p.142) Jennifer Robinson and Stephanie Ross (1993) also

point out that "meaning is a function of the reader's experience and that differences in experience produce different--perhaps inconsistent--readings." (p.112) Because women experience reality differently, there are multiple possible feminist interpretations of any given text. Again, similarly, Rita Felski (1989) urges that "...a feminist approach to women's writing needs to proceed from a recognition of the heterogeneity of texts produced by women writers in different periods and cultures which cannot be reduced to exemplifications of a single underlying essence." (p.49)

In sum, these feminist scholars remind us to consider the interplay between viewer and text in formulating meaning, and to consider the social context of viewing before determining what is feminist cultural praxis. They have paved the way for a synthesized view of analyzing this material, termed here "a gender context perspective."

**XI. FEMINIST PRACTICE, COMPONENT I:  
THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN  
WOMEN VIEWERS AND GENDERED TEXT**

This chapter is about how women interact with soap operas as a gendered text: what we like about the shows, and whether and we consider the soaps, and ourselves, to be feminist. These factors are seen as determining whether soap operas are feminist from the perspective of the viewer.

**Women Viewers On Soaps vs. Talkshows: Feminine Oriented Emotionality  
As A Primary Source Of Enjoyment**

*On Soaps: Feminine Oriented Emotionality as an Attraction*

This is my time away from everybody else. this is my dreamland....you'd be surprised. the strenuous day-to-day work that I do in real estate. and having to negotiate and work with buyers. I wanna pull my hair out....this is my escape. It's relaxing. I walk away and I've got a clear head again. I can deal with the rest of the problems that I've gotta deal with. --  
Angie

Soap operas offer women a relaxing space, away from the pressures of the outside world. It seems paradoxical that a show which is experienced by viewers as so relaxing is at the same time so filled with tension, every moment an emotional turning point, confrontation, or resolution. And yet women experience them as relaxing, like breathing the clean air after a thunderstorm has cleared. As masculinity is associated with the use of physical methods, such as sports, to let out tension, femininity is associated with emotionally-centered techniques, such as talking, as a stress-reliever. They are often referred to by women as an "escape," largely because they offer a safe, nonpressured space where the viewer can drain off her unpleasant or "excessive" (in society's judgment) emotional buildup.

The soaps' trademark emotionality is associated with other feminine traits which they highlight, like (the above-mentioned) talkativeness, relational capacity, and intuition. That soaps offer a satisfying emotional catharsis for viewers explains why, once they are "over the hump" of understanding the plot, "few viewers said that they ever stopped watching" (Whetmore and Kielwasser 1983). When viewers achieve secure footing in the fictional soap world, they are free to project their own emotional needs onto the characters whom they are coming to "know." Indeed, 51% of the 91 women I surveyed had been watching

the soaps for 16 years or more: 85% had been viewers for greater than 5 years. Other studies have yielded similar findings (Carveth and Alexander 1985, Perse 1986, Matelski 1988).

It is only to be expected that women viewers derive great satisfaction from the soaps' portrayal of emotionality as central, healthy, and necessary, living as we do in a society where being "very emotional" or "too sensitive" is considered an aberration. True, women are "allowed" to be somewhat "hysterical," but this only proves the point. Since women remain subordinate to men, society does not expect as much from us. In fact, highly emotional men are often stigmatized as being effeminate. This attitude is common: we reward the President, military officers, and CEO's for being "cool under fire," "men of steel," not for seeming "premenstrual," or for acting "like a scared little girl." Although women are continually socialized to be emotionally aware (Chodorow 1978), this capacity is neither respected nor financially rewarded in adult life, except in a mothering<sup>20</sup>.

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20 Yes, mothering is technically unpaid, but women who stay home with their children are paid either by their spouses or the government (via welfare programs) to do so. Also, mothering work is called for in "womens' jobs" like preschool teaching, nursing and secretarial work, where the worker has to anticipate and take care of the child's/patient's/boss' needs--not only technically, but emotionally as well.

psychotherapeutic, or artistic capacity. Even in these jobs, women are supposed to be "tuned in" to other people's feelings, rather than focused upon their own.

The result of society's repudiation of emotion is a culture in which feelings must be suppressed, diverted, or "handled" by a (paid) mental health professional<sup>21</sup>. The realization that takes place in women's lives, that they have been socialized to be sensitive, but that they will be respected for "playing down" this quality, is painful and damaging to the psyche. Soap operas, then, which not only divert one's emotions from personal issues, but actively encourage emotional expression about fictional characters' lives, offers psychic relief without the negative labeling that results from public emotional displays<sup>22</sup>.

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21 One might argue that the inability of society to effectively handle people's emotionality accounts for the high levels of drug and alcohol abuse--perhaps people feel they have to "get high" in order to be able to freely express themselves. When the "drunk" or the "druggie" acts emotional, society then attributes this to the drug, rather than to the person. Sadly, it may be more comfortable for people (particularly men) to admit addiction to an external agent, rather than to confess that they inherently "feel too much".

22 Some might recall the recent scandal over John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s yelling match with his then-girlfriend (now wife), Jacqueline Bessett, in New York's Central Park.

Early on in soap opera research, Herta Herzog recognized that women/viewers<sup>23</sup> turn to soap operas for "emotional release." In Herzog's analysis, soaps also offer "opportunities for wishful thinking" (fantasizing), and "advice" (Herzog 1979 [1944]:24-25). Many scholars continue to argue for at least one of these factors as central to viewer gratification (Karp 1985, Matelski 1988, Allen 1989, Hopper 1989). Some have added the "social utility" factor<sup>24</sup>, arguing that women also enjoy soaps because they offer an opportunity for socialization, either symbolically (with the show's characters) or actually (discussing the soaps with others). Still others have combined or narrowed the above factors in trying to explain soaps' appeal. An example of the latter is the common contention that soaps satisfy a specific kind of wish--to escape the tedium of housework (Lopate 1976, Modleski 1982, Buchwald 1986).

Some say that soap operas exercise different types of appeal to different people, and attract diverse viewership because of this (Kaufman 1979 [1944]).

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23 The two are often conflated, even though the viewing audience does consist of both women and men, and despite the fact that both sexes are recruited for most contemporary research on the soap opera viewer.

24 Ronald Compesi (1977) first used the term. This idea also appears in the work of Whetmore and Kielwasser 1983; Rubin 1985a; Buckman 1985; Rosen 1987; Brown 1990a; Williams 1992; Rittenhouse 1992, and Rogers 1992a.

Cantor and Pingree 1983, Matelski 1988). Different viewers watching the same soap opera also come away with varying interpretations/experiences of viewing (Kaufman 1979 [1944], Livingstone 1989, 1990a, 1990b), and therefore the same soap opera can interest different people for different reasons.

In my interviews with women viewers, I found that the soaps offer what Herzog called "emotional release" in four particular ways: venting, truth, justice, and romance. "Venting" is a general term for all the miscellaneous feelings that women let out through soap opera viewing. "Truth" means that soaps allow women to watch characters search for and find emotional truth in their lives, whether through realism or fantasy. "Justice" concerns the resolution of moral problems, that more often than not have to do with one character's emotional manipulation of another. "Romance" refers to all issues connected with intimacy and sex, which are generally intertwined on the soaps.

Soaps' emphasis on emotion has a larger significance for women, because the message conveyed is that life ultimately derives meaning from the feelings one has, and from the relationships one forms with others. This validates women's feminine socialization; more than that, it implies that feminine identification gives women the ability--equal to physical prowess, or money, etc.--

to shape and alter the course of people's lives. These notions are empowering for women, whose emotionality is expected, but not respected.

## VENTING

(Watching soap operas) lets you forget about your problems for a little while...scream and holler and laugh and cry...forget about life for an hour. --Cathy

The general need to let off emotional steam is one of the main reasons why the women studied enjoy soap operas. The majority of those surveyed, 64% (n=90) have a strong emotional reaction to something they see on a soap opera "often" or "sometimes."

For some viewers, soaps allow venting of positive feelings, for instance, happiness at characters' good fortune. However, most women that I studied use the programs to let out their sadness and anger. Sadness is exemplified by an online posting from "GramaCindy," who "had tears running down my face after the scene with Sonny and Brenda. When Stone came in and found Brenda, it was so moving." The feelings soap operas evoke are likely related to viewers' own experiences, as when Sally told me that "One Life to Live"'s portrayal of a

character holding a dying loved one, reminded her of her own son's untimely passing.

The second, and more common, category of negative emotions provoked by soap operas includes anger, and even hatred. This is not surprising, given that women specifically look to soap operas to release emotions they must suppress in everyday life. Although society treats any display of emotionality as a deviation from the norm, it is only natural that such fierce emotions are more likely to be suppressed, because they are unpleasant--and more likely to threaten the social order.

Some women expressed anger at the fictional characters, for their "behavior." As Donna put it, "they're doing things for their own purposes and you want to strangle them." Online, more extreme anger surfaced in viewers' comments, correspondingly punctuated by a seemingly infinite number of question marks and exclamation points. In this comment, "Carol417" actually uses the word "vent" to describe her feelings:

Boy...I dont know about anyone else but Justis is REALLY getting on my nerves!!!! I think his smug little attitude needs an adjustment!!!! How can Simone stand that creep????? I used to really

like the character of Justis but now I cant stand him.  
Simone is better off without him!

Thanks for letting me vent!

I was really mad (.)

When a character crosses the line from provoking anger to inciting hatred in the viewers, they become the target of online comments like the one from "AnniBanany," who asked if "anyone else out there...just wishes Sammi (on 'Days of Our Lives') would be dropped into a big vat of acid?" Pure hatred, though, is unusual, for even the most contemptible soap characters are presented in such a way that we feel at least a little sympathy for them, or sense some goodness in them. This is because soaps attempt to elicit as many and as complex emotions from viewers as possible. An extreme result of this attempt at complexity is soaps' tendency to convert "Rapists Into Heroes" (Martin 1995)-- that is, to take a feared and hated character, such as a rapist, and transform him into someone viewers like and identify with.

Other viewers aim their anger at the soaps' real-life actors/writers/producers, rather than at the fictional characters. An example of this is "KariNicole"'s online protest regarding the character Kristin's discovery of

her own infertility on "Days of Our Lives." She points out that "...this medical problem is a bit unreal. She (Kristin) didn't even ask WHY she may not be fertile!" This type of anger is caused by the show's failure to keep the fiction emotionally convincing, which is the basis for viewers' being relaxed enough so that one's feelings can be discharged and projected upon the narrative.

#### TRUTH

What makes a soap opera unconvincing? In their interviews with soap opera viewers (1983), Whetmore and Kielwasser uncovered a paradox in audience interpretation of soap operas: even though the soaps' "content was often noted by viewers to be decidedly dissimilar to real life...these same viewers would still classify their soaps as 'realistic,' 'true to life,' and 'believable.'" (p.114). Ultimately, they realized, viewers were equating "realism" with a particular type of truth.

..."the truth of soap opera." Through all their cliché-filled dialogue...histrionics, and distorted pictures of affluence, it seems that soaps are still managing to convey some very basic truths about our human experience as creatures of emotion. (ibid.)

In real life, women, who are socialized to be emotional, are, paradoxically, continually asked to suppress their emotions in favor of intellectually logical behavior. On the soaps, characters are not only allowed, but required, to indulge their emotions, even (or especially) at the expense of rational action. For instance, on "General Hospital," when Bobbi learned that Damian had seduced her away from her husband merely to win a bet, she was so angry at his cruelty that she lured Damian to an underground cave, then left him to die there.

As a viewer, I enjoyed watching Bobbi act on her emotions. However, in real life society does not sanction this type of behavior. Much like action-oriented entertainment (e.g., "cop shows") aim to symbolically free the warrior inside everyman, soap operas lift the burden of rationality from everywoman, favoring emotional over rational logic. Soap characters are routinely thrust into extreme circumstances merely for the sake of exploring their feelings. This occurred on a recent episode of "General Hospital" (3/18/95), in which the characters Justus and Keesha watch their grandmother's home burn to the ground. The circumstances surrounding the fire are unusual--an incredibly wealthy businessman set this combination home/orphanage afire when his offer to purchase it was refused. Yet the shocked expression on Justus' face, the tears streaming out of Keesha's eyes, their mutual portrayal of loss--this was emotionally real.

In their search for emotional truth, soaps must keep a delicate balance between "reality" and "fantasy" to satisfy the viewers. As Jennifer put it, "A lot of the things are very true to life (until they) veer so far off you start throwing things at the TV." Soaps are thus not always successful in their quest. This would explain why although the majority of the women surveyed, 63%, said that soap operas were generally "very" or "somewhat" realistic, a large minority, 37%, said they were "hardly" or "not at all" realistic (n=91). Another reason why viewers are divided on this is that impressions of emotional veracity are "idiosyncratic" (Whetmore and Kielwasser 1983).

The idea that women watch soaps to explore emotional reality is also supported by their responses to another of the survey questions. Women were asked to rate 19 factors, such as mother-daughter relationships, friendship, psychological problems, social problems, etc., on a scale of 1-4, based upon how they thought their favorite soap has represented these items in the past few years. A score of 1 meant the item was portrayed very realistically; 4 meant that the viewer thought the representation was not at all realistic. The responses range from 1.7 for "Friendship" to 2.9 for "The Criminal Justice System." The relative narrowness of the responses fits in with the contention that whatever soaps portray, from family relationships to the workings of a court, it is filtered through

"emotion-colored glasses." At the same time, the gradations of responses reveal viewers' sense that relationships lend themselves more easily to emotional exploration than police stations and business offices do<sup>25</sup>.

There is one recent storyline in particular, from "Days of Our Lives," which is a perfect "case study" of the way viewers react when soaps depart from romantic storylines in the process of exploring emotional truth. This plot, which will be referred to here as the "devil storyline," featured the satanic possession of Marlena, complete with morphing, green contact lenses (to symbolize possession of the soul) and other special effects. This unusual storyline caused a number of events to be set into motion in Salem, USA, wherein the "devil" in Marlena confronted the other characters with their true motivations (her daughter Sami's love for Austin, Stefano's evil intentions, John's love for Kristen, etc.) Many viewers apparently disliked this plot, leading Deirdre Hall, who plays Marlena, to admit (in *Soap Opera Digest*) that for the first time, she was afraid to go out in public, because of all the hate mail that she had received. In my interview with one viewer, Joanne, she told me how much she disliked the plot, calling it

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25 See the Appendix for the full listing. In general, clearly relational items scored lowest (most realistic), while items that are less concerned with personal relationships (the criminal justice system, workplace issues) scored highest (least realistic).

"outrageous." All the controversy led "D.S." to write to Soap Opera Magazine, in a plea for tolerance. This viewer was confronting the perception that soaps have to mimic day to day life to deliver a satisfying narrative. The writer asks viewers to appreciate the soaps' effort to depart from day-to-day life in their storytelling:

I'm so tired of the negative comments about Marlina's possession (on DAYS). Viewers get crazed if it isn't all romance, sex, and family crisis. We need to bear in mind that soaps aren't reality. I'm sympathetic to the stories about safe sex, AIDS, etc., but this is what happens every day out there. Thank goodness we can escape into our soaps. Lighten up fans! --from "Your Turn." (Soap Opera Magazine 5[22]), 5/30/95:45).

In my interview with Donna, she expresses a similar understanding, that the show, even if "outrageous," was trying to advance more "serious" things in the plot with the devil storyline:

..."Days of Our Lives" has sort of an outrageous umm topic they had, the devil in Salem. A lot of people were like oh, I cant believe this, and things like that, and they...and it got kind of tacky and goofy but in a way it was just sort of another story, you know....you could see that they were trying to portray something somewhat serious, you know? The things that were at stake.

Given that women must often suppress their feelings outside the context of the fictional show, it is unsurprising that they will gravitate towards a medium that expresses the importance of plumbing one's emotions, "getting to the heart of the matter," so to speak. Women want to get in touch with the self, and by watching the soap characters undergo processes of self-discovery, we are encouraged to seek emotional truth in our own lives.

#### JUSTICE

The process of searching for "emotional truth" is connected with another soap opera issue that appeals to women viewers: the accomplishment of justice. "Emotional truth" and "justice" are linked in that characters are expected to pursue the former, but in a moral fashion. If they cross the line (and of course they always do, it wouldn't be any fun otherwise!), viewers want "justice" to be served.

This is perhaps best illustrated in the area of romance, with a sample storyline: the Sami-Carrie-Austin love triangle on "Days of Our Lives." The audience sympathizes if Sami searches her feelings and discovers that she is truly in love with her sister's boyfriend, Austin. However, we don't sanction her attempts to break the couple up and insert herself into the picture. Now that she has done wrong, she must pay, and a particularly high price at that, since she has used and

abused so many people. Sami did not provoke this much anger when she stole and wrecked someone's car--that was just property. But that she manipulated Austin into being with her, that she ignored her sister's attempts to have a good relationship, that she would use a baby to "trap" a man--the girl must be stopped!<sup>26</sup> It is true that soaps try to keep viewers from hating the characters ceaselessly: in Sami's case, this is true as well. She is made sympathetic by her representation of a girl from a mixed-up family who just wants to be loved. Nevertheless, it is unacceptable to the viewer that she just get away with all the havoc she has caused, and, as Jill puts it, "...we don't want Austin and Sami together, so we're watchin' it (the soap) to make sure that they don't get together." It just wouldn't be right.

What "justice" is, however, isn't always as clear as it is with Sami. When issues are murky, the audience has a harder time deciding who is right and who is wrong, and what an appropriate punishment would be. To keep viewers emotionally entangled in the controversy, soap operas intentionally create complicated plots, like the romantic quadrangle between Sonny, Brenda, Lily, and

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26 See "AnniBanany"'s online comment, above, in which she asks whether "anyone else out there...just wishes Sammi (sic) (on "Days of Our Lives") would be dropped into a big vat of acid?"

Miguel on "General Hospital." Originally, the couples were: Brenda/Sonny, and Lily/Miguel. However, after Brenda's friends (Lois and Ned) convinced her to wiretap Sonny, a mafiosi, he broke off with her. Brenda and Sonny turned to their friends, Miguel and Lily, for comfort, and initiated sexual relationships with them.

The audience was in turmoil over the various moral issues at stake in this storyline. In the following online debate over this storyline, there is a sophisticated understanding of the complicated emotional issues at stake, as well as concern over the characters' various wrongdoings. The letter is authored by Susan, who is responding to various comments related to the storyline:

Comment #1: Am I the only one who was yelling at the TV during the Sonny and Brenda scenes today? I mean, here's Brenda, whimpering and simpering about how much she loved Sonny. Yet she admitted to Lois that she lied to Sonny all along about her feelings for Miguel. She jumped into bed with Miguel less than two days after breaking up with Sonny, and feels no remorse at all for this.

Susan: I have got to disagree.....Brenda took him in out of friendship (which was not smart...) Because Lilly hurt Miguel & Sonny hurt Brenda!

Comment #2: She whimpers that she loves Sonny, but I'm sure she will willingly and passively go back to using his love for her to hurt him and take L&B away from him. If this is her idea of love, Sonny is better off without her...

Susan: She is trying to get Sonny (& even More than Sonny, THE MOB) out of L&B. I know she still loves him VERY much. I think eventually she will have to take responsibility for Miguel but right now she is listening to other people's heads more than her own!...

Comment #3: Lois and Ned should suffer a great deal for their betrayal of Brenda....Seems no one has seen fit to stand by her and help her in her hour of need. Brenda went out of her way for Ned and then for Lois. They repay her by urging her to destroy her life. I hope Brenda reads them both the riot act when she gets her brain back.

Susan: ...Ned is a Double-Standarder Jerk at times But I think Lois has always tryed (sic) to help Brenda but I do not think the woman (Lois) can live her life for her....the Multi-Confused Brenda is still trying to sort thru some things....soon I think she will realize a lot of people (as far as Brenda is concerned) can go to hell!....I hope Brenda can take Sonny back from that yes-mam LeeLee! :)

Although some complexity makes the storyline believable and interesting, women viewers also need to feel secure in distinguishing right from wrong. For when this is accomplished, it allows viewers the freedom to imagine all sorts of punishment. This can be illustrated via another storyline, also on "General Hospital," in which the aforementioned Bobbie had an almost-affair with Alan. Particularly because Bobbie was still in the process of making it up to her

husband for a previous indiscretion (with Damian--the one who seduced her on a bet), and especially because Alan's wife was recovering from a bout with breast cancer. viewers (including myself) were furious at them both. One onliner, "Skarlett"/Sarah, envisioned how justice might be served to Alan. In her fantasy, Bobbie's charms prove exhausting, so that when Alan's wife Monica wants to

... come on to Alan.....Alan won't be able to do, how shall I say this delicately, anything about it because he's used up all of his stamina. It's the ultimate irony. For months, Alan's been wanting Monica, and when she's finally ready, he can't do it. What do you think?

Viewers' wish that there be justice on the soaps is so overweening that it even extends to the real-life behavior of cast members. When "Ellen 7" revealed online that Genie Francis (Laura on "General Hospital") was supposedly leaving the show in October 1995, even though the show had accommodated her leave of absence for pregnancy, she did so angrily:

You would think that with all the build up the show gave her return and the accommodations they made with her pregnancy and later when she came back, let her go again for another few months to do a TV movie, she would have felt some gratitude and loyalty to give them at least a full year of her services!

Ellen felt that the show had been more than fair to Genie Francis, and that she owed them something in return. In fact, Ellen argued, Francis' absence from the show "is why Luke and Laura's story went down the tubes along with their characters!" Other viewers, like "Carol417," agreed with her, and argued for justice: "...I don't think that they should let her come back."

Women viewers' "moralism" has a flipside: a fascination with the soap characters' transgressions. As Marsha commented about Erica Kane, on "All My Children":

Morally I don't think what she does is right....but she's really interesting. I think if she left "All My Children" I wouldn't watch it anymore.

Women viewers' fixation upon issues related to evil-doing and punishment is linked, of course, to gender socialization. From an early age, girls are taught to be nurturing, not aggressive; not scheming, but moral. On soaps, we have the vicarious opportunity both to be bad, and to punish ourselves for this impulse.

Secondly, women know from their "emotional training" how subtle and how painful emotional warfare can be, but masculinized society is less sensitive to this type of aggression than to the use of physical violence: one cannot be

arrested for giving someone "the cold shoulder." By recognizing the potential harmfulness of feminine forms of aggression, soap operas affirm women's sense of their own (and others') emotional power. By validating feminine might, soap operas offer a forum in which its misuse can be acknowledged, and ultimately righted.

#### ROMANCE

I always like the romance aspect on the soap operas... --- Donna

Romance--the intertwining of intimacy and sexuality--is the central preoccupation of the soaps. As such, romantic storylines inevitably address the three factors previously mentioned: viewers' interest in venting, emotional truth, and justice. As lovers fight, viewers vent; as they decide if they "really want to be together," we accompany their search for emotional truth; and when a manipulative third person breaks up the couple, we demand justice. Because soaps present emotionally complex situations related to intimate relationships, we are able to vicariously experience the problem and its resolution, becoming involved in the conflict without having anything at stake because of it. As Diana Reep (1992) puts it, "Jack and Jennifer--Luke and Laura--Bo and Hope--Eden and Cruz--Frisco and Felicia--Anna and Duke--Steve and Kayla--Josh and Reva:

these are the super couples of daytime soap opera--the romantic duos who excite the strongest and most emotional viewer response." (p. 96)

The biggest romantic problem for soap characters is what I call "misalignment"--pairing up with the wrong partner. The question of proper alignment, that is often but not always synonymous with "chemistry," was an eagerly-taken-up topic of conversation in the interviews. Online, too, women reason with each other about who should partner with whom (these two comments are about "Days of Our Lives"):

The writers will probably try to put Marlana with Stephano now. I agree Marlana should be put back with John. I never liked John and Kristen together anyway! --Bonnie444

Am I the only one who likes Kristen and John together? I love their scenes! --KariNicole

Some give detailed explanations of their thoughts, almost as if they were the characters' therapists, as in this comment about "General Hospital":

Now come on now: if you're really trying to put your marriage back together again, would you GO AWAY with the person you're trying to avoid succumbing to?...NO--OF COURSE NOT!!!!....You'd do this stupid thing if all you want

is your gratification. short-term. instead of keeping the long-term picture in mind. which I presume in both cases is continuation/revival of the marriage. -- IAMB2 (Beth)

Because women viewers are not actually invested in the outcome of these relationships, they often make light of the characters' romantic dilemmas:

Lessee....

Lily could sleep with Alan

Bobbie could sleep with Miguel

Sonny could sleep with Lily

Then of course Brenda would sleep with everybody....

Feeling left out: I've only got one husband... --Alice

It is easy to think of reasons why soaps' emphasis on romance appeals to women soap opera viewers. Clearly, women are socialized to be preoccupied with relationships. Second, women may turn to soap relationships as a way of addressing their own romantic needs. Rather than incorporating it into everyday

life, masculine-dominant society relegates romance to an "occasion" (like Valentine's Day), a "getaway" ("Beautiful Mount Airy Lodge"), or a means to an end (courtship, for marriage). Masculinity clearly separates between "love stuff" and "daily life," whereas femininity finds the two indistinguishable. Soap operas, as a woman-centered subversion of masculine society, portray a world in which romance is threaded throughout everyday life.

On the whole, soap operas pay a great deal of attention to the need to explore, express, and resolve all varieties of human emotion, whether it be romantic or otherwise. Based upon my research, I believe this is the true source of their appeal to women. Whereas masculine society decrees that women suppress excessive feeling so as to "get on with it," the alternative, feminine world of the soaps reassures us that we cannot go on without paying regular and consistent attention to "matters of the heart."

*On Talkshows: Masculinized Emotion Displays As A Turnoff*

If it is true that women watch soap operas for an emotional "high," this begs the question of whether the latter are replaceable by daytime talkshows. After all, these programs --such as "Oprah Winfrey," "Geraldo," and "The Ricki Lake Show," also air on weekdays, also explore human emotions, and also

encourage the viewer to relate to the guests' lives. Do talkshows therefore have a similar appeal to soap operas?

Most women soap opera viewers I spoke with said no. In fact, a number of them were disdainful of talkshows, calling them "disgustingly sleazy" (Marly), with "stupid," "weird," "depressing" topics (Vivian), that encourage guests to "exploit themselves" (Lynn). The one exception, that viewers cited repeatedly, was "The Oprah Winfrey Show." Women approved of Oprah's decision not to do "gutter shows," as Alison put it, felt that Oprah had risen above the pack in her quest to better the world.

The irritated, even angry manner in which viewers discussed talkshows contrasted sharply with the relaxed and happy mien they exhibited when conversing about soap operas. Their distaste for the talkshow genre contradicts Muriel Cantor's prediction (restated in Stern 1994) that "soaps might someday die out altogether as viewers switch to the real-life dramas offered by the talk shows."

To the contrary, viewers detested the talkshows' sensationalism, the questionable authenticity of their guests, and the repellent nature of their "problems." As Patricia commented:

I very seldom watch a talkshow.....they're either fighting, they're taking somebody else's husband, they're fighting with the wife, they're fighting with the daughter....I don't wanna hear it, I don't wanna watch those shows....It's getting too out of hand, as far as I'm concerned....I really wonder if...they (the problems portrayed) really happen the way...these talkshows (portray them). I really don't care for them too much, I really don't.

Struck by their strongly contrasting attitudes towards the two types of programs, I asked viewers how they distinguished talkshows from soap operas. For them, the main difference is that soap operas are, as Marly put it, "fiction that I know is fiction," whereas talkshows are apparently based upon the lives of real people. Many, like Tracy, felt that talkshows go to "bizarre, often crude" lengths to heighten audience interest in their guests' lives. The feeling was expressed that this sensationalism is immoral; thus the viewers tended to hold up the ethically-oriented "Oprah" show in contrast. Talkshows, they felt, operate under false pretenses, exploiting people in the name of helping them. On the other hand, soap operas promise, and deliver, a good story:

...it's a very tiny jump from the great plays of "Hamlet" and "Romeo and Juliet" to local soap operas, (because soaps feature) characters, and they're placed in outrageous events...you can relate to them in a fictional manner. Talkshows put real people in front of you and they say...this is what I've sunk to... --Alison

Unlike talkshows, soap operas offer viewers something "more meaningful than who's sleeping with who." (Lynn). For them, this meaningfulness derives from soaps' emphasis on exploring the complexities of emotional life, particularly romantic matters.

Yet the fact remains that both soaps and talkshows deal with similar content--emotions--and spice that up with sexuality and aggression. A deeper look at these two genres yields a truer difference between them: talkshows are as masculinized as soaps are feminine.

How is this so? First, a basic element of talkshows is objectification, which feminists commonly link to masculinity. As Nancy Hartsock puts it, under patriarchy "The other (the woman) must be completely controlled, must be made into a thing...sometimes even made into an object to be traded" (1985:177). Unlike soap operas, which present characters as emotionally complex, talkshows reduce people to singular aspects of their personalities. The host (as well as the written descriptions that flash under the guests' faces), clearly communicates what type of person the panelist is: "concerned mother," "obsessive girlfriend," "jealous husband," etc. Presumably this simplifies the audience's task of figuring out what these people are doing on the panel in the first place.

Talkshows objectify not only personality, but physicality. Whereas most of soaps' characters are normative, neither too thin nor too fat, neither too ugly nor too good-looking<sup>27</sup>, talkshows strive to present guests who are immediately reducible to their sexual characteristics. Women guests are often clad prostitute-style, so as to "present the problem," e.g., "My daughter the hooker" ("Sally Jessy Raphael"), or "My mom dresses too sexy" ("Montel Williams"). Men, too, are presented as sexual objects, as on "The Ricki Lake Show," that features shows like "Blue-collar studs." Other programs, such as "The Richard Bey Show," hire male-stripper types to bring out the guests. Yet another trend is to "make men over" to see how they would look as sexy women ("Sally Jessy Raphael"). When they are not focusing on sexuality directly, talkshows portray guests as the personification of other physical traits, such as obesity. A familiar theme in this vein is "guests whose families are embarrassed by them," (a favorite of "Ricki Lake"); there is the occasional competition for "Miss Big Butt" or "Mr. Punyverse" ("Richard Bey").

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27 The exception being soaps' tendency to sexually objectify one or two male characters in each cast, the "tokens" whose primary purpose is to attract women viewers.

Another manifestation of talkshows' masculine orientation is their penchant for provoking physical violence (even as they tsk, tsk against it) as a means of letting out aggression. This is greatly divergent from the world of soap operas, on which aggression is usually channeled into subtle emotional warfare. Violent soap opera characters are considered aberrant and extreme. Verbal aggression, while prevalent on both soaps and talkshows, rarely degenerates into violence on the soaps. Yet talkshows regularly play up their violent content. When violence develops between guests, it starts with name-calling, progresses to hand-gestures, then to a stand-up "face-off," and finally ends in the swinging of fists and restraint by security guards. Of course, the camera takes due note of the audience's excitement at these displays, and even features promotional spots that say, "Coming up..." and then show a violent confrontation. Hypocritically, guests are then "chastised" for their behavior, and told that "this is not the way we treat people" (another penchant of Ricki Lake's). Although they could edit the violence out, the point of talkshows is to allow the audience to revel in it.

The masculine tendencies toward objectification and violence are the hallmark of the talkshow genre. Soap operas, on the other hand, are distinguished by their emphases on emotional complexity and nonphysical aggression--feminine characteristics. Therefore, although talkshows, like soap operas, feature

emotional displays, the women I spoke with greatly favor the soap operas. Many saw talkshows as generally farcical, crude, immoral, exploitative, and insincere, a mockery of the emotional realism that soap operas strive for.

**Women Viewers On Feminism: The Interplay Between Identity Construction And Meaning Construction In The Act Of Viewing**

Boys are primarily bullied by other boys who use... physical aggression....Girls may be bullied by girls, boys or both, and the methods used are less physical, primarily social alienation and intimidation. (Garrity, in Brody 1996)

Girls and boys alike come to sense that society is male-dominated from an early age, as they face the universal threat of masculine physical aggression. However, girls are disadvantaged in coping with the threat of bullying. First, unlike boys, girls are not socialized to be physically aggressive or even capable at self-defense (e.g., boys play with guns, while girls play with dolls). Second, girls are hindered by their lack of sisterhood. Rather than finding safety with each other, they wage internal battles, fueled by feminine tactics of aggression. Unlike boys, who can at least think of the opposite sex as a relatively safe haven, girls are isolated both from each other and from the opposite sex by the constant threat of

both masculine and feminine bullying. Male dominance hurts women, but it hurts even more when "sisterhood is doubtful."

As adults, women face the same problem--male-dominant society--but still do not join together to confront it. Instead, by and large, women make their own choices as to how to handle things. Because these individual choices cannot by themselves overcome the structure of our oppression, women take out anger at each other over "the problem" in much the same way we did as girls: at-home mothers vs. working mothers, heterosexual women vs. bisexuals vs. lesbians, daughters vs. mothers, and so on.

Why haven't women expressed their anger by rallying around the feminist flag? Some might attribute women's lack of unity to a "divide and conquer" strategy, intentional or not, conscious or not, on the part of patriarchy. As true as that may be, one cannot ignore women's repulsion at the perceived message of feminism: that women should cast aside femininity in favor of equality. Even women who identify themselves as feminist find themselves torn between the popular notion of empowerment, and lived experience as a woman. In Living With Contradictions: A Married Feminist, Angela McBride writes of

...the potent, almost symbiotic connection made between woman and home which pleases the traditionalist and offends the feminist. Many an old-fashioned woman gets misty-eyed when she thinks of herself as a homemaker: it's pleasant to think of a gracious, warm, inviting home as an extension of your own personality. On the other hand, the fact that "woman" and "house" are so inextricably linked that has occasioned many a feminist war cry. It's demeaning to use the word "housewife" to define a woman: she's not wed to a house. After her relationship to her own body and those she has with other people as daughter, wife, and mother, no other relationship has so much emotional hold on a married feminist or generates so much ambivalence as the one she has to her home." (1977:102)

However, the "casting aside" message only represents one feminist school of thought, that of liberal feminism. From this perspective, women and men are seen as more similar than different, and femininity is viewed as a mode of living which women are socialized into, so that we will not challenge patriarchy's real-world hegemony over women's lives. In contrast, cultural feminism challenges the deemphasis of femininity, presenting women as different from men in important ways (e.g., being intuitively and relationally privileged), and argues that women should bring our unique influence to improve a world dominated by masculine values.

Liberal and cultural feminism offer two opposing versions of what "keeps women down." Should women be treated as men's equals, as liberal feminists say, or as a class apart from men, as cultural feminists do? The answer one gives to this question leads to fundamental differences as to strategy--for example, liberal feminists tend to be against protective legislation for women, whereas cultural feminists tend to favor it (Donovan 1990). The disparity between the two perspectives pits American women against each other. Sylvia Hewlett (1987) describes "contemporary women" as (unfortunately) being in "two hostile camps" (p.9):

Perhaps the greatest casualties of the liberation movements have been middle-aged women who still want and need to be homemakers. They have been made immensely vulnerable by the cold winds of change that have swept through our society, and they are generally misunderstood by younger, elite women who are in the vanguard of change. In many cases these "liberated" women identify so completely with men that they too have learned to regard homemakers as parasites and fools. One of the challenges for the future is to bring these two groups of women together so that they can make a common cause. (ibid.:337)

Ultimately, because the liberal feminist message came to be seen as representing the feminist movement as a whole<sup>28</sup>, "feminism" became associated with the word "equality" (rather than "equity," for instance, which implies a recognition of difference). For many, the implication of sexual "equality" is the loss of any distinctions based upon sex or gender, including the distinction between self-identification as either masculine or feminine. Because liberal feminism sees conventional notions of gender (masculinity and femininity) as an integral part of the patriarchal social structure, they are considered unacceptable. Thus terminology like "gender socialization," "sex roles," "sex discrimination," and "sexism" are not neutral and academic but rather the products of a theory that pays attention to the ways that society constructs and enforces sex differences so as to "keep women down." In place of essentialism, there is the idea of "the social construction of gender" (see Lorber 1994), a concept which liberal feminists have internalized (Henry 1994). The constructionist perspective is that gender is a product of nurture, not nature, and is separable from biological sex

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28 This contrast between liberal and cultural feminism is not to suggest that these are the only strains of feminism in existence, rather that they represent the opposed paradigms over femininity to which American women gravitate. Of course there are also other major schools of feminist thought. Jaggar (1983) classifies them broadly as socialist, Marxist, and radical feminism. To this we can add Freudian feminism and existentialist feminism (Donovan 1990).

(and sexuality). If society constructs the feminine, and simultaneously seeks to keep women subordinate, then women have the right and even the responsibility to seek empowerment by overcoming feminine socialization and appropriating the "natural" prerogatives of men. In this view, biological women who seek to behave as social men, rather than to accept womanhood, are normal, perhaps more normal than women who choose to accept their fate. To restate R.D. Laing, "to be feminine, in a masculinist society, is to be insane."

In truth, it would be impossible for feminists to do anything but advocate women's masculinism if women are to achieve economic empowerment, at least. Ever heard the expression, "a woman has to work twice as hard as a man to earn half as much"? In our society, where power is measured in large part by money, typical feminine occupations (prototypically, motherhood) are low-status because they are low-paid or unpaid. As "the 51 percent minority" (Joreen, in Morgan 1970), women face the same alternatives that any racial or ethnic minority do, when confronted with the dominant group: exploitation, extermination, pluralism, and assimilation (Orenstein 1984). Obviously, the first two are not desirable options, and pluralism, which implies mutual respect (or at least respectful coexistence), is an impossibility when the dominant group disdains you. So women are seemingly left with a choice: assimilation towards masculinity, or

acceptance of an inferior femininity. Thus "equality," or sameness of opportunity, was a theme used by a number of the women surveyed to define the term "feminist" (see Appendix for complete listing). However, along with the notion of equal opportunity comes the feeling, at least among the women soap opera viewers I surveyed and interviewed, that femininity, "women's work," etcetera, are devalued by feminists. The following survey response typifies this feeling:

It ("feminist") used to mean someone who wanted women to have the same opportunities that everyone is entitled to. Now, it seems to me, that it means women who leave no room for any differences between the sexes & who demean women who choose to stay home with kids.

That many contemporary American women (whether they are soap opera viewers or not) resist identifying themselves with feminism because they perceive the movement as antifeminine is documented empirically in Sherrye Henry's The Deep Divide: Why American Women Resist Equality (1994). The results are based on a nationwide survey of 600 women, as well as cross-country focus groups, including women of diverse cultural backgrounds. Like Hewlett, Henry argues that (mainstream, meaning liberal) feminism has apparently not answered women's need for a "movement...that 'celebrates womanhood'"; does not offer a "positive, celebratory approach to being female." (p.56) Because feminists, like

the (self-identified) ones interviewed for the book, are generally liberal in orientation, and therefore distance themselves from identifying with femininity (p.51). women who may otherwise agree with feminist ideas identify themselves as nonfeminists, who "feel that the very core of their being--their ego and self-identity--is threatened by feminists" (p.271). True, Henry says, Republicans have pushed for a "backlash" against feminism (see Faludi 1991), and this may partly explain women's hostility to the latter, but many women, including the soap opera viewers I spoke with, still perceive and reject anti-femininity among feminists.

In line with the notion that women's identification with the feminine is a source of subordination, the feminist movement has traditionally framed women's love of the soaps as a problem. As Len Ang (1985:119) puts it, "Women are...seen (by feminists) as the passive victims of the deceptive message of soap operas." Writing in *Ms.*, Elizabeth Janeway (1985:118) blames soap opera content for the lack of sisterhood among women, saying that the latter "suggests to a woman that even her friends had better not be trusted...denying comradeship, sisterhood--and joint action" (Janeway 1985:118).

However, the vanguard of cultural feminist thought is towards a more inclusive view of empowerment, and towards a more celebratory view of

womanhood. The idea here is to take women's experiences, which have been a source of subordination, and use them for empowerment with a strategy of cooption, placing them under women's control. Thus a growing number of feminist critics are urging that soap operas be studied as a possibly coopt-able narrative for women (Ang 1985, 1990, Modleski 1983, Brown 1990a, 1990b), or at least be considered within the universe of feminist discourse (Kaplan 1987), without necessarily counting them out because the message, or the messenger, seem regressive. The debate over "what is feminist?" has been carried on in other areas as well, such as pornography (Valverde 1989), sadomasochistic sexual practices (France 1984), and romance novel-reading (Radway 1984).

However, despite the fact that cultural feminism is gaining ground within the movement, broadening the discourse within the movement as to "what is empowering for women," the women I interviewed remain uncomfortable with what they perceive as an antifeminine feminist model, which explains why, although many of those surveyed appeared to give neutral, equality-based definitions of feminism, 63% (N=86) of those surveyed said they were either not feminist, or not sure if they were feminist. Like many women and men in the United States,

and around the world, they may prefer to hold on to conventional notions of gender difference (Lewin 1996)<sup>29</sup>.

In the interviews, viewers tended to dichotomize between feminism, as a kind of extreme, and soap operas, which were called "neutral." (Phoebe) "in the middle." (Donna) or "universal" (Jennifer). Many viewers expressed surprise when I asked them if soap operas are feminist. Varda, for instance, "never really thought about it that way": Elizabeth said the soaps are just "telling a story." In other words, viewers saw the soaps as reflective of feminist gains that are already mainstream--e.g., working moms--but not as pushing for a change in the status quo (and therefore, as apolitical). As Jennifer explained:

No, I'm not a feminist, and no, I don't see feminism involved in the soaps...I view feminism as like a small faction of women who just view that women just aren't getting, it's something that we're not

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29 Lewin's recent article in *The New York Times* (3/27/96:A15) reports the results of a recent International Gallup Poll, of 1,000 adults in each of 22 countries:

...men and women around the world shared the perception that women are more emotional, talkative and affectionate than men, while men are perceived as more courageous, aggressive and ambitious....Nearly half of the Americans surveyed said the ideal family structure was one in which only the father earned the living and the mother stayed home with the children...

getting, and a lot of them blame men I think....I think the soaps' appeal is universal, and I don't see anything feministic there at all.

While it is true that most viewers surveyed would not identify themselves as feminists, the women I interviewed would also not repudiate the gains that feminism has made on women's behalf. In her book, Henry (1994:296) reports similar findings, that "...tarnished as the image of feminists may be, women today are not antifeminism. Feminism's message has been internalized as an accepted premise for most women's lives." This is consistent with my own survey results, in which 59% of women soap opera viewers (n=91) identified themselves as "pro-choice," 53% felt that women these days "have pretty much the same opportunities as men," 64% agreed that "pornography is degrading to women," 74% disagreed that "children turn out better when they are raised by a stay-at-home mother," and 70% disagreed that "it is important for women to always look their best."

Women soap opera viewers' "internalized" feminism also emerged as they acknowledged the shows' more empowering (for women) aspects. In several respects viewers surveyed felt that the soaps resisted sexism: 79% disagreed that soap operas "portray women as too dependent on men, and 68% disagreed that soap

operas "portray powerful women as 'bitches'" (n=91). Further, they were quick to condemn the soaps for any exhibition of (perceived) sexism. In Soap Opera Digest, for example, "K.H."<sup>30</sup> writes,

Although soap writers have moved female characters out of the kitchen and into the boardroom, they seem to revert back to the Middle Ages when these career women get married. It is very unrealistic in the '90s for nearly every female CEO, doctor, lawyer or executive on soaps to take her husband's surname, let alone refer to herself by his first and last names ("Mrs. John Smith"). Newly engaged soap women are heard to say, "I can't wait to be Mrs. John Smith." Surely we've progressed beyond this point....Have soap writers ever heard of "Ms."? It's ironic that soaps can tackle such issues as date rape and wife beating and then, in the next scene, discard a successful woman's name and identity in favor of a man's. -- "Sound Off." (Soap Opera Digest 9/10/96)

Similarly, in an interview with me, Vicky called "Days of Our Lives" "outright sexist," even though the women characters have careers and "basically neglect" their children, because "the men...always save the women."

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30 Whom I am assuming is more likely to be a woman, given her concern with sexism against women on the soaps.

Yet even as they called attention to the soaps' "feminist" or "nonfeminist" aspects, there was ambivalence about the "gains" that feminism has made, because those gains were equated with the loss of femininity. Vicky's comments are illustrative in this regard. In telling me about feminist representations on the soaps, she equates feminism with career, saying that soaps are feminist in the sense that they show women having careers. Pursuing a career may be empowering for women, but then again maybe it's not, if career pursuit means losing the family closeness that also gives women strength. Despite the fact that her soap, "Days of Our Lives," portrays women as professionals, Vicky ultimately expresses the feeling that the program is sexist because women characters are always being saved from danger by the male characters, rather than being represented as strong enough to save themselves. Again, "saving oneself" sounds positive, but what if you derive strength from feeling able to depend on your man?

Thus viewers' feelings about what feminism means communicate both the pros and the cons of the implications of feminism for women's lives. On the one hand feminism has accomplished concrete gains for us, but on the other, its rise feels tied to a loss of what it means to be a woman, particularly of the mother-caretaker role. This is a conflict that Vicky has in her own life. She described herself as:

Lucky enough to have career and be a homebody at the same time.....who straddles the fence between

the real strong feminist movement and the wanna-stay-home-with-my-child-too. almost a paradox...

Overall, women viewers' definitions of feminism had a great deal to do with how they defined themselves and the soap operas. In terms of self-definition, although they reject feminism's apparent rejection of femininity, they embrace its message that women can and should be equal to men. In terms of feminism on the soap operas, they did not define the shows as feminist, but rejected whatever aspects of sexism they felt were on the shows--almost as if the "default setting" of soap operas is a kind of fusion of liberal and cultural feminism, although it is not explicitly articulated as such. Indeed, the kind of feminism these women implicitly embrace, and which the soap operas portray, takes for granted the gains of liberal feminism, but also incorporates cultural feminism, taking pains to valorize women's experiences of the world and women's "special qualities" (socially constructed or not), particularly emotionality. By presenting a fused model of liberal and cultural feminism, soap operas powerfully address women viewers' conflict over their own identities, and empower them by allowing to integrate the qualities they value--by fantasizing a world in which women are able to be both womanly and equally as capable as men. Even when characters are supposedly "in the professional world," for

instance, inside they are always caring about others and deeply immersed in human relationships. This is the message that speaks to women viewers, who, although they appreciate what liberal feminism has done for them in terms of "rights" and "equality," want to incorporate feminine values into their lives, for example to love, and to be loved. That viewers see the soaps' emphasis on love, relationships, and feelings as apolitical, a story, "neutral," "universal," is perhaps the most subversive thing about their thoughts: they see woman's experiences and capacities, rather than masculinity, as basic. In this way, viewers of soap operas reverse the prevailing power dynamic between the sexes that de Beauvoir describes in The Second Sex (1989 [1952]). A line from her book (p.xxii), inverted, could serve as the mantra of the soap opera viewer: "She is the Subject, she is the Absolute--he is the Other."

## **XII. FEMINIST PRAXIS, COMPONENT II:**

### **FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP ON THE GENDERED SOAP OPERA TEXT**

#### **Arriving At A Feminist Aesthetic**

This section concerns the question of how feminist scholars understand the gendered soap opera text, and why. Do we consider soap operas as being constituted by “a feminist aesthetic”? The extent to which this question can be answered “yes” is seen as one aspect of determining whether soap opera viewing can be seen as feminist praxis.

Before addressing this question, we first have to backtrack, and address several points. First, the reason why I privilege explicitly feminist scholars over nonfeminist scholars is to credit the fact that the latter are not only sensitized, but are immersed in studying, gender issues and the potential for women’s empowerment, and are clear and vocal about valuing the latter as they conduct research. Second, I have purposely framed this component as “feminist-scholarly interpretation of soap operas” rather than “the text itself,” because I do not want to falsely privilege scholarly interpretation of soap operas over viewers’ thoughts.

That is, to call the first component "viewer interpretation," and the second "an analysis of the text," is to imply that the viewers' ideas are subjective, and the scholars' are objective, when in both cases I take the stance that textual meaning is only produced in concert with the viewer.

Next, there comes the issue of why it is necessary for feminist scholars to formulate a "feminist aesthetic" at all. As Estella Lauter (1993) asks, why develop a feminist theory of art when:

- The idea that art is gender-neutral seems "beneficial," and "perhaps the problem lay in the prejudices of individuals who applied the theory and not in the theory itself."
- There is "no single specific distinction between men's and women's art" which "can be identified"; and
- There is a "lack of uniformity in women's art"; and
- "A further complication arises in the multiplication of feminisms (cultural, materialist, black, French), so that little agreement exists among them about art or anything else." (pp.26-27)

These are all seemingly valid points. However, the basic reason why feminists have problematized the seeming objectivity of existing theories of art is that they can be shown to uphold a gender dichotomy in which men are privileged over women in the production of art and in recognition of their artistic work. Secondly, as Lauter herself responds to her own question, it is not necessary for feminists to develop a monolithic feminist aesthetic, nor for us to say “that women’s art is definable as a separate category.” Rather, it is the necessity of addressing aesthetic sexism that leads to the necessity for feminist alternatives: therefore “feminist practices” are sufficient to “lead now to an alternative theory of art.” (ibid.:27) Fundamentally, feminists challenge the taken-for-granted rules of aesthetics, whether explicit or implicit, that include sexist assumptions and negative effects for women. Following are some examples (synthesized from Hein 1993):

Rule: There is a fundamental division between mind and body, between subject and object. Great art exists as an object, and can be recognized as such by a qualified, detached mind. Sexist assumption which follows from this: Because men are intellectual and able to separate mind from body, and women are emotional and unable to do this, men are more competent than women to judge art. Negative effect on women: women are naturally excluded from the world of real art.

Rule: Useful art is not real art. An item is only art if one can "make it a plaything of privilege." (p.12)  
Sexist assumption: The latter is the sexist assumption, since 1) traditional women's art has been domestic (e.g., quilts) and 2) men are, on the whole, more likely than women to be socially/financially privileged. Negative effect on women: Art is something produced by men for men. The role of women in art is as a subject, one whom is objectified within art to be contemplated by the men who are rich enough to own it.

In feminist philosophical aesthetics, unlike in traditional aesthetics, there is no object without a perceiving subject (Korsmeyer 1993:viii). Rather, these exist in relation to one another. Feminists argue that the prevailing idea of a subject/object dichotomy did not just arise out of nowhere, but is integrally related to the desire to separate from, know, and thereby to eventually dominate an Other:

...the seemingly gender-neutral notion of dualism...is...related to the masculinist striving for domination and the wish to deny the interconnectedness of human experience, to which women as mothers are integrally related.... each of us is connected to other people and ideas and things in...complex ways. There is no such thing as a self-made man--or woman. Scientists are discovering more fully each decade that nothing dominates. No planet dominates the cosmos, no part of a cell dominates it, no single person, not even the boss, dominates any situation. The drive to control that informs patriarchy is an unremitting, relentless drive to an invulnerability...that does not exist on earth." (French 1993:72)

Furthermore, the wish to conceptualize useful art as nonart is has political consequences as well. For art that derives value from its exchange value alone supports "the reified world of commodity exchange," in which men predominate, while useful art, which has both use-value and exchange-value, more clearly derives from the traditional woman's world, the domestic sphere, of production and reproduction for use by the family. (Donovan 1993:53)

Lauter (1993) sketches out the "formalist" (masculinist) paradigm of art:

According to formalist theory of artistic production, the artist....learns the specific techniques of one or more closely related media through formal education and apprenticeship with at least one "master." He becomes a member of the artworld and works with full consciousness of it to produce something new. He develops an individual "signature," so that his technique, form, or preoccupations are immediately distinguishable from others, but he takes care to disguise relationships between his art and his personal life in order to make his view seem "universal." He rises to the top through competitions and is championed by someone in the art world, preferably in a large center of art such as New York. The artist is most to be admired who inspires others to adopt his style and eventually to change it, thereby advancing the history of art. (pp. 31-32)

In contrast, she then presents a feminist paradigm:

In feminist theory, the artist is a co-creator of structures in an interactive system which includes both nature and cultures. The artist learns her/his techniques in any of several ways--thru formal education if she is lucky, but also through a craft tradition or self education. Although "she" sometimes achieves status through competitions, she often finds her direction through membership in alternative groups for which her art serves a purpose: her "gallery" may be alternative, collective, or even communitarian. She may in fact create with others. Her effort is to produce something that seems authentic to herself or to her audience....The artist is most to be admired who best shows art's centrality to its contexts...."She"...evaluates art according to its potential to empower people to live more effective, moral and satisfying lives". (ibid.:32)

Unsurprisingly, according to conventional "objective" aesthetics, which feminists argue are inherently sexist, soap operas are clearly nonart. Robert Allen (1985) discusses how this is so. First, soap operas are impossible to treat as an definable product, with a beginning and an end: "As the only narrative form...predicated upon the impossibility of closure, the soap opera resists specification as an aesthetic object." (p.13) Second, the shows "are marked by their authorial anonymity" rather than being "the concrete expression of the personality and vision of the artist." (pp.14-15) Finally, in conventional thinking, "The greater the art, the more 'difficult' it is for the uninitiated to fully understand." yet soap operas are not difficult to decode (p.16).

For feminists, it is easier to decode what is sexist about existing paradigms than to define clearly what is feminist about new ones. It is true that most agree that a feminist aesthetic considers power relationships openly, is grounded in the real world and in the relationships between people, and arises from critical reflection upon women's experiences as subordinates. As Lauter puts it, "Once we admit that art is inevitably related to its social context...then formalist efforts to maintain art's separateness by definition become meaningless." (1993:28) Marilyn French (1993) tries to reduce the feminist aesthetic to two principles: that such art "approaches reality from a feminist perspective (meaning, it "challenges patriarchal ideologies); second, it endorses female experience." (p.69)

However, what happens when the "feminist perspective" that "should" underlie feminist art, clashes with "endorsing female experience"? For example, more women are domestic workers than CEO's. How do we valorize women's lives in art, while at the same time criticizing the entanglements of our experiences in patriarchy? Do we disallow women's fantasies and pleasures in art, in favor of political correctness, and tell women which art should, or shouldn't, be enjoyed?

For instance, a recent article in The New York Times recently reported that "Brutal Comics for Women" are extremely popular in Japan. These comics present graphic stories about women's sexual domination by men. (Kristof 1995)

Closer to home, there are feminists who are antipornography, and those who are in favor of free sexual expression in art, even if women are represented in a victimized stance (Freccero 1990). There are those who think it's great to have art that focuses on women's "special qualities" (e.g., relational ability), following what Renee Lorraine (1993) describes as "A Gynecentric Aesthetic"; and there are those who argue that these are the qualities that men want to project onto women, and that we should therefore overcome our dependence on romantic stories that keep us at home, tied to our men (see Modleski 1982, Radway 1984). Again, this harks back to Ann Snitow's notion of the "recurring divide" between feminists, who debate over whether women will be empowered when they eradicate gender (liberal feminists) or when they coopt and valorize it (cultural feminists).

I take the stance that we cannot deny women's own voices: many derive pleasure from narratives that emphasize women's conventional gender interests. Like Gilligan (1982), I see that "a feminist politics can be built around the concepts of interconnectedness, sympathy, and thinking of oneself in relation to others, in contrast to the masculinist ideas of competitive individualism and

isolation.” (cited in Nelson 1992:107) In other words, even though the qualities inculcated into women by the institution of gender can be used against us, I would like to explore the ways in which we can coopt them, to make them work for us. Soap operas, because they are targeted to women and highlight women’s “unique” qualities, provide a perfect forum in which to conduct such an exploration.

### **Academic Conceptualizations of Soap Opera Form and Content**

We now turn to a consideration of the soap opera, in terms of how it is commonly interpreted by academicians as a feminine text (the notion of how this femininity contributes to a feminist interpretation of the soap opera aesthetic is taken up in the next section). Although the word “text” is used for simplicity’s sake, I take a reader-response position (Fish 1980) that there is no such thing as an objective text, but rather an agreement among the (here, academic) community<sup>31</sup> regarding facets of the shows’ content. Implicitly, here, the word “text” refers to “accepted interpretations of the text” rather than “objective text”. These aspects of soap operas, such as excessive talkativeness or excessive relational content, seem “obvious to all.” However, soaps’ talkativeness, for example, is emphasized

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31 Which probably mirrors that of the popular sensibility, to a large extent.

only in relation to mainstream evening dramas (e.g., cop shows) that are targeted to men. The latter is taken as the "norm," against which daytime television is an deviation. This is true in both feminist and nonfeminist scholarship; however, in feminist scholarship, soaps' deviations from "normal TV" are problematized and investigated from a gender/power perspective, whereas in nonfeminist scholarship these are not. Nonfeminist content analyses of soap opera are much more prevalent than feminist ones (but see Modleski 1982, Nochimson 1992, and Walters 1995); therefore, nonfeminist studies are emphasized here, but are contrasted with feminist sensibility to illustrate the distortions of objectivist work.

### *Form*

It is commonly agreed among scholars that the soap opera form is, nearly singlemindedly, focused upon women's domestic and relational interests. As Horace Newcomb has pointed out (in 1974, but his observations still hold), "...there is almost no external world on daytime television....much of the action of the daytime shows takes place in the homes of the characters." (pp.164-165)

Consequently,

Our concern is with dialogue, and the camera insists that our attention remain there, offering us a close-up of either the speaker or the listener. For variety we

are given a close two-shot of both characters. Our eyes are restricted to the faces and facial expressions of full-screen magnitude. At times we have over-the-shoulder shots of one character reacting to another....The fact that soaps frequently deal with violent content....does not alter the situation. This is a world of words....the interpretation of character depends on an ability for introspection of reaction....Because so much of the content depends on introspection, the soap operas have developed a usage of interior monologue more than any other type of television show. We are frequently engaged with voice over action sequences, with the visual representation of imagined events, or with memory. Often we see the creation of aberrant psychological states or dreams. (ibid.:168-169)

Incidentally, just to give an example of the difference between nonfeminist and feminist scholarship on soap operas. Newcomb also writes here that there is "no action" on soap operas. By this he means no car chases, building explosions, etc., things that men conceptualize as "real action." For on soap operas I see plenty of action, to which Newcomb himself alludes, but it is emotionally and not physically centered. So what Newcomb is really saying, then, is that there is no masculine action on the soaps; but he makes this observation gender-neutral, and therefore falsely universal.

In any case, others (nonfeminist and feminist) have also made mention of the fact that the soaps situate home and family as a focal point of the action

(Cantor and Pingree 1983; Rittenhouse 1992; Rogers 1992), which leaves the impression that domestic issues are powerful and important, and that only those who can manage them are truly successful. Soap operas' version of this type of success is personified by the ubiquitous character of the matriarch, who is the emotional center of the show<sup>32</sup>. The shows, further, accentuate the primacy of talk (what Brown [1990a] calls women's "oral culture") in forming and maintaining relationships (Newcomb 1974; Alexander 1985:304). The shows' style also caters particularly to women by slowing the pace to "real time" (Cantor and Pingree 1983), showing many close-ups of facial expressions (Modleski 1982:99), so that an inclination towards emotional exploration is continually surfaced and dealt with (Lopate 1976).

### *Content*

Soap operas' woman-oriented style extends to their content, especially portrayals of conflict and aggression. In fact, much of the action on the programs revolves around the doings of power-hungry, aggressive women (and men). That

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32 Examples: Alice Horton on "Days of Our Lives," Lila Quartermaine on "General Hospital", Rachel Cory on "Another World", and Vicky Buchanan on "One Life to Live".

aggression is feminized on the soaps means that rivalry for love supersedes competition for things (e.g., money) and tends to be nonviolent. Because soaps portray love as the apex of human existence, it is unsurprising that they consciously aim to have a "super couple" on board, one whose romantic chemistry keeps the audience ecstatic (Reep 1992). The instruments of aggression are feminine-ized as well, so that characters are more likely to engage in emotional warfare than physical violence.

To achieve their objectives, women soap opera characters also draw upon weapons particular to female body: female sexuality and the capacity to reproduce. This can be illustrated via a current storyline on "Days of Our Lives." Sami, a teenage girl, loves Austin, who loves Carrie, her sister. Determined to win his love, she drugs and seduces him, then delivers a child nine months later. At the same time, she contrives for Austin to find "Carrie" (Sami in disguise) sleeping with Austin's brother, Lucas. Ultimately Austin moves in with Sami to raise their child as a "family." Since this is what Sami has wanted all along, she "wins" (for the short-term, anyway), using her own body, and others' emotions, as artillery.

This storyline provides another example of soaps' feminine orientation as well: their portrayal of sexuality. In contrast to the detached manner in which masculinized heroes "take" their women, it is unthinkable for soap opera intercourse to take place without accompaniment by intense emotion<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, Sami's single night with Austin is interpreted by Carrie as full-fledged emotional and sexual betrayal, even though Austin clearly loves Carrie and not her sister. Similarly, Sami's "love" for Austin, on the show, is portrayed as inescapably real--no one even dares to suggest the attraction is merely hormonal. In fact, the audience would probably faster believe Sami's "love" results from her hatred of Carrie, than women would buy her emotionality as the product of simple lust. This is because on soaps, "it just doesn't work that way"--99% of the time, sex without emotional involvement<sup>34</sup> is unheard of. Again, to bring in an example of how "objective" scholarship is biased towards masculinist paradigms, the sex=emotion equation on soaps leads mainstream scholars to argue that there isn't as much "sex" on the soaps as there is "talk about sex," as if there were a fixable dichotomy between these two, rather than seeing their existence along a

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33 That is, unless the female participant is a prostitute--but even then she feels incredible emotion (shame) about her actions later on (e.g., Bobbie Spencer Jones on "General Hospital").

34 Even if that emotion is not love, but anger or hatred.

continuum. In a feminine aesthetic, talking about sex is part of seeing sex emotionally, and is therefore a form of sexuality. In a masculine one, "sex" equals "physical sex." Therefore, Bradley Greenberg and Dave D'Alessio (1985:318) argue that there isn't as much "sex" on the soap operas as we popularly think, because soap operas greatly favor talking-about-it to "visual counterparts of engaging in it."

Soap operas not only glorify women's unique experiences, but expand the universe of their possibilities (incorporating the liberal perspective with a cultural one). Women characters are not only "domestics,"<sup>35</sup> but enjoy a variety of masculine privileges as well. Most are educated, professional participants in the labor force. On "General Hospital," for instance, women are not only mothers but are also: physicians (Monica, Simone), businesswomen (Lois, Brenda, Katherine, Lucy), and private investigators (Felicia). These women are not shown doing housework, or being endlessly occupied by childcare: they presumably have others who help raise the children, clean the house, shop for food, and do the laundry.

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35 Many, in fact, are not "domestic" at all.

Most prominently, soap operas glorify women by focusing intensely upon the emotionality that women are known for: this is why the nuclear family, as a highly charged center of emotional interaction, is such a pervasive presence on the soaps (see Rittenhouse 1992, on the soaps' continuing focus on the nuclear family). Seemingly physical phenomena (e.g., fires, explosions, illness) are incorporated into the soap opera world, but mainly insofar as they are intertwined with the characters' emotions: for example, portrayals of AIDS are used mainly to explore its emotional effects on the sufferer and her/his friends and family, as Deborah Rogers (1992) explains.

In this article, called "AIDS Spreads to the Soaps, Sort Of," Rogers--along liberal feminist lines--has also argued that soaps' portrayal of the illness serves to symbolically castigate women for sexual promiscuity (in the liberal model, promiscuous sexuality, since it is a privilege that has long been held out to men, is one which women should equally be permitted). However, a cultural feminist interpretation might counter this by contending that that the shows glorify women's experience, values, and socialization, meting out reward and punishment to characters who either succeed at or fall short of this paradigm. Thus the shows reward committed, loyal sexuality, that is associated with women, and punishes sexual promiscuity, which is associated with masculinity (e.g., the

historical cultural encouragement of polygamy among men and monogamy among women). In this sense their content would be woman-glorifying and therefore culturally feminist, even as particular woman characters are struck down for deviation from these norms.

### **Feminist Scholarship on Soap Operas: The Feminine Aesthetic as a Feminist Aesthetic**

By portraying women pursuing their desires (Nochimson 1992), and by treating these desires as potentially powerful, soap operas fundamentally subvert masculine superiority<sup>36</sup>. The notion that conventional gender qualities can be coopted and transformed into a source of women's empowerment is one that cultural feminist critics are increasingly becoming comfortable with. For rather than explaining women's pleasure in these narratives as an aberration, we can finally see how it makes sense. In this paradigm, women are not "helpless, hopeless victims." (Maguire 1996:107) collaborating in our own oppression, but consciously seek out narratives that portray us enjoying the positive aspects of

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36 "Contemporary Freudian feminists," as Donovan points out, go even further, identifying masculinity with the drive to virtually exterminate the feminine, since they "suggest that modern patriarchal civilization is...built upon this masculine impulse to repress, reject, and subdue the feminine." (1990:30)

conventionally gendered womanhood, finding empowerment from the very places in which many of us currently stand. Conventionally, however, women's pleasure in soap operas has served as a site of contention among feminist critics. It disturbs some, who think that women should know better than to enjoy shows that "colonise women in the home" (Brown 1990b:203):

What is disturbing, however, is the fact that these stories still provide pleasure for women viewers who are critically aware of how alienating they are and who have located the mechanisms through which their work is carried on....There is a problem here, and one hitherto scarcely tackled. (Mattelart 1986)

Michelle Mattelart shows her liberal feminist bent by instructing women to be rationally rather than emotionally directed in their choice of entertainment, by only watching shows that (feminists have decided) are "good for women" (Brown 1990b:201). She assumes that as a feminist academician, she is in a position to decide what types of shows these are, whereas everyday (non-liberated) women are not. To feminist scholars like Mattelart and Tania Modleski, soap operas are bad for women because they reinforce women's roles as housewives, those "bedmaking, dishwashing automatons whose never-ending work includes constant availability as "a large sympathizing consciousness" (Modleski 1982:102). By keeping women "off center" and "involving her (the

housewife) in the pleasures of a fragmented life" (ibid.:101). soap opera "plays a part in habituating women to housework" (ibid.:100). Not only that, but soap operas feed on women's fears (ibid.:109) and induce in them a "sense of powerlessness" (ibid.:91).

Modleski does allow that soap operas contain "clues to women's pleasure" (ibid.:104). that can be used in constructing a "feminist aesthetics" (ibid.:103). However, she is unable to see that idea through to its conclusion, and instead discredits soap operas because their "pleasure is currently placed at the service of patriarchy" (p.104). Modleski's insistence on soaps' regressiveness may be a consequence of her own prejudice. As she herself admits, "women's criticism of popular feminine narratives" has been tainted by the fear of "her own 'worse' self, the part of her which has not yet been 'liberated' from shameful fantasies." (p.14) Modleski grapples with her own self-awareness, trying to "avoid expressing either hostility or ridicule" in understanding how soaps "speak to very real problems and tensions in women's lives." However, in the end she falls right into that trap: if she is actually open-minded about soap operas, she stands to lose her identity, not to mention her social status, as a genuine feminist. Consequently she is eager to believe that soaps are tricking women into compliance with patriarchy by preying upon their needs (ibid.:108-109). Without even speaking to the viewers

themselves, to determine what "uses," "gratifications," or "effects" (to use mass communications' formal terms) are associated with soap opera viewing. Modleski assumes that soaps must be bad for women because they are tailored to housewives, and feminists do not approve. Instead of using women's love of soaps to question whether feminism has an adequate understanding of women's actual needs--and what would truly empower us--she acts paternally, to protect women from themselves.

Carol Williams (1992) also notes critically the distance that feminist critics like Modleski, Janice Radway, and Michelle Barrett put between themselves and other women. However, her analysis is superficial and does not address the true complexity of their arguments. For example, she chastises Barrett, who can't understand why soap operas give "so many women"--not her, of course--pleasure (Barrett 1982:55-56). However, in the same text Barrett also rejects "moralism" in feminist cultural criticism in favor of an examination of why this type of art is pleasurable for women, and recognizes that the viewer can transform art from antifeminist to feminist by virtue of her control over the viewing process.

This is the position taken up by Williams herself, as well as Mary Ellen Brown, who believes soap opera viewing allows women to "nominate, value, and regulate their own pleasure" (1990b:210)<sup>37</sup>. In this sense, says Brown, women's use of the "product of a consumer society, in this case television" is "political," an "act of resistance" (ibid.) The woman who enjoys watching soap operas is seizing the seemingly conventionally gendered narrative away from men, whose social power the shows are thought to reinforce, for her own pleasure. Women's pleasure in soap operas is a source of power, and men fear that power will make women "uppity," which is why society denigrates them (Williams 1992:8). As Andrea Dworkin has pointed out (1974), femininity is complementary to masculinity only insofar as the former signifies vulnerability (think of such longtime cultural traditions as female genital mutilation and Chinese footbinding). While it certainly can be argued that soap operas portray women as vulnerable, and that women are dupes for falling into the gender traps that soaps set for them, it can also be said that they show women deriving power from the social places that they have been assigned to as women. That women derive such sheer

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37 For an excellent exposition of the various feminist approaches to television, see E. Ann Kaplan (1987). For other discussions about the problem of pleasure for feminism, see Mariana Valverde (1989) and Robin Ann Sheets (1991).

satisfaction from the shows leads me to believe women are reveling in the latter possibility, rather than towards what Paula Caplan calls "the myth of women's masochism" (1985).

**XIII. FEMINIST PRAXIS, COMPONENT III:  
THE GENDERED SOCIAL CONTEXTS  
OF WOMEN'S SOAP OPERA VIEWING**

This section considers whether the gendered social contexts of women's soap opera viewing support the contention that it is indeed feminist praxis. The "social context" question is divided here into three subquestions, each of us will be addressed in turn. First, do women resist gender-based social opposition for watching soap operas? Second, do women see soap opera viewing as an opportunity to take care of themselves? And third, do women use soap opera viewing as an occasion to create a sense of community with other? The extent to which each of these questions can be answered "yes" is seen as determining whether the gendered social contexts of women's soap opera viewing create a climate in which watching the shows, and engaging in viewing-related activities, is a transformative, empowering activity for women.

**Overcoming The Social Devaluation of Women's Soap Opera Viewing**

In Chapter 12, I wrote of how soap operas are considered nonaesthetic because they offer up a popular, woman-centered aesthetic, defying the dominant

masculinist, elitist definitions of what "good art" is. However, I did not go into much detail about how anti-soap rhetoric is rooted not just in biased aestheticism, but in sexism, plain and simple. Soap operas are not only devalued because they are "a lesser art," but because women like them. This devaluation takes place in a larger, intranational and crossnational milieu in which women's general and representational cultures are actively subordinated. Thus, here we will explore the larger senses in which women's culture is seen as lesser: the particular ways in which soap operas are stigmatized because of sexism: the negative stereotypes of soap opera viewers that this leads to: and the forms of direct opposition that women overcome in order to keep viewing.

*The General Subordination of Women's Culture and the Particular Subordination of Soap Operas*

Soon after the turn of the century, the German social theorist Georg Simmel noted that "human culture" as it is commonly conceptualized

...is not asexual...there is no sense in which culture exists in a domain that lies beyond men and women. It is rather the case that, with the exception of a very few areas, our...culture is thoroughly male. It is men who have created art and industry, science and commerce, the state and religion. The belief that there is a purely "human" culture for which the

difference between man and woman is irrelevant has its origins in the...naive identification of the "human" with "man". Many languages even use the same word for both concepts...this naive identification is responsible for the fact that deficient performances in the most diverse areas are degraded as "feminine" while outstanding performances of women are celebrated as "thoroughly manly." (1984 [1911]:67)

The "naive identification of the 'human' with 'man' " to which Simmel alluded may not actually be so naive. That, as Gisela Kaplan argues, (1992:23<sup>38</sup>) "...there exists no single place on earth where women enjoy equal status with men" suggests that the universalization of masculinity is intentional and ongoing, rooted in a longstanding class war between the sexes (Firestone 1970), in which men as a class have historically sought to attain superiority to, and dominance over, women. In any war, not only physical but psychological battle takes place, and the latter dictates (at the very least) that one seek to demoralize the opponent/s. This is what has happened in the case of women's culture. Historically, men as a class, have seized upon the way of life that is identified with women, and have sought to control, subdue, and devalue all that is associated with it.

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38 Citing a 1988 Population Crisis Committee report.

This notion is borne out by the existence of the belief, in many cultures, of the overthrow of the matriarchy that predated patriarchy (see for example El Saadawi 1982, Robins-Mowry 1983, and Lorber 1994), in which women were worshipped as goddesses--primarily because of our reproductive capability, which was thought to be a godlike power. At some point in early human history, matriarchy, or mother-rule (and its attendant woman-centered culture), was overthrown and subordinated to men and masculine culture. This historical process has been theorized in detail in Friedrich Engels' famous and often-quoted essay, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State" (1978[1884]).

Unfortunately, most agree that "Men's privilege and women's subordination cut across cultures, although in varying degrees." (Billson 1995:5); that women as a group, and therefore culture which binds us together (most notably motherhood) are nearly universally discriminated against in favor of men and masculinism (French 1992)<sup>39</sup>. As stated in the Introduction, "women's culture" is spoken of here on a number of levels. Basically, it refers to both general culture, "the way of life--the values, beliefs, and customs--that

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39 Not all feminist anthropologists agree that "sexual asymmetry" is "universal" (Moore 1988:13); not all nonfeminist anthropologists do either (see Bacdayan 1977).

distinguishes one group from another....(which) binds individuals together in community" (Billson 1995:4) and also representative or symbolic culture, such as art, music, and dance.

In order to get a sense of the universality of women's subordination, let us first take some examples of how women are subordinated to men across societies. In India, for instance, pregnant women undergo tests to determine the sex of an unborn child: sexist population control procedures dictate that unborn females be encouraged to be aborted (Shukla et al. 1987). The preference for male over female children is at all not limited to India (Lorber 1994:152). In Muslim-controlled Iran, a man who put out his wife's eyes with a knife because he "suspected her modesty" was sentenced to lose one eye by the court, since "under the Islamic Code of Practice, two female eyes are equivalent to one of a man's." (Ahmady 1987:190). The wife also "was resentful of the Retribution Laws which required her to pay her husband the price of his eyes if she was to see him punished by the Islamic Courts." (ibid.:192) In Japan, "From the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries...Japanese women...learned subservience....Even the Japanese words for wife, *kanai* and *okusan*, adopted into the language during this era, symbolized her position. They mean 'persons in the innermost recesses of the house.' She was protected but confined." Women in Japan became "reduced...to

the lowest classification." (Robins-Mowry 1983:20-22) In terms of Arab women.

Nawal El Saadawi (1982) writes sadly that

All children who are born healthy and normal feel that they are complete human beings. This, however, is not so for the female child. From the moment she is born and even before she learns to pronounce words, the way people look at her, the expression in their eyes, and their glances somehow indicate that she was born "incomplete" or "with something missing". From the day of her birth to the moment of death, a question will continue to haunt her: "Why?" (p. 12)

El Saadawi recalls asking her teacher, once,

"Why was Allah masculine and not feminine?" ....The teacher shot to his feet, trembling with wrath and disapproval and shouted out in a loud voice: "May Allah have mercy on us. How can Allah be feminine, thou girl who hast no shame? How dare you place Allah with the female sex. Allah is masculine! Masculine!" (Ibid.:103)

The domination of women as a group leads directly to the devaluation of all that associated with us and our way of life--of women's culture. In Arab countries, to continue the illustration, women's domestic culture is literally a source of unpaid imprisonment: "For thousands of years, society has imprisoned woman within the four walls of the home and entrusted her with the function of

serving the family, the husband and the children, free of charge except for her food, her clothes and a roof over her head." (El Saadawi 1982:184)

American society resembles other countries in its historical devaluation of women, and our ways of life, relative to men. In the English language, for instance, "man" is often used in a universal sense, to refer to humans, while "woman" is lesser, a modification of the universal (Deckard 1975:7). Although contemporary "political correctness" dictates the formal usage of "man" and "woman" separately, informally the word "man" is still used at times to refer to all people, while the term "woman" is never used to refer to a "man." Similarly, the conventional language used in marriage ceremonies, "I now pronounce you man and wife," reflects "The man's position in the world," which "has not been changed by the act of marriage. He was a 'man' before the ceremony, and a 'man' he still is...at its conclusion. But the bride went into the ceremony a 'woman,' not defined by any other person, at least linguistically; she leaves it a 'wife,' defined in terms of the man, her husband." (Lakoff 1975:34)

Linguistically, women are at once told to speak in gender-appropriate ways, even as the latter are defined as inherently limited compared with men's talk: "So a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn,

she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense, as less than fully human. These two choices which a woman has--to be less than a woman or less than a person--are highly painful." (ibid.)

Just as women's language is devalued, so too are the qualities identified with her, such as emotionality, as Stephanie Shields (1986) notes: "The popular stereotype is easily recognized. He is coolly rational, even in the face of danger. His emotional displays are limited to righteous anger and gosh-shucks tongue-tied in love. She, on the other hand, swoons with emotion at the slightest provocation. Emotions, of all qualities and quantities, are her trademark." (p. 131) Barbara Deckard (1975) notes how women's emotionality is linked with a lack of intellect by men: "On the nature of woman everyone seems to consider himself an expert ("himself" because most of the answers come from men). According to these 'experts,' woman is emotional rather than logical. In fact, she is not very bright." (p.1) Shields, in turn, begins from the equation of emotions with intellectual dullness when she declares that, in American society, "For the most part, the label 'emotional' is one to be shunned: emotion is believed antithetical to reasoned, mature behavior....In other words, man thinks, woman feels. This belief still lives....emotion is still portrayed as a female quality." (1986:134)

Another instance of the devaluation of women's culture by society is the derogation of activities that are seen as the province of women. For instance, Wendy Simonds (1992) initially became interested in writing Women and Self-Help Culture because "of the negative press it received, generally from journalists who read self-help not because they were personally looking for help, but because they were professionally interested in examining it. I was drawn in by this very dichotomy. And I saw journalists' professional displeasure with the genre as symptomatic of the general disdain usually accorded by the intellectual elite to 'women's culture'--all forms of media directed to an audience of women, or media utilized...primarily by women." (Simonds 1992:2)

Even women's reproductive capacity, and the culture this engenders, is devalued by society--even though women were once worshipped as goddesses because of our fertility. Whereas women were once seen as controlling the world with their reproductivity, now in "modern American society, pregnancy is a natural condition treated unnaturally, a physiological process imbued with magic and taboo, an experience belonging uniquely to women, yet all too often removed from their control." (Davis-Floyd 1988:9; see also Katz-Rothman 1989)

Given that women's culture is so thoroughly devalued in America, it is unsurprising that Mary Ellen Donovan and Linda Tschirhart Sanford (1986), in interviewing women during self-esteem workshops,

...rarely heard women say, "I'm a good mother and housewife: it's too bad this culture doesn't value that." Instead, women were far more likely to say in self-deprecation, "I'm only a mother and housewife."...we heard many women say, "I'm *just* (sic) a secretary. Big deal." (pp. 41-42)

According to the authors, there are six major issues contributing to American women's lack of self-esteem:

1. Lack of self-identity:
2. Having but devaluing self-identity:
3. Fixation on personal flaws:
4. Pointing out the worthlessness of what they are good at:
5. The feeling of going through a low self-esteem phase: and
6. The feeling of being "not sure who I should be anymore" (ibid.:41-43).

All of these factors can be seen as the natural consequences of living in a society in which women's feelings, experiences, and activities are seen as "naturally" inferior to men. Women are socialized to be gender-normative, then told that womanhood lacks value. So of course women will develop ambivalence towards themselves as women, feeling either like they don't know who they are, or that what they are is somehow not good enough.

In retaliation to cultural portrayals of us as inferior, that in turn negatively affect our self-esteem, some women have chosen to fight back against cultural representations that portray us as inferior humans, or objects. In India, "the Committee on the Portrayal of Women in the Media," working out of Delhi, "aims at: monitoring and analysing the way women are depicted in films, advertisements, newspapers....mobilising public opinion and launching a wide-ranging campaign of protest against sexist...portrayals" (Agarwal and Bhasin 1987:143). The U.S., of course, has its own antipornography movement. Further, women have also coopted art and used it as a means of protest. In Jamaica, for instance, "a women's theatre collective....Concentrating on drama as an effective means towards self-discovery and change...has also developed into a women's cultural organisation, initiating workshops, producing silk-screen designs and a quarterly magazine." (French 1987:147) The Amauta Association of Cuzco

(Peru) uses "videos, films and tape-slides" to conduct consciousness-raising among poor women in the city, who are often illiterate (Amauta Association 1987).

Thus the relationship between women and culture can be either negative or positive. In general, women's culture is situated as inferior to men's culture, just as women are considered inferior to men. To combat this, as mentioned above, some women actively contest what are seen as demeaning representations of women in what is commonly considered men's representational culture--pornography. Others develop women's art forms specifically for political purposes. Still others, however, do not take a consciously political stance concerning women's culture, but rather choose to engage themselves with art forms that valorize women's experience--such as soap operas.

Since women's enjoyment of soap opera is not generally taken by us to be a political stance, we have not yet fleshed out a full analysis of the way soap operas are situated politically in the larger culture. This political unconsciousness has allowed the dominant, pro-masculinist discourse, to devalue the soap opera as a non-aesthetic. Although this is in part due to elitism and masculine value-embedded aestheticism, it is also due to value-explicit sexism, in which anything

linked with women is automatically considered secondary. Soap operas are a perfect example of this:

A narrative form associated primarily with women, soap opera tends to provoke the same mix of desire and disdain that femininity itself produces in our culture. As with women, so with soap opera: one cannot speak of desire without ambiguity, since both the enjoyment of soap opera and the comforts and delights of intimacy associated with women and celebrated by soap opera have been defined mainly by their detractors....Soap opera, a discourse quite at home with the comforts and intimacy associated with women, must inevitably be a renegade discourse. Given the traditions of our culture, it would have been a miracle had soap opera met with easy acceptance. Thus it is no wonder that soap opera, imbued with the very sense of feminine importance that culture warns against, has sometimes been defined as dangerous. (Nochimson 1992:11)

That soap operas are so definitely and historically linked in the public mind with women even led to a 1950's marketing ploy--the "TV-stove. The oven included a window through which the housewife could watch her chicken roast. Above the oven window was a TV screen that presented an even more spectacular sight. With the aid of this machine the housewife would be able to prepare her meal, but at the same time she could watch TV." (Spigel 1994:19) This contraption sounds amusing, but the consequences of identifying mass culture

with the feminine (and with the popular<sup>40</sup>) seriously and detrimentally affected the manner in which studies of mass culture developed in the U.S. Why is the soap opera particularly, and television in general, identified with femininity? The

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40 Both sexism and elitism have led to the denigration of soap operas (see Allen 1985). Here, I specifically focus on sexism, but see also Willard Rowland Jr. and Bruce Watkins (1984), who note that

...as it developed communication research was severely constrained by intellectual and structural factors related to its heritage. Emerging on the margins of and in the interstices between the humanities and the social sciences, communication studies had a substantial problem of self-identity and legitimation. To make claims to a place in the academy...communication research had to make a series of accommodations...that were to be more costly than it could imagine. With regard to the humanities, the compromise was to buy into the traditional aesthetic analysis of content that led it far too deeply into the mass culture debate....one of the costs for communication studies was to accept the traditional distinction between high and low culture in which the classics of literature, art, and music were taken as given and as the former, while television and other mass media were clearly associated with the latter. (pp.11-12)

Of course, one could also develop an analysis intertwining elitism and sexism, but that is for another time and place. Here, I just want to note the analytic separability of elitism as a determining factor in the academic and social devaluation of mass culture.

development of the TV-stove alludes implicitly to what Horace Newcomb (1994) says straightforwardly:

This designation rises on the one hand from the economic-social fact of television's "address" to women thru its base in advertiser-supported, consumer-targeted content. On the other hand, it emerges from arguments that the form of television...with its demand for open, unending narrative strategies, relates somehow to feminine experience. (p.7)

Soap operas, like other "popular entertainment forms: novels, material culture, magazines, radio programs, and so on," have long been considered "inferior" (ibid.:4), both in the public and in the academic mind. The gendered social context of women's soap opera viewing is one in which our choices are commonly seen as worthless.

#### *Negative Stereotypes of Soap Opera Viewers*

The perceived inadequacy of soap opera viewing is a sexist consequence of their origins, as daytime radio serials oriented directly to housewives. The shows were initially conceived of as a melodramatic vehicle for advertisers to sell household products, like soap, to the listening housewife (thus the nickname "soap operas"). "Painted Dreams," the first soap, began airing in 1930. Soap

operas became so popular in the next decade that their broadcast hours expanded greatly. However, then as now, aired only during weekdays, in the daytime--when the breadwinner of the house was assumed to be out getting paid for "his" labor. In 1951, the first televised soap opera, "Miss Susan," was launched. Although this show proved unsuccessful, others, such as "Guiding Light," (1937-present) (began as a radio serial and then moved to television), "As The World Turns," (1956-present), and "General Hospital," (1963-present) have consistently brought in such high ratings that they remain on the air to this day (Matelski 1988:12). All three major television networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) currently broadcast soap operas every weekday.

Despite their ongoing popularity among women<sup>41</sup>--actually, because of it--soap operas have been socially maligned from their start. In fact, the term "soap

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41 Just how many people watch soap operas every day is disputed. Recent estimates range from as low as 6-7 million viewers (cited in Williams 1992:3), to 40 million (Waldrop and Crispell 1988), and as high as 60 million (Rogers 1992b)41. Waldrop and Crispell estimate that women constitute 70% of the viewing audience. The raw data for these numbers was not provided in any of the articles which cited them, so I cannot comment on the statistical accuracy of any one estimate. However, there are other ways to measure soaps' continuing popularity. First, there are at least four soap opera magazines, Soap Opera Update, Soap Opera Digest, Soap Opera Weekly, and Soap Opera Magazine. Second, newspapers and magazines print ongoing summaries of soap opera content. Further, there are 1-900 telephone numbers that one can call for a storyline update. There are also "soap opera bulletin boards" on computer online

opera." more than just an apt nickname, is a denigrating term that reflects the "near unanimous disdain of the form" (Allen 1985:11) that marked "aesthetic discourse" on soap operas from their inception. Reed (1991) puts it well: "...as an adjective, soap opera always had withering connotations." Soap operas' lowly status began with the stereotypical image of their perceived audience--the lazy, uneducated housewife (Allen 1985, Herzog 1979 [1944]). In line with this, the shows are mocked because of their "emotional" or "feminine" content. Although recently, feminist academics have begun to point out the sexist bias that influences popular opinion against the shows (Ang 1985, Brown 1990, Geraghty 1991, Matelski 1988, Modleski 1982, Nochimson 1992, Williams 1992), many continue to accept their low status--including soap opera actors: "Most actors have the attitude about soaps where they feel they are either slumming, or they're thanking God they have a way to pay their rent." Eva (Larue, "Maria" on "All My Children") explained. (Steinbach 1995)<sup>42</sup>

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services. Additionally, Soap Opera Magazine reported recently (6/6/95) that "The Soap Channel" will premiere on cable in 1996. Finally, a new daytime serial, "The City," was added to daytime TV's roster in November 1995.

42 One may argue that soap opera actors are less appreciative of their work due to the long hours and low budgets that characterize soap opera production work. However, the word "slumming" denotes an artistic snobbery--as though the actors (like the critics, and like society-in-general) visualize soap operas as the bottom of the professional barrel (with Broadway, films, and other television

One of the earliest references in the literature to the "type" of woman who watches soap operas was made by Rudolf Arnheim (1979 [1944]), who offhandedly called the soap opera audience a "particular social group" (p. 35). Herta Herzog, a contemporary of Arnheim's, disagreed. By comparing listeners with nonlisteners (remember that at that time, daytime serials were still broadcast over the radio), she concluded that soap opera listeners were indistinguishable from nonlisteners: neither different psychologically, nor more isolated, nor less well-read, nor less interested in the news. Where differences existed, she argued, they were mitigated by being viewed in "context." (1979[1944]:7-17)

However, despite Herzog's reasoned arguments to the contrary, the soap opera fan soon became fully "otherified" within American culture. This process began with the publication of Warner and Henry's 1948 monograph, "The Radio Day Time Serial: A Symbolic Analysis." Based upon decontextualized, peculiar interpretations of viewers' responses to the Thematic Apperception Test and a "Verbal Projective" interview directly related to a serial drama, these scholars found soap opera fans inferior to non-fans in nearly twenty ways, accusing

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work--perhaps a nighttime investigative drama--presumably higher up on the list). See Allen (1985) for a detailed analysis of the underlying reasons for the aesthetic snobbery that is leveled at soap operas.

(women) audience members of a lack of imaginativeness, of wanting to subject men to their control, etc. By reinforcing popular stereotypes (and fears), this paper lent scholarly credence to baseless bias.

Decades later, Cantor and Pingree, in their widely respected book The Soap Opera, carried on the tradition of presenting "scientific evidence" in such a way that viewers again came out looking like a pathetic "type." In the section "The Soap Opera Audience," they drew heavily upon a study conducted by Frank and Greenberg in 1980, in particular upon a table showing "Average Number of Times Viewed by Interest Segment for Soap Operas." The table presents the average number of times that people in a particular interest group watched soap operas over a four-week period. The highest averages (between 4.63 and 6.56 times per week) belonged to the interest group "home and community centered," then "family integrated activities," "indoor games and social activities," "news and information," and "highly diversified." Of itself, this is unbiased, except that the authors don't stop there. They go on to summarize the differences in viewer vs. nonviewer interest groups by baselessly concluding that: "Soap opera viewing is lowest among those segments with intellectual interests..." (pp. 123-125). Several years later, Lemish (1985) also called most viewers "bored, uneducated

homemakers." distinguishing them from the "educated" college students who watch.

Beginning in the mid-1980's, perhaps influenced by feminist elaboration about the soaps, academics and journalists began to challenge conventional stereotypes about the soap opera viewer. Article after article (Allen 1985; Rosen 1987; Matelski 1988; Waldrop and Crispell 1988; Hopper 1989; Curry 1992; Rittenhouse 1993) tried to establish that viewers "can no longer be dismissed as a collection of bored, lonely, and frustrated housewives" (Buckman 1985) who are "no longer interested in waxy buildup and diapers" (Waldrop and Crispell 1988:29-30). However, stereotypes die hard, and advertisers, reflecting the persistent negative opinion that mainstream culture has of soap opera viewing, have resisted a more balanced view of the audience:

The networks have been trotting from advertiser to advertiser with all sorts of figures proving that daytime audiences are affluent, well-informed and hold the purse strings when it comes to such major purchases as cars and vacations. But advertisers simply aren't biting... (King 1991)

The fact that viewers--aware that soap opera viewing is stigmatized--hide in the closet, hasn't helped their image any. In "Hope for Tomorrow: P&G Aims

to Salvage Soap Operas" (Stern 1994), it is suggested that no one is sure whether soap opera fans are switching over to talkshows and cable television programming, because "...most viewers are closet fans." As Judith Langer, a market-research consultant quoted in the article, says, "It's not a point of pride that you watch a soap opera."

*Facing Down Opposition In Order To Keep Viewing*

Why do people who watch daytime get ridiculed by friends and family.... My family constantly teases me about watching soaps....People who watch daytime soaps are stigmatized as being unemployed or stay-at-home moms who sit around all day doing nothing...--Name Withheld (in "Sound Off," Soap Opera Digest 9/10/96:140)

In Jeanne Allen's 1989 article "Harlequins, Gothics, and Soap Operas: Addressing Needs and Masking Fears," she refers to "my mother's habitual viewing of Dallas reruns despite my father's equally habitual consternation and attempts to interrupt..." (p.113) It is unsurprising that Allen's mother had to face down opposition in order to keep viewing soap operas. This is because generally, as David Morley (1994) writes, "masculine power" tends to control "viewing choices" in the home: husbands tend to use the "channel control device obsessively, channel flicking across programs when their wives are trying to

watch something else. Characteristically, the control device is the symbolic possession of the father...which sits 'on the arm of Daddy's chair' and is used almost exclusively by him. It is a highly visible symbol of condensed power relations." (p.476)

Inability to understand the appeal of soaps, coupled with women's intense enjoyment of them, leaves nonviewers--particularly men who are in relationships with viewing women--fearing that women might reject them and go away to "Another World"<sup>43</sup>, which they can't compete with. It is in this context that we can understand why male pundits have rude comments to make about soap opera viewers. "...that great semi-washed lower middle class" (Bakshian 1985 [cited in Rittenhouse 1992]). Yet for the viewers I interviewed, neither general social disapproval nor the personal criticism of their husbands could keep them from the soaps. As Jennifer put it, "My husband hates them, and I know a lot of husbands hate the soaps....I've heard comments like, 'Why do you watch that trash?'" To women viewers, soap opera watching is a kind of line in the sand: by viewing them, women are saying, "This far and no further. You can make me conform to a point, but soaps are mine, all mine, and I'm going to revel in being an emotional

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43 The title of a current soap opera.

beast for this hour or two or three that I watch. I'll call you when I'm back to your world."

According to the viewers I spoke with, the objections of the men in their lives to soap operas are harsh--revealing the men's (perhaps unconscious) awareness of soaps' subversiveness. Tracy's husband, for instance, "always yells, 'Oh yeah, such a hard life, eating bonbons and watching soap operas.'" Others, like Penny's husband and father, try to convince their women that soaps are "a waste of time, and that they flood your mind with worthless thoughts." Gillian's husband thinks that soaps are "stupid to watch...he just cannot understand why I watch 'em." Incidentally, viewers potentially face not only the objections of men, but of masculine-identified women as well--professional, educated achievers, successful by masculine standards, who ask, as they did Esther, how she can watch such "crap."

From the perspective of soaps' ongoing attack on masculinity, it is unsurprising that men (or masculine-identified women) oppose them. It is similarly unsurprising that their objections melt when they begin to watch, and appreciate, (rather than be threatened by) the differences inherent in soaps' feminine perspective:

As males become involved in serial viewing, it seems that their interpretation of the soap opera genre becomes more like that of female viewers. Given that soap operas are considered to be "women's programming."....it may be that when men...(suspend their "masculine" disbelief)...the influence of soap operas on their attitudes begins to take shape... (Alexander et al. 1992:30)

From the interviews, it appears that men's criticism of soap operas is inversely related to the extent of their soap opera viewing. For instance, Jane's father used to criticize the soaps, but now that he's retired and "hooked" on a soap, his objections have ceased. Brooke's stepfather continues to criticize the shows, ceasing only when he watches them with her--then he "gets into them."

One might think that women viewers, if they are watching the soaps in affirmation of their femininity, would not welcome male participation. This was not the case with the women I spoke to. Bobbie, for instance, described movingly how she watched "The Young and The Restless" with her husband daily when he was terminally ill. Tracy described her supportive husband, who encourages her to go to the personal appearances of soap opera stars, even though others she talks about it with "just kinda roll their eyes." In the end, whether husbands object or not, the women I interviewed continue to pursue their soap opera habit. This indicates its importance to them. That male nonviewers (and popular opinion) object so harshly

to soap operas indicates their fear of soaps' usurping their masculine superiority (a fear which quickly dissipates upon their viewing, turning to appreciation). Soaps' femininity does not attack masculinity--rather, the programs affect a positive tone in affirmation of womanhood. Women want men to get involved with these shows, which would accomplish in reality what soaps do only in fantasy: expand the scope of femininity, so that it fully infiltrates "real life."

Unfortunately for these women, however, most real-life men do not want to join them in soap opera viewing. They are aware of this. They are also aware that society as a "generalized other" disapproves of their viewing, which is why, as Olga put it, "I have a lot of closets."

The women viewers I spoke with know about "the closet." Some of them stay there, others come out, but the majority are conscious of social disapproval of the soap opera genre. This shows up in the few studies that have addressed this. Edward Whetmore and Alfred Kielwasser (1983) interviewed 45 soap opera fans, who...seemed almost apologetic about their involvement with the soaps. As one viewer aptly put it, "I'm embarrassed to say that I watch them." (p.115) David Morley (1994) also found that women feel "guilt...about their own pleasures. They are, on the whole, prepared to concede that the drama and soap opera they

like is 'silly' or 'badly acted' or inconsequential--that is, they accept the terms of a masculine hegemony which defines their preferences as having a low status." (p.487)

Dafna Lemish (1985), in observing college viewers of "General Hospital," observed that the students, both male and female, had an "awareness of publicly held opinions about soap operas" and "were struggling with their own conformity to these stereotypes." One male viewer, who admitted that others put soaps down, "refused to be interviewed in a group situation" and "obviously lowered his voice any time an acquaintance passed by during the interview." Other incidents she cites show how women students also tended to be "apologetic" about their viewing (pp.288-289).

Most of the women soap opera viewers I spoke with were aware that society stigmatizes their viewing. The responses of some typify the apologetic styles mentioned by Whetmore and Kielwasser, and Lemish. Phoebe, for example, continually negated the soap operas she enjoys, saying that they are "silly...stupid, their plots are really retarded." Similarly, Esther nervously laughed as she told me, "I'm probably more educated than most people who watch 'em." Later she admitted, "Yeah, I'm kinda embarrassed about it."

It is only to be expected that women soap opera viewers will feel that their viewing is disreputable in a society dominated by masculine values. Esther, from the previous example, attributed her embarrassment to the denigration of her social circle. "...because my best women friends are Ph.D.'s, lawyers, they're very well educated. And if I start talking about a soap opera they go, 'Are you crazy? Why are you watching that crap?'"

Given that women soap opera viewers are negatively labeled by society, and given women's socialization towards being "good girls" who conform to what is expected of them, it is unsurprising that they "internalize the oppressor" (Peslekiis 1970) by invalidating their own pleasure. And truly, in our society, any association with soap operas is pejorative. As Julia Reed puts it, "I have been told more than once to 'cut the soap-opera shenanigans.'" (Reed 1991:80) Women's awareness of soaps' stigmatization leads them, as viewers, to play opposing roles: one as an obedient woman-in-a-man's-world who agrees that soaps are "trashy," and another as a rebel against that world, insistent upon pursuing her "secret vice" which runs counter to "masculine hegemony." Kate explained how she handles this role conflict:

...when I'm at professional meetings, and that sort of thing, I don't normally bring it (soap operas) up too much, until I know the person better, and they know

I'm not some...flake, and then after I get to know them better, and that sort of thing, then I'll say well, you know, there is another side of me that, you know, I just hafta cut loose from all this...

Olga, a former executive who "quit to be a mommy," also talked about how nonviewers "can't believe that a highly educated and intelligent" person like herself watches soaps, which is why "I have a lot of closets." She then confided that viewing is her "only vice, so I'm going to wallow in it." Her words brought to mind a lingerie ad I once saw that shows a woman, returning home from a long day's work, disposing of her masculine "power suit" to reveal the frilly, feminine undergarments beneath. Similarly, on a metaphorical level, soap operas are the feminine unconscious (gender-socialized, of course) of the "liberated" woman.

Although most of the women I spoke with were rather blase as they agreed that soaps occupy pariah status, not all were of this type. Some, like Alison, denied that nonviewers, as a group, are particularly prejudiced against soaps, attributing the strong feelings they evoke to individual subjectivity: "...people either love them or hate them...it's kind of like religion or politics." Other women were angry about soap bias. Monica, who described herself as a "woman in a male-dominated field," contrasted prejudice against soaps with society's veneration of athletics, saying, "I'm considered addled because I watch 'The Guiding Light'."

Despite her anger over the unfairness of soap-related stereotypes, Monica is still trying to convince her best friend, a male college professor, that the soaps are "viable." This made me wonder: given her awareness that the prejudice is unfair, why does Monica bother? One might think that she should refuse to defend herself, as Jennifer does: "I just tell them if you don't like it then that's fine." Unlike Jennifer, Monica can't just let it go--because to Monica, the acceptance of her friend the professor is crucial. This is because she is actively experiencing role conflict between her identity as an "intellectual," (having gone to college over her "lower-middle-class" family's objections) and as a soap opera fan, who tapes three soaps a (week)day and watches them at night. To her, the professor's acceptance would allow her to reconcile those conflicts to some extent.

Monica, though similar to other viewers in her consciousness of general soap bias, is unlike them in a few ways. First, she connects this bias to sexism. Second, she has attempted to resolve the identity crisis precipitated by her viewing, rather than just accepting it. Third, she is openly angry about it. I connect Monica's differences with other viewers to her description of herself as a "card-carrying NOW member." Apparently unaware of, or rejecting, the differences that the movement has had with the soaps, Monica, who is dedicated to empowering herself, has accepted her viewing as a valid fact and has publicly taken a stance in its defense.

None of the other viewers I spoke with were as strongly identified with feminism as Monica. To the contrary, they spoke of feminism as something rather distant from themselves, and accordingly, were not immediately conscious of the gender hierarchy that produces such vehement bias against soap operas. Yet, awareness of this bias--and even agreement with it--did not stop the women I spoke with from viewing. They even go so far as to accept having a dual identity, so as to keep the soap operas, which so fundamentally celebrate femininity, in their lives. Therefore, in the sense that they view in defiance of a gendered social context in which women's culture is defined as inferior, these women's engagement with soap operas is empowering.

### **Soap Operas as Self-Nurturance: Setting Aside Time Away From Caring For Others**

The second "social context" subquestion concerns whether women use soap operas as a way of dealing with the demands placed on them because of gender expectations connected to women--specifically, the requirement of caring for others. To address this, I will first present a brief selection of some literature surrounding women's gender socialization towards caretaking. Then, the discussion will turn to the ways in which actual women viewers set aside time

from caring for others to care for themselves, via immersion in the world of soap operas.

*A Larger Frame: Selfishness vs. Caretaking in Women's Gender Socialization*

Caring for others is central to conventional notions of what womanhood is all about. Simone de Beauvoir (1989 [1952]) traces this back historically, to the Biblical account of woman's creation, in which she was formed out of man's rib--explicitly for the purpose of functioning as his helpmate. Today, taking a psychoanalytic view, Nancy Chodorow (1978) describes how women's socialization to relate to others begins virtually from birth, in the differential treatment accorded girl children vs. boy children by the primary caretaker (usually the mother). Whereas mothers recognize boys as a separate entity, girls are regarded as continuous with the self. Therefore, mothers establish fluid ego boundaries between mother-self and girl-child. This is a form of training for later life, in which women's role is to relate to other human beings, in the "traditional female role-dyad of wife and mother" (Williams 1983:304).

The fact that "Women are socialized to be 'helpmates' and mothers, not creative individuals" (Deckard 1975:116) is another reason, aside from the social

devaluation of womanhood<sup>44</sup>. why women have difficulty in clearly defining a sense of self. In "The Impossible Pursuit of Perfection." (1986) Rachel Hare-Mustin describes how the social (and often, economic) imperative of pleasing others, particularly men, functions in women's day-to-day lives:

Women are constantly exhorted to remake themselves, to improve their appearance, mind, house, temperament, and use of the telephone. Perfumed, shampooed, slim, smiling, receptive...see the perfect woman's life as she runs through fields of daisies to serve sugared munchies to her children, polish her kitchen floor, accept her husband's sage advice, and, as she ages, keep her dentures gleaming.

Since women's identity has depended on the appraisal of others, women are more vulnerable to others' opinions....The standard of living and social status women have are derived primarily from their relationships with men, first their fathers, then their husbands. Women who have no men, such as old women and single mothers, are the most likely ones to live in poverty." (p.12)

Because women are so thoroughly trained to be relational, we are denied opportunities to explore who we are, apart from others. As Donovan and Sanford put it,

Although in an ideal world everyone would reach mid-life with a pretty clear idea of who she is and

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<sup>44</sup> See discussion in subquestion 1, above.

what she's about, in our world women traditionally have not been encouraged to 'know thyself' as men have been admonished to do, and women historically have been denied the opportunities for self-discovery that many men take for granted. As a result, many women we interviewed had great difficulty describing themselves at all. (Donovan and Sanford 1986:41-42)

Lack of self-definition, coupled with "a deep-seated, strong feeling of connectedness to others." (ibid.:45) leads women to "be very good at showing compassion for others, but not very good at feeling similar compassion for themselves." (ibid.) Yet it is precisely the ability to care for the self that empowers us, particularly due to the contradictory demands many women face, "between the demands for attention and nurturing of her children and those of her husband...between the demands of her family for financial security....and her family's demand for her time and attention...demands of her husband, children, parents, friends, relatives, colleagues, and bosses." (Pines 1986:185) In fact, when "too much of the self is sacrificed in the service of a relationship....the de-selfed partner may develop symptoms....depression, fatigue, apathy, and a growing sense of bitterness, helplessness, and low self-esteem." (Lerner 1986:377) Given the contradictory psychic demands uniquely placed on women--take care of everyone, but not yourself--it is unsurprising that "women have always been the main consumers of psychotherapy" (Williams 1983:385). This is

because psychotherapy reconciles other-care with self-care, offering a means of focusing on the self via connecting with another. Yet the downside of psychotherapy as a means of self-empowerment is that it places the woman patient in a conventional role--the passive, helpless patient (ibid.), in need of rescuing by another.

As an antidote to the imperative to think about others, then, psychotherapy can prove a relief. Yet because of its association with passivity, this route is somewhat less than ideal as a strategy. In contrast, soap opera viewing is an active process (Perse and Rubin 1990), in which woman watchers can "regulate their own pleasure" (Brown 1990b:210). Like psychotherapy, soaps offer the ability to valorize relating to others (both symbolically and actually, with other fans) while at the same time having the feeling of "taking time out" to care for the self. Soap operas offer women the opportunity to practice self-care in an active, self-regulating fashion.

*Ladies First: Taking Time Out For The Soaps*

We now turn to the methods, both individual and social, with which women take time out for the soaps. Arranging one's schedule around soap operas,

keeping up with them in a variety of ways, and regularly discussing them with others, all point to the importance women place on having soap operas in our lives.

Many have noted the tendency of the soap opera audience to integrate the shows into their lives in various ways. Fans' tendency to center their daily routines around soap opera viewing is well-documented (Lopate 1976, Carveth and Alexander 1985, Lemish 1985, Rosen 1987, Hopper 1989, Curry 1992). The women I surveyed were interested in "keeping up with the story" directly, visually, and consistently: a majority of viewers, 64%, follows the soaps by watching them "live," as they are broadcast; 63% tape them on the VCR for more convenient viewing<sup>45</sup>. Women expressed an expanded interest in soap operas via watching more than one show (74%), or by keeping up with them in nonviewing ways. 40% read summaries of the soaps' storylines in periodicals, 30% go online<sup>46</sup>, and 23% have a magazine subscription to a soap opera periodical (n=91).

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45 Viewers could choose more than one method of following the shows, so the percentages do not total 100%.

46 Not a listed option, but was filled in under the question, "How do you follow the soaps?" Under "Other-specify" some viewers said that they go online. This percentage does not count those viewers who said, in another question, that they discuss soap operas with "Other," then wrote in, "Online," because we are

In the interviews, some viewers appeared nonchalant about taking time out to view. For example, Felicia said she watches "whenever I happen to be free at the time." Others, however, were openly dedicated to their viewing. There are those, like Jennifer, can't watch them "live," and so tape them daily. Jennifer either watches them at night, or "piles them up" and watches on the weekends, so that "if I start Friday night, then I'm generally through by Sunday night." Some watch them as they are broadcast. Angie, for instance, watches daily from 12:30-3:00 p.m., and only interrupts this schedule if she reads online that the shows will be dull that week. Bobbie is a more "multifaceted" viewer, who either tapes or views, depending on her schedule. She also goes online, has a pen pal, attends fan events, and subscribes to "half a dozen" soap opera-related periodicals.

In general, greater integration of soap life into real life is accomplished by fans' watching more than one soap opera (Williams 1992:3), discussing them with friends (Cantor and Pingree 1983:23), taping the daytime shows for more convenient viewing, after work (Curry 1992), joining fan clubs, writing highly charged love/hate letters to their favorite soap opera actors, and other activities. Perhaps this is why soap opera viewing is often called an "addiction" (e.g.,

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using the results from the survey question relating to how viewers follow the soaps, rather than how they discuss them.

Campbell 1994). In fact, according to Diane Calhoun-French (1992), novelized soap operas pale in comparison to the televised version precisely because

...one misses the enforced elongation of the story-telling experience which integrates characters' lives into the fabric of one's own as only protracted narrative can do. (p.135)

From the inception of the soap opera genre, fans have been notorious for their letter-writing to the shows (Kaufman 1979 [1944]). According to Peter Buckman, soap opera mail (in England) outnumbers the responses to other types of shows, showing that viewers are "as involved (with the shows) as they are with friends" (1985:188). Ruth Rosen (1987) dramatically reports how soap opera fans carry their interest to extremes, whether via graphic letters or physical violence against soap stars:

An actress who played the wicked Lisa on "As the World Turns" for sixteen years is punched by an irate viewer in front of Manhattan's Lord & Taylor department store. CBS finds that viewers send carefully wrapped "Care" packages to actors who play impoverished characters. An actress on "All My Children" reports that fans begin their letters by addressing her (sic) and then imperceptibly slip into accusatory condemnations of her character's actions.

When Julie, in "Days of Our Lives," wonders whether to have an abortion, actress Susan Hayes receives pictures of fetuses in the mail. (p. 43)

Fans have also been known to camp out in front of the studios where soaps are being taped (Flick 1995), swarm over their favorite stars at fan events ("Young, Restless, Bold, Beautiful" 1991), or attempt to meet their favorite stars by going on a talkshow ("The Ricki Lake Show," "Leeza"). Whether or not the majority of fans engage in such behavior is unknown, but given the millions of viewers soap operas enjoy, common sense dictates that it's unlikely. Further, as Buckman (1985) puts it, "Soap-watching allows involvement at all sorts of levels, from the addicts...to the more distracted viewers who only want to keep up with the story." (p.201)

Overall, by making either some effort or great pains to include soap opera viewing and associated activities into their own lives, women viewers affirm the right to take time out to care for the self. This is so even as the particular choice of soap operas reveals a continuing interest in relating to others--e.g., in valorizing women's gender socialization. In this sense, soap operas offer a unique vehicle for women to hold onto the values with which we have been inculcated, but in a way that positions us as beings with the power to control our own lives.

### **Soap Operas as Communal Womanspace**

The third "social context" subquestion concerns whether women use soap operas to engage in sisterhood--women's community-building. To address this issue, we will first look at a number of ways in which women draw upon their relational gender socialization to support each other via community-building, and then turn particularly to soap opera viewing as activity around which women create a sense of sisterhood.

#### *One of Many Ways Women Create Supportive Spaces For Each Other*

Given that women are traditionally seen in a role that emphasizes relationships with other people, in particular to maintain the family, it makes sense that we turn to community-building as a means of empowerment. In fact, the notion of prehistoric matriarchy directly ties womens' treatment as goddesses to their fertility. Out of the need to care for children, mothers played a primary role in developing the community as a whole.

Today, the feminist movement is well-known for bringing women together, not only to fight the oppression of women but to envision and create societies that will nurture all of those within. The feminist movement is not only

a part of contemporary American society, but spans cultures, with organized women's groups throughout such diverse locations as Western Europe (Kaplan 1992), Algeria (Helie-Lucas 1987), Pakistan (Rahman 1987), Thailand (Women's Information Centre 1987), Mexico (Damian 1987), Peru (Vargas 1987), Palestinian society (Jou'beh 1987), and other countries. There are also "international and regional women's networks" (Davies 1987) that link countries together.

Not all women's organizations are explicitly or singularly feminist, for some are what Ann Snitow calls "mothering" efforts (1990), and grow out of women's caretaking sensibilities for the community as a whole, as opposed to women in particular. Examples of such cause-related efforts are the role of women in the antiapartheid movement in South Africa (Meer 1987, Outwrite 1987), the Guatemalan Civil War (Latin American Working Group 1987), the Namibian struggle for national liberation (SWAPO Women's Solidarity Campaign 1987) and the Kanak<sup>47</sup> struggle for independence (Ounei 1987). As in the case of the Kanaks, women's struggle for liberation is sometimes

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47 In New Caledonia, South Pacific.

simultaneous with national efforts, and sometimes separate from them (see Ounei 1987, Andreas 1985).

In the United States, the past hundred years has seen women organize as feminists and as motherists for many things, among them suffrage, temperance, and the elimination of pornography. In the past thirty years in particular, such groups Radical Women in New York, Redstockings, The Feminists, and of course The National Organization for Women (NOW), have all brought women together to fight for common causes (Deckard 1975). The midwifery movement (see Rothman 1989) is an illustration of how feminists and motherists have joined together in common cause.

Women's community-building as a phenomenon illustrates how our gender socialization can be used either as a source of subordination, or as a place of strength. The ability to care for others can be used as an excuse to virtually imprison women in the home, or it can be a powerful source of strength in envisioning and crafting a more utopian world. That women can coopt our conventional roles to empower ourselves has been recognized by "feminist theory," which, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1991) writes, "has drawn upon women's commitment to community building" (p. 39).

The connections women make with each other tend to be grassroots-oriented and casual. As Debra Umberson et al. note (1996), in comparison with men, "Women's "social ties" tend to be more "intimate and informal...such as having a confidant, receiving social support from friends and family, and visiting with friends" (p.851). Women bond over many things, including representational culture, such as literature. In the United States, there is a longstanding tradition among women of conducting reading groups:

In cities and small towns throughout the country, hundreds--perhaps thousands--of groups of middle-class women gather every month in members' homes to discuss books. They show in action how at least one sector of the reading public responds to the economic power of the modern book industry and to the cultural authority of the critical establishment. Such groups have existed at least since...1813. (Long 1986:591)

In fact, it was the phenomenon of women reading collectively that led Janice Radway to the romance-novel readers she interviewed for Reading the Romance (1984). Her informant, "Dot," led an informal book reading club for women interested in romance novels, and was instrumental in providing access for Radway to these readers.

Just as women form a sense of community around novel-reading, we connect with each other over television as well. Compared with men. "Women seem to show much less reluctance to 'admit' that they talk about television to their friends and workmates." (Morley 1994:482) Like romance novels, soap operas are specifically focused upon women, and therefore have proven a particularly useful occasion for sisterhood. Just as these programs create a space in which women care for themselves, soaps allow women to be cared for by each other as well. Community-building over soap operas reinforces women's interest in relationships without enmeshing us in them, for it produces a location from which we can stand outside and analyze others' connections with each other, without becoming implicated in the consequences.

*Soap Operas As a Particular Occasion for Woman-Bonding*

Given women's tendency to prioritize their viewing, and to pursue a variety of activities related to their interest in soaps, some have hypothesized that "viewers and listeners go on thinking about the characters when they have faded from vision or sound" (Buckman 1985:191). Although college students vehemently "insisted" to Lemish (1985:287) that this was not true, 36% of the

women I surveyed said they think about soap operas "often" or "sometimes" when not watching. Another 49% said they thought about them "once in a while."<sup>48</sup>

The desire to reflect on the soaps, even after the show is over, is consistent with another well-documented soap-related activity among viewers--the discussion of them with others. The "social utility" model proposed by Compesi (1977; see also Rubin 1985) contends that soap operas appeal to viewers because they provide a topic of conversation with others (Buckman 1985). As Donna explained, soap operas are

...something useful in social situations. If you don't know someone at a party or something you can find something to talk about....you know, it's like in the old days when everyone knew everyone and they could gossip about somebody in town.

In "Search for Yesterday," Rosen (1987) tells a similar story. The setting was not a party but a grocery store, in which a supermarket cashier, glimpsing a copy of Soap Opera Digest among Rosen's groceries, then engaged her in conversation about the soaps. Dafna Lemish (1985) also found that "The only related behavior (to soap opera viewing) mentioned quite often was exchanging

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<sup>48</sup> Nonstudents and students combined, n=91.

information about the program with other people, such as friends, work mates, and neighbors (p. 287). Indeed, for the college students she studied, soap operas were not only a topic of conversation but an occasion for becoming a "social collective." As a group, they "laughed at humor, giggled at commercials, clapped hands and cheered, moaned in shock, and sighed in great relief" (p. 289) as they watched the soaps together. Lemish describes the daily gathering:

It is 5 minutes to 3:00 in the afternoon. As by some invisible signal, the college lounge suddenly has filled with students. All over the campus--in lounges, dining areas, and dormitories--students enjoy a break from school work and settle down with their favorite soap opera. (p.275)

Some of the women I surveyed watch soaps in groups as well: 26% do so "often" or "sometimes." However, more than double this proportion, 63%, converse about soap operas with this frequency (n=91). This is probably because it is easier to mention the soaps to others than to regularly schedule viewing with them. Whether they view soaps together or separately, the point is that sharing the soap opera experience provides common ground--and for viewers like Felicia, soap opera gossip is "half the fun."

Soap operas' transformation from a personal to a group-level activity is firmly rooted in the initiation to viewing itself. A number of women I interviewed were socialized into viewing by their mothers. As Cathy told me, "that's how I got hooked." Mother-daughter "bonding" over soaps provides yet another vantage point from which soap opera viewing can be seen as a particularly feminine activity. Watching the soaps now, in later life, reminds viewers of an earlier closeness with mother that was born of their shared soap opera viewing. For instance, Monica talked about how she, her mother, and her sisters always watched the soaps--her mother listened to "Guiding Light" when it was still on the radio. Being single and alone is hard for her, and soap opera viewing helps her to reconnect with her early family life. Vivian, who tells a similar story, made me laugh when she recalled how she started watching the soaps with her mother:

...she used to sit and watch them and there was only one TV in the house. So you had no choice! It was either you watched that, or you didn't watch anything.

Watching the soaps with one's mother sets the stage for thinking of soap operas as having an innate social quality. Thus it is unsurprising that so many of the women surveyed discuss soap operas with others. Of those who do so (n=82), the trend is towards discussing them mainly with those who are closest: 74% talk with family, 62% with friends, 28% with coworkers, and 23% with acquaintances.

Later on, the early mother-daughter soap opera bond translates into an implicit attachment between women in general, as we discuss issues, problems, humor, believability, and other soap-related issues with each other.

Marsha's story is illustrative of how soap opera viewing translates from a childhood mother-daughter relationship into her adulthood. When she started watching them, at the age of 12, she would come home from school and watch, together, with her mother. "She'd be so involved in it, I'd be wondering what's taking up her time." Marsha went on: "We'd do our homework, but when she was interested she started talking to the TV and got excited: we would go see what she was talking about." Now, she "definitely" will "discuss it with other people." I could hear her continuing excitement as she revealed that she still discusses them not only with mother but coworkers too, who say, "did you see what happened?" as the prelude to an update of the storyline.

Because their interest in soap opera serves to connect them with other women in sisterhood, the women viewers I spoke with can be seen as being powerfully aware of their membership in a larger community of women. In joining together to watch and discuss these programs, women coopt them for our own purposes. In this sense, communal viewing is an act of power, accessible to

all. allowing women to symbolically “uncover and create their own stories, expressed through artistic performance owned by the people themselves, rather than by an elite class of artists and patrons.” (Thomas and Rappaport 1996:318).

## XIV. CONCLUSION

### Summary of Findings

This dissertation has examined the question of whether soap opera viewing can be seen as a form of feminist praxis among women--at least, among White, heterosexual women living in the United States. Working from a cultural feminist stance, coupled with a gender context perspective, a detailed case has been made for seeing soap operas as empowering for the women who view them.

First, from the standpoint of the viewer, soap operas present a model of womanhood in which women can be both equal to men, for example by having careers outside the home, while simultaneously being valorized for our unique qualities. On the soaps, women's difference is conceptualized along conventional gender lines--particularly in the sense that women are seen as strongly emotional.

In a number of ways, women viewers alluded to their appreciation of the fact that soap operas emphasize women's emotionality, yet at the same time chastised the shows whenever they felt women were represented as silly, or dupes. In the sense that viewers recognize soaps' valorization of womanhood, while at the same time decrying any notion of women as inferior or incapable of appropriating masculine

privilege successfully, these women perceive and value soap operas as a text in which women are powerful.

Second, feminist cultural critics are increasingly coming to recognize the transformative power of soap operas for the women who view them. Some, like Tania Modleski (1982), dislike the gender messages sent by the soaps, but allow that soap opera form is gynecentric, because it is multiple, open-ended, and magnifies rather than downplays the significance of emotional exchange. Others, like Mary Ellen Brown (1990) and Carol Williams (1992), are not necessarily opposed to soaps' content: they trust women to make satisfying choices, and do not consider us victims simply because we turn to narratives that affirm conventional notions of gender. For these scholars, as for Michele Barrett (1982), a feminist aesthetic derives from the ability of women to control our indulgence in representational culture and to enjoy it, whether others approve of it or not.

Third, the gendered social contexts surrounding women's soap opera viewing are such that women's enjoyment of the programs can be seen as meaningful and empowering. Women resist opposition from others--whether it is generalized, personified, or internalized--in order to continue viewing.

Additionally, we make an extra effort to weave these programs into our lives, because, as 85% of those surveyed agreed (n=91), soap opera watching is “just for myself.” As an art form that focuses on relationships, as women are socialized to do, soaps are unique in allowing us to watch others interact without bearing any responsibility for the consequences. Further, soaps serve to connect women with each other, in a supportive network of viewers.

For all of these reasons, I have concluded that soap opera viewing is indeed viewable as a form of feminist praxis among women. Perhaps more importantly, usage of the gender context perspective to arrive at this conclusion carries with it some significant implications for future feminist research, which are enumerated below.

### **Implications of the Gender Context Perspective for Feminist Research**

#### *A Fuller Understanding Of The Implications For Feminism Of Women's Cultural Activities*

Current feminist studies of culture are limited in that they are primarily text-centered. There is little interplay between text and viewer envisioned, and little conceptualization of the social context surrounding women's consumption of

culture. As Walters (1995) and Shrage (1993) have already suggested, we need to consider a number of factors in understanding the feminist implications of women's cultural activity. Further, as response theorists (e.g., Fish 1980) and feminist researchers (e.g., Alcoff 1995) have pointed out, researchers need to problematize both the existence of an "objective" text and the privileging of scholarly over viewer interpretations of what they see. Rather, we ought to interpret the "feminist-ness" of an activity from the ground up, that is from understanding the viewer in her surroundings, and by considering how the relationship between viewer, text, and social context of viewing define the meaning of cultural activity.

*Expanding The Universe Of Feminist Discourse*

Additionally, some feminists see women's negative reactions to feminism as a problem of "why women resist equality" (Henry 1994), or as a consequence of a larger social "backlash" against feminism (Faludi 1991). Rather, we can choose instead to incorporate women's negative reactions to feminism within the universe of feminist discourse itself--to focus on women's strength rather than on "the myth of women's masochism" (Caplan 1985). The latter leads us to falsely dichotomize between feminist women, who have undergone "consciousness-

raising,” and nonfeminists, women who are seemingly experiencing “resistances to consciousness” (Pesleki 1970). This is not to say that there is no such thing as denial, false consciousness, etc. among women, or to argue that there hasn’t been a backlash against feminism. However, I do want to point out that feminists must theorize both the apparent strengths and the seeming weaknesses of the choices women make and the stances we take. By continuing to inquire about the perspectives of women and the contexts in which we make choices, we gain insight into the positive, empowering implications of women’s day-to-day strategies for handling life’s challenges. In so doing, we can find out how, as in the case of soap operas viewing, seemingly antifeminist or nonfeminist activities among women can actually be seen as forms of feminist praxis.

## XV. APPENDIX: SURVEY RESPONSES<sup>49 50</sup>

### Viewing habits

#### Which shows do women viewers watch?

(in alphabetical order)

All My Children	42/46%
As The World Turns	15/16%
Another World	20/22%
Bold & Beautiful	16/18%
Days of Our Lives	27/30%
General Hospital	33/36%
Guiding Light	16/18%
Loving	20/22%
One Life to Live	36/40%
Young & Restless	22/24%

#### How long have women viewers been watching?

Less than

1 year	0/0%
1-5	14/15%
6-15	31/34%
16-25	32/35%

More than

26 years	14/15%
TOTAL:	91/99%

#### Number of soaps women viewers watch

1	24/26%
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49 N=91 unless otherwise indicated.

50 Responses to survey questions which were later discarded from analysis are not included here.

2	18/20%
3	22/24%
4	20/22%
5	5/5%
6	1/1%
10	1/1%
TOTAL:	91/99%

Favorite soap

All My Children	22/24%
Another World	6/7%
As the World Turns	5/5%
Bold & Beautiful	2/2%
Days of Our Lives	24/26%
General Hospital	11/12%
Guiding Light	8/9%
One Life to Live	4/4%
Young & Restless	9/10%
TOTAL:	91/99%

How often women viewers watch favorite soap opera, per week

Less than once	4/4%
Once	7/8%
Twice	8/9%
Three times	10/11%
Four times	6/7%
Five times	56/62%
TOTAL:	91/101%

How women viewers follow the soaps

TV	58/64%
VCR	57/63%
Discuss	42/46%
Read summaries	36/40%
Subscribe	21/23%
Call 1-900#	1/1%
Other	1/1%

Online<sup>51</sup> 27/30%

How often women viewers watch soap operas with others

Often	10/11%
Sometimes	14/15%
Once in a while	34/37%
Never	33/36%
TOTAL:	91/99%

How often women viewers discuss soap operas with others?

Often	32/35%
Sometimes	25/27%
Once in a while	25/27%
Never	9/10%
TOTAL:	91/99%

If women viewers discuss soap operas, with whom?<sup>52</sup>

Family	61/74%
Friends	51/62%
Coworkers	23/28%
Acquaintances	19/23%
Strangers/	
Other/Online	22/27%

How often women viewers have a strong emotional reaction to soaps

Often	22/24%
Sometimes	36/40%
Once in a while	28/31%
Never	4/4%
TOTAL:	90/99%

How often women viewers read soap periodicals at supermarket checkout counter

Every/almost every time	17/19%
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51 Not a listed option, but people filled in under "other-specify".

52 N=82, the total number of respondents who indicated that they do discuss soap operas with others.

Sometimes	25/27%
Once in a while	35/38%
Never	14/15%
TOTAL:	91/99%

### **Feelings/Opinions About Soap Operas**

#### How often women viewers think about soap operas, when not watching

Often	11/12%
Sometimes	22/24%
Once in a while	45/49%
Never	13/14%
TOTAL:	91/99%

#### Any soap opera character women viewers would like to be?

Yes	28/31%
No	62/69%
TOTAL:	90/100%

#### For "yes" responses: Why? (If filled in)<sup>53</sup>

- Shes rich dresses good goes for wat she want
- Because of the variety in her life.
- She is such a great person. possative attitude. happy. & easygoing
- Because she is a down to earth person
- Because she is rich and beautyfull
- She's intelligent, rich, georgous husband compasanet. has a close relationship with her family, and she's a doctor!
- Cause she's the most real charachter on soaps
- She married wealthy & she's a free spirit
- Her strength / her power

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<sup>53</sup> The notation "" indicates a new paragraph. Responses are reprinted verbatim unless otherwise indicated.

- Dr. In love & momey (money)
- She is always happy. and very pretty
- She has it all together
- B/c she is pretty. nice. sensitive. has a good looking boyfriend. Really caring & everyone loves her (but Sami!)
- She's great!
- She's wild & does what she wants to
- Would love to look like/would be fun to be
- She's beautiful rich and level headed (most of the time)
- She's rich + beautiful + has a great job --- has it all (except a child. and she's gonna get that soon)
- She has spunk and a good heart. She is also shrewd and savvy.
- She's someone whom I can relate to. yet she's so different from myself.
- Intelligent. attractive. matriarch
- She has fun. money. a gorgeous boyfriend and a great figure!
- Job she likes. sweet husband...
- Very independent. strong characters. much like myself.

Any soap opera character women viewers would like to be friends with?

Yes	46/52%
No	43/48%
TOTAL:	89/100%

For "yes" responses: Why? (If filled in)

- In order to meet all the people she knows
- Sexy

- Great mothering instincts. possative. good person.
- Because they have a good heart.
- Because she seems genuine
- She's sweet. kind. understanding. loyal. and down to earth
- She's sweet. honest. & someone who is a good friend who can be trusted with anything
- Because she is honest. reliable. and truly cares about people.
- Sharp/very sweet
- She is so cool!
- She's fun.
- Good person & down to earth
- Posed potite aft...(illegible word)
- Caring. loyal
- She's nice. honest. down-to-earth.
- She's so cool
- She values friends and. is easy to get along with
- She's real
- So trusting. Can keep a secret
- She's got a great attitude towards life
- She's a lot of fun
- She's compassionate
- Seem like interesting. good pals...
- Cause she is the type of loyal friend anyone would appreciate.

- Strong woman - older
- To straighten her out // she needs a friend
- She owns a department store
- Thought he was great!
- Great to talk to
- Strong, loyal and sincere
- He's sensitive, kind, understanding, etc.
- He seems like the person who would listen to your problems and who would care about your feelings
- Loyal // committed
- They are young, outgoing and energetic women.
- Nice, down to earth personality
- She seems fun and interesting.//I'd be intreged.
- They just seem to be really great people
- She is loyal and gracious
- Nice supportive
- Very independent, strong characters, much like myself.
- Wonderful characters who attempt to manager career & personal life-unfortunately-are written as "dumb blonde" at times.

Any soap opera character women viewers would like to be romantically involved with?

Yes	35/39%
No	54/61%
TOTAL:	89/100%

For "yes" responses: Why? (If filled in)

- He's handsome
- He's so handsome and resourceful.
- He is the most romantic, sweet, loving, kind, goodhearted person.
- Because he is a very nice person/because he is so understanding.
- He's all man
- He seems like a devoted guy
- He's intelligent, funny, sensitive & loyal
- He's, cool, dangerous, loveing, Cute!
- He's incredibly sexy.
- His strength/his power
- Handsome
- Exciting, fun, little dangerous
- He's cute, nice & rich
- He's gorgeous
- Sexy, nice voice, nice, smile, romantic
- Sexy
- He's hot!
- He's gorgeous
- Exciting, gorgeous, combo of nice/guy bad-guy
- One sexy man!
- Handsome, intelligent, funny
- His charm, sincerity, and good look!

- He's an intriguing character, whose very emotional and quite handsome.
- Intelligent/sophisticated/successful
- He's a sweet, romantic, genuinely caring & sexy character
- He's cool smart, & good-looking, respects women
- He is a really cool, sexy person in real life
- Are you kidding? Just look at him!
- Kind, gentle, supportive
- Strong, independently wealthy
- Looks & sensitivity-wow!/fun & laughter

Have women viewers ever tried to dress or act like any of the characters on the soaps?

Yes	7/8%
No	84/92%
TOTAL:	91/100%

For "yes" responses: Why? (If filled in)

- Dress
- She doesn't care what people think of her
- I loved how she dressed
- Manners & class
- (Same one she wanted to be, befriend-"was 14 years old at the time")

How realistic do women viewers think soap operas are, in general?

Very	4/4%
Somewhat	53/58%
Hardly	24/26%
Not at all	10/11%
TOTAL:	91/99%

How realistically has viewer's favorite soap opera portrayed the following storylines in the past few years?<sup>54</sup>

Friendship

N=86

Mean: 1.70

Rape/Sexual Abuse

N=85

Mean: 2.11

Father-Son Relationships

N=82

Mean: 2.17

Mother-Daughter Relationships

N=88

Mean: 2.18

Mother-Son Relationships

N=84

Mean: 2.29

Father-Daughter Relationships

N=83

Mean: 2.30

Deception/Secrets

N=85

Mean: 2.33

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54 For this as well as the following question: Response codes range from 1 (very realistic) to 4 (not at all realistic). To retain the ordinal quality of the responses to this question (and thereby to allow for the computation of a mean), "don't know" answers were coded as missing. Responses are listed in ascending order, according to the means of the responses to the subquestions.

**Social Problems**

N=83

Mean: 2.34

**Making Love**

N=86

Mean: 2.41

**Romance/Courtship**

N=88

Mean: 2.41

**Nonviolent Crime**

N=72

Mean: 2.47

**Psychological Problems**

N=82

Mean: 2.49

**Physical Illness/Injury**

N=85

Mean: 2.51

**Business Practices of Powerful Companies**

N=81

Mean: 2.53

**Violent Crime (not including rape)**

N=79

Mean: 2.61

**Sexism Against Women**

N=73

Mean: 2.63

**Marriage**

N=84

Mean: 2.67

## Workplace Issues

N=73

Mean: 2.71

## The Criminal Justice System

N=81

Mean: 2.90

How realistically do soap operas portray any five characters (women viewers' choice) from any soap opera?

## Character 1

N=84

Mean: 2.13

## Character 3

N=78

Mean: 2.13

## Character 5

N=73

Mean: 2.19

## Character 2

N=81

Mean: 2.25

## Character 4

N=76

Mean: 2.32

Proportion of women viewers who agree with the following statements

- In the past, soap operas have helped me to deal with real-life problems.  
Agree: 9/10%
- Soap opera watching is something I do "just for myself."  
Agree: 77/85%

- Currently, soap operas portray women as too dependent on men.  
Agree: 19/21%
- Currently, soap operas portray powerful women as "bitches."  
Agree: 29/32%

### Issues Related To Feminism

#### Proportion of women viewers who agree with the following statements

- These days, women have pretty much the same opportunities as men.  
Agree: 48/53%
- I am "pro-choice" (regarding abortion).  
Agree: 54/59%
- Children turn out better when they are raised by a stay-at-home mother.  
Agree: 24/26%
- Pornography is degrading to women.  
Agree: 58/64%
- It is important for women to always look their best.  
Agree: 27/30%

#### What does the term "feminist" mean to women viewers?<sup>55</sup>

- Females having equal opportunities as men and not being categorized as to abilities and careers. Also, being able to assert oneself in male-dominated situations (i.e., healthcare) other than work.
- One who actively believes in womens rights and issues
- Well dressed nice personality
- Actively believes in womens issues and rights very strongly.
- Womens' rights and the use of the feminine gender to replace the masculine in most words. i.e., herstory instead of history
- I'm for womens' rights.

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55 15% (n=14) did not answer.

- A woman with good nature and quality who stand for decency (decency)
- I think it means that a person who believes or supports feminism.
- A woman who is her own person.
- To me feminist means some one who is sure & strong in their beliefs regarding feminine issues.
- Women are above men & dont want anything from a man.
- Being in favor of women and women rights and women being able to be independent and to be knock down by men.
- Someone who wants equal right for women & is extremely vocal about it.
- Someone who believes in everything about women.
- Equal opportunity, equal pay for equal work--respect from my spouse
- Girlish or is it someone who dislikes girls
- I think it has changed. It used to be more hard-line men vs. Women. I would like to think a feminist nowadays is someone who can retain feminine ways as well as be viewed as equal, educated and competent
- Not much - another label
- Someone who tries to attain equal rights for woman that men have
- To me, a feminist is a woman who has certain beliefs about male and female relationships. She believes strongly in rights for women and feels they are being denied.
- A person who cares a lot about feminity.
- Someone who is just into advocacy for womens' rights and not everyone's rights.

- Negative connotation-however. a person who stands firmly for womens' right to have choices in life
- A women who has her own mind. She can have it all, job, husband, baby, success. once she puts her mind too it. My opinion is, a women can anything a man can, if she's strong willed & determined.
- Someone who believes and is actively pursuing the empowerment and advancement of women and women related issues in todays society.
- An activist for womens' rights (equality) in the home & in the workplace
- Someone who believes in womens' rights. Who doesn't need another person to make herself complete.
- Career woman
- Equality
- Female self worth
- That women strive for equal opportunities and receive equal pay. it does not mean to me that women who are feminists are necessarily antagonistic toward men.
- To believe that women have the same opportunities as men in business + society
- A woman concerned with her own rights and the rights of other women.
- Women who fight for equal rights against men, & who hate men.
- Someone who is fanatic about womens rights
- A woman who thinks she can do anything a man can
- Having the same opportunity as men. having the choice of whether or not to stay home with children or have a career. Basically, it means equality.

- A female who strives to be the best she can be and she'll do anything to meet her goals including letting a man get in her way.
- Believes a woman can do anything a man can do just as good, quick, & efficient
- A person who supports a woman's right to make choices about her life, career, etc. And will back up those feelings with actions.
- Being as strong as man in relationships and at work. But yet being soft and sweet
- A woman who wants to be treated equal to all men rights
- It used to mean someone who wanted women to have the same opportunities that everyone is entitled to. Now, it seems to me, that it means women who leave no room for any differences between the sexes & who demean women who choose to stay home with kids.
- Standing up for womens' rights
- Someone who doesn't "depend" on a man
- A woman who is very strong, independent, believes very strongly in equality. Womens' issues & pro choice. Usually I think of someone unfeminine or gay.
- Someone who believes strongly in womens rights and equality for women.
- Becoming to your full potential, always behaving at your fullest potential, being strong, yet feminine
- Pulling for equality of women
- Every woman alive is either a feminist or a masochist.
- It comes across as a negative term, implies someone who is militant, pro-abortion which I am against, I do believe that women are discriminated against in the workplace and that needs to change.

- A woman who strives to be man's equal in everything.
- Proud to be female strive for achievements based on who you are rather than what gender you are
- Belief that women should have the same opportunities as men
- Hard lined women who takes exception to anything men say regarding women.
- Someone who thinks women should be better than men.
- A person who cares about the rights of women and defends these rights when necessary.
- Intelligent thinker - strong character
- Equality between the sexes.
- A woman who is so determined to be non-dependant on men that she carries it to extremes.
- A feminist is someone who believes women should have the same opportunities as men (sometimes bordering on the extreme)
- Pro-women. Standing up for & looking out for womens' rights. I view feminism as something positive even though the media & society seem to portray it as something negative.
- To me a feminist is an extremist who pushes for many womens' causes. These include equality in the workplace and general respect for women and their choices. I do think that some feminists go to far in their methods & statements. but if someone never pushed in the beginning we wouldn't have come this far.
- Someone who goes overboard in regards to their views. And tries to impose them on others. Feminist think women should get special treatment and they whine a lot.

- Women who seek equal rights in a man's world, and try to undo the injustices men have created, for women throughout history.
- It should mean that women have the same rights as men and the same abilities. Lately it means that women want all the power & step all over some men. Need a happy medium.
- Someone who believes that women have the same innate rights and privileges (or should have) as men do
- Someone who fights for equal rights for women
- Freedom of choice without guilt
- Very strong female who portrays herself that way. Believes in her views & isn't afraid to show them.
- I don't have a clear picture of the word-maybe assertive, no-nonsense.
- That I am equal to men, but not like a man.
- A woman who takes women's rights to the extreme
- Having the same opportunities (career, socially, economically) as men.

Does viewer consider herself a feminist?

Yes	32/37%
No	31/36%
Not sure	23/27%
TOTAL:	86/100%

**Demographics**

State of Residence

New York	34/39%
Florida	12/14%
New Jersey	7/8%
Other	35/40%
TOTAL:	88/101%

Racial/Ethnic Background

White	71/82%
Black/African-	
American	14/16%
Hispanic	1/1%
Asian	0/0%
None of the above	1/1%
TOTAL:	87/100%

Age

11-17	4/5%
18-24	9/10%
25-34	31/35%
35-49	35/40%
50-64	3/3%
65-79	6/7%
TOTAL:	88/100%

Religion<sup>56</sup>

Jewish	18/23%
Catholic	26/33%
Christian (includes denominational. non-Catholics)	34/43%
Muslim	1/1%
Buddhist	1/1%
TOTAL:	80/101%

How often women viewers attended religious services in the past year

Once/week or more	26/30%
Once/twice a month	15/17%
A few times	32/36%
Did not attend	15/17%
TOTAL:	88/100%

Highest educational degree attained

(for respondents over age 25)

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56 Total includes all respondents indicating a religious affiliation.

Elementary school	2/3%
High School	21/28%
Coll./Vocational	39/51%
Master's Degree	12/16%
M.D./J.D./Ph.D.	2/3%
TOTAL:	76/101%

Sexual orientation

Heterosexual	84/100%
Bisexual	0/0%
Homosexual	0/0%
TOTAL:	84/100%

Marital status

Single (never married)	29/33%
Single (divorced)	2/2%
Single (widowed)	3/3%
Married (not separated)	51/57%
Married (separated)	4/4%
TOTAL:	89/99%

Number of children

0	27/34%
1	18/23%
2	19/24%
3	10/13%
4	2/3%
5 or more	3/4%
TOTAL:	79/101%

Proportion of women viewers who are currently homemakers

Yes	39/44%
No	49/56%
TOTAL:	88/100%

Proportion of women viewers who are currently students

Yes, full-time	10/12%
Yes, part-time	6/7%
No	70/81%
TOTAL:	86/100%

Proportion of women viewers who are currently employed (including self-employment)

Yes, full-time	39/44%
Yes, part-time	21/24%
No	29/33%
TOTAL:	89/101%

Employed women viewers' occupations/job titles<sup>57</sup>

- Owner
- Teacher-elementary ed
- Certified nursing assistant
- Teacher
- Customer service representative
- Housekeeping
- Associate producer-int'l TV
- Certified nursing asst.
- TV prod. associate
- Telecommunications manager
- Asst director of a preschool
- Sales associate
- Administrator

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57 Reprinted verbatim. Not all employed respondents answered this question.

- Payroll clerk
- Self-employed writer
- Attorney at law
- District mgr
- Blood component lab tech
- Self employed - office work
- Office asst/secretary
- Bookkeeper
- Teacher
- Receptionist
- Work temp/secretarial
- Marketing/research analyst
- Legal secretary
- Cosmetologist (at home)
- Advertising copywriter
- Accountant
- Actor
- Lawyer
- Office manager
- Run a day care home
- President (?)
- Healthcare consultant
- Teacher
- Registered nurse

- Sales associate
- Office manager
- Co-owner graphic design firm
- Technical assistant
- Work study
- Freelance writer
- Manager
- Real estate
- Consultant-electrical engineering
- Medical transcriptionist
- Cust svc. manager
- Executive sales
- Administrative management consultant

Household income last year

Less than \$5,999	2/3%
\$6,000-9,999	1/1%
\$10,000-14,999	2/3%
\$15,000-24,999	5/7%
\$25,000-34,999	12/16%
\$35,000-49,999	9/12%
\$50,000-74,999	21/28%
\$75,000-99,999	10/14%
\$100,000+	12/16%
TOTAL:	74/100%

Proportion of women viewers to which the following applies

Retired	6/7%
On unemployment	1/1%
On social security	6/7%
On welfare	2/2%

On disability 0/0%

### Written Comments

- Since I am a full-time employee, most of my answers are based on those times when I'm home because of holidays, sick or personal time. However, I've watched my favorite soap opera for so many years, on and off, that I always know what the storyline is.
- An afternoon of entertainment.
- It get boring everybody, all the woman they let become as slut sicking.//There is no mortal (moral) nothing to let a young person can look to in this country where young girl from there are 10 year old they are having baby there is no exsample of young people in this country so I stop watch most of them
- I like to watch the soap opera when I come home from work. It is a way for me to relax & forget what has happened until it is over.
- I love those soaps I watch I never miss becasue if I am home I taped them so no need to miss
- I feel that the survey drifted away from the topic of soap operas & became too personal with the last 10 questions.
- Soaps are a wonderful form of entertainment. I enjoy watching.
- I like watching all my children because I feel that all my children is the first to have a mixed married I feel they sould let julie and the noah get married and have a baby
- I think that to whatch soap operas it's an edikshen and it's a waist of time.
- Sexual orientation and personal information has absolutely nothing to do with soap operas!

- I watch "soaps" while I'm working out at the gym, or folding laundry--I would never take time out of my busy schedule to sit down just for a soap. Basically they are unrealistic, mindless, but somehow amusing. I really don't get into fantasy I never have read a romance novel or such. If I hadn't started watching "soaps" so many years ago I probably wouldn't have ever turned them on now! --good luck w/ your survey.
- Thank you!
- I think soap operas are the only form of entertainment where you can see women over 40 in romantic/sexual pursuits. These actresses are considered "too old" for the movies or night-time tv (although some are only in their 40's). // Because soap-opera watching is primarily focused on women, it is demeaned in our society as opposed to the mostly-male hobby of watching sports, which is glorified.
- Most of the time, story lines are drawn out for too long if they are building up to something big happening.
- I never watched soap operas until I "retired" but I got hooked very fast. Now I buy magazines & even dream about the soaps. I have gone to personal appearances & even joined a fan club.
- Soaps are fun to watch. They take you away for awhile. Watching soaps which I have for several years, make you realize life is not like the soap. But it's a good get away. I enjoy soap operas.
- On question #22 I believe that children are best served by a stay at home parent, not necessarily a mother.
- For the most part I find soaps to be like junk food--all calories no substance, but very enjoyable. Every once in a while though they do a terrific job on a real issue (GH-AIDS). They're not always perfect on it, but they are very careful with the information they put out.
- I love them

- I would be glad to answer any other questions or surveys in the future. In general I think soaps are alot less concerned with reality nowadays than with trying to entertain and gimmicks to draw in new female viewers. (ie: marleena being possessed by the devil).
- I only watch one soap. and that's purely for escapism. Since I quit smoking. I think of it as my only vice!
- When you've finished your study. it would be very interesting if you could put a brief summary of your findings on America Online on the soap opera board.
- Your survey seems to be trying to determine if people who watch soaps regularly are substituting soaps for living a life of their own. I only watch one soap & am disappointed in it over the last year. I continue to watch because I have followed it since it was first aired. (30 years?) I wish it stuck to real life situations. marital problems, unwed motherhood, family relationships, alcohol & drug problems. Not devil possession, international crime figures, children who go from being babies & aren't seen again until they're teenagers.
- The unrealistic nature of the soaps is part of the fun of soaps.
- Happily married women are seldom the subject of interesting story lines
- Most pornography is degrading to women. not all.
- I watch soaps as an enjoyment. i always think boy I'm glad thats not my life. Thanks.
- I consider myself a loyal viewer of soap operas (guiding light), but for my entertainment only. I don't consider myself too involved. (I don't subscribe to soap magazines: don't use 1-900 numbers: etc...) Soaps give me a chance to step into a city where excitement and conflict is always around the next commercial. It gives me an hour out of my day to think, "I'm glad I'm not in her shoes." or "why can't my life be like that?" Its all just for fun.

- I don't mind filling out your survey, however it would be convenient & polite for you to include a s.a.s.e. Thanks & good luck. P.S. I sincerely apologize--I just folded this & realised it was stamped & addressed. Well done!
- Soaps are fantasy - pure escapism - fun!
- I think that soap operas are meant to be frustrating to the female viewers.that's why we continue to watch. (did she tell him - did he find out, etc.) Basically, I think that if soap operas were any more realistic they'd be boring & in an effort to stand out they are forced into unbelievable storylines. What else can explain Carly being buried alive & exorcisms on Days & aliens on GH (General Hospital)?
- I mainly watch soaps for entertainment, not for how realistic they are. I find some of the teen storylines appalling and unrealistic. They're poor role models for teens.
- Ques. #24. The reason I said I didn't know was because although I identify with the problems women face, I'm not an active participant in the feminist movement.
- Shows I also watched were: (at various times)
  - Search for Tomorrow
  - Secret Storm
  - Edge of Night
  - Love Is a Many Splendid Thing
  - Love of Life
  - Dark Shadows
  - Peyton Place
  - Where the Heart Is
  - The Doctors

- It is a real shame that quality shows like Generations get cancelled, while absolute trash like Days currently continues. Also, quality shows/actors like AW (Another World) are constantly overlooked for the higher ratings. I've seen YR [Young and the Restless] (used to air in the a.m. here) and it is tons worse than AW (Another World). Also, I am currently not happy w/ Procter and Gamble's merry-go-round of writers/producers.
- Some people think soaps are stupid & a waste of space. They are like any other TV show--they tell a story with characters. They are just a little different at times which make them fun & different.
- I love soap opera as a format. It is a fun entertaining escape. I am currently writing a soap opera & selling it in newsletter form. Soap opera has a way of magnifying everything, beauty, power, money, grief, crisis. I believe this magnification helps people put their own lives into perspective and have some fun.
- I love soaps. My mother watched them and I got hooked. I'm also on line and b/c of my love of soaps I have met some really wonderful people. I love DOOL so much I paid \$2500 for 2 people to tour the set and I'm going.
- Good luck on your paper!
- I've been a days viewer for eons. I fuss & fume at storylines, but I love to try & predict what direction a story will evolve--and w/ Days I generally do this well.  
  
Days has terrific characters--a compliment to the writers & actors who create them. Days will have all kinds of wonderful leading men, villainious villains (Stefano will never die!) & crazy/wacky fun characters (Eugene & Calliope).  
  
Days is pure escapism! and I love it!

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