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'Television, Sexual Difference and Everyday Life in the 1970s: American Youth as Historical Audience'

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Abstract

This essay applies Janice Radway's proposed 'radical anthropologization' of media audience studies to a study of historical audiencehood in everyday life, focusing on children and teenagers as audiences for 1970s American television and its discourses of sex and gender. By drawing on a range of unconventional source materials – including high school yearbooks, photographs, toys, and reports of children's play – I argue that such historical evidence reveals the suffusion of 1970s television, and in particular its attention to the question of sexual difference, in the daily lives of young people. I also assert that such evidence allows for an attention to underexplored aspects of media audiencehood. This project reveals that television audiencehood can be a practice of daily life as much as it can be a matter of more conventional textual interpretation or readings.

Key words: sexual difference, gender, television, audiences, 1970s, children, teens, play, everyday life

In 1988, Janice Radway discussed what she termed 'the problems of dispersed audiences and nomadic subjects' for cultural studies research on media audiences (359). In so doing, she questioned whether cultural studies' theories of fluid and contextually-dependent subjectivity might call for a 'new object of analysis,' what she described as 'the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it' (366). While recognizing the theorizations of everyday life by such thinkers as Michel de Certeau and John Fiske, Radway argued that the practice of media audience scholarship did not typically attend to these theorizations, falling instead into 'singular text-audience circuits' that neglected the much more diffuse role of media in the constitution of the social subject (366). She proposed an ethnographic project – a 'radical anthropologization' – that might begin to access the nexus of media, subjectivity, and everyday life in ways more commensurate with cultural studies theories. Radway's proposal called for a collaborative approach, one in which a

team of researchers would immerse themselves in the spheres of daily life – families, schools, and the 'leisure worlds' – and together construct an ethnography of media, popular culture, and the everyday (369). Although others have echoed Radway's call for reform to media audience scholarship, the project she proposed has yet to be undertaken. Still, the ideas therein serve as useful reminders of, and inspiration for, the ongoing theorization and exploration of day-to-day living in a mediated world.

Radway's proposal was meant as a study of the present, but her call for a revised object of analysis, a turn away from studies of single text/audience interactions and toward a more diffuse picture of the place of media in everyday life, applies equally well to studies of the past. Indeed, Radway's interest in the everyday life of the present can be married to the concerns of the so-called new history that has challenged traditional historiography across multiple disciplines. In the "new" history, such areas as women's history, oral history, micro-history, histories of reading, and histories "from below" have come to the fore (Burke). Such approaches, historian Jim Sharpe notes, help "convince those of us born without silver spoons in our mouths that we have a past, that we come from somewhere" (39). Such approaches recognize that everyday people's everyday lives – the very matters of concern to Radway – are significant areas of historical inquiry. Thus, in this essay, I seek to bring together Radway's call for studies of media and everyday life with historians' calls for "new" histories "from below." I am thereby translating Radway's proposal for historiographic purposes, examining how it might be possible to study the role of media in everyday life of the past, as well as the constructions of social subjectivity therein. I do so by applying Radway's conceptualization of media and everyday life to an historical period that I have studied in depth, the U.S. in the 1970s, and I focus on television's discourses of sex and gender in the everyday lives of children and teens.[1]

Children and teens are an audience contingent particularly amenable to an 'everyday life' approach, not least because so much of their lives are taken up with leisure and play. Because play is part of children's daily activity, and because play is often imaginative and expressive, analyses of children's play can offer useful insights into kids' perspectives on the world in which they live. According to Henry Jenkins, 'Play represents a testing of alternative identities. Maintaining a fluid relationship to adult roles, children try things out through their play, seeing if they fit or make sense' (28). Children's play is not necessarily linked to any particular media text, but it often interacts with and references media. As Ellen Seiter points out, 'Consumer culture provides children with a shared repository of images, characters, plots, and themes: it provides the basis for small talk and play' (297). Teens may also use media as a way to 'try things out,' particularly identities and roles associated with adulthood. Media offer young people of all ages the kind of 'shared repository' that Seiter notes. Understanding the references to and uses of media in young people's everyday lives can thus offer insight into communal youth cultures and the experiences of individuals therein.

My aim, then, is to experiment with Radway's proposed method by drawing upon a 'team' of historical sources to piece together a picture, albeit partial, of television and everyday

life in the context of the 1970s U.S. and its climate of changing sex and gender roles. I draw upon a range of source materials, most of which are not focused on particular programs (unlike, say, audience letters written to producers and collected in an archive – these can be invaluable sources, to be sure, but are outside the focus of this project). Instead, I place such materials as high school yearbooks, first-person journalistic accounts, photographs, personal journals, toys and dolls, and researchers' observations of children's play in dialogue to help illuminate television's place in 1970s everyday life. Although my conclusions are necessarily partial, my analysis of these materials suggests that, in the 1970s, television programming played a part in the construction of the sexed and gendered identities of some American children and teens. In this era of rapidly changing sexual mores and practices, television provided a point of identification, fantasy, and comfort for many young people. These encounters with television were not solely in the form of conventional interpretations or readings of texts; instead, they took the form of everyday practices, including those of interpersonal relationships and play.

Debating difference: From politics to the playground

Central to the analysis of the fragments of everyday life from the past is an understanding of the discursive context into which everyday encounters with media occurred. Ien Ang has called for just this sort of 'radical contextualization' as the key to a more productive approach to media audiencehood and everyday life. Ang acknowledges the necessity of making choices (what she calls 'consciously *political* choices') about which contextual frameworks to consider (257). In this spirit, my study of television audiences and everyday life in the 1970s places my evidence of audience experience in the context of debates over gender roles and the question of sexual difference in the 1970s U.S. Understanding this context is vital to understanding the evidence of television's place in young people's everyday lives that I have uncovered.

The question of sexual difference was so pressing in the 1970s because of issues raised by the women's liberation movement and its detractors. The feminist challenge to the notion of sexual difference came from both radical and mainstream factions of the women's movement, each with its own take on difference, its impact on women's subordination, and ways to combat it. Radical feminism tended to follow in the path laid by French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in the 1950s. de Beauvoir saw the identification of women with their bodies, and thus as different from men, as one of the root strategies of patriarchal oppression. Radical feminists of the 1970s (e.g., Shulamith Firestone) updated de Beauvoir's perspective by echoing the link between biology and women's social role and by calling for the elimination of sexual difference as a cultural category. More mainstream discourses of women's liberation, in particular the campaign around the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, assisted the widespread understanding of feminism as erasing, or at least refusing to acknowledge, all differences between men and women. Although the ERA ultimately failed to gain the necessary number of state ratifications to be added to the U.S. constitution, it was a major rallying point for feminist organizing,

accounting for a vast increase in feminist allegiance across the 1970s (Ryan: 73; Mansbridge).

This wave of feminist affiliation notwithstanding, the ERA and the more radical feminist stances that rejected sexual difference faced severe opposition both from within and outside the women's movement. Within the movement, the refusal of sexual difference on the part of radical feminists led to disputes over which women could rightly be counted as feminists, which women could rightly be said to have rejected sexual difference. Women's movement activist and writer Anne Koedt told of, 'women being told they could not be trusted as feminists because they wore miniskirts, because they were married . . . or because they wanted to have children' (255).   Lesbian members of the movement were sometimes distrusted as feminists, in part because of straight feminist distaste for the butch/femme sex roles they saw as carrying over from patriarchal society into some lesbian relationships.

Ongoing activism by lesbians and by straight feminists who were uncomfortable with radical feminism's insistence upon sex and gender ambiguity helped develop a strand of feminism that embraced sexual difference. These 'cultural' feminists insisted on woman's fundamental difference from man and emphasized the nurturing and romantic aspects of women's sexuality in contrast to the aggressive, genitally-focused sexuality they attributed to the opposite sex.[2] Cultural or 'difference' feminism gets its name from its insistence on, and celebration of, a separate women's culture that validates the female body, feminine experience, and the feminist power to be found in those spheres.[3] Woman's difference from man underlies all cultural feminist thought, and often that difference is seen as natural and biological, with women's reproductive functions as a central, heralded part of their difference.

Yet the challenge to the movement's rejection of sexual difference came from *anti*-feminists, as well. The most vocal and powerful of the anti-feminist constituencies were the many women who devoted themselves to stridently opposing the movement that attempted to speak for them. Most often, this opposition took the form of anti-ERA activism, but bolstering the anti-ERA platform were claims about sexual difference, claims that rejected the radical and mainstream feminist stances on difference and passionately argued that the differences between men and women should not only be preserved, but celebrated. Organizations such as right-wing activist Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA, Women Who Want to Be Women, Happiness of Womanhood, and Females Opposed to Equality fought for a recognition of sexual difference as the foundation of human experience. Such groups declared that pro-ERA feminists were 'women-who-want-to-be-men,' and that their push for a unisex world would rob women of important protections (Marshall; Mathews and Mathews).

Although the anti-ERA groups had a distinct political purpose, they also had a significant impact on many Americans, largely because their endorsement of a fundamental, irrevocable, and beneficial sexual difference resonated with many people's theretofore

unquestioned beliefs about sex and gender. For example, Mary Donnelly, a fifty-nine-year-old Catholic housewife and anti-ERA activist, expressed the pull many must have felt between feminism's potential and its problems for the notion of fundamental sexual difference: 'I have three daughters so of course I want equal rights for them. I just don't want them saddled with having to be like a man' (quoted in Klatch: 166). For Donnelly and many others, the women's movement offered some exciting opportunities, but it also threatened the way she understood herself and her world. The debate over sexual difference within the women's movement, between the movement and its detractors, and across the society complicated the question of women and men's proper roles. As a result, it also complicated ideas about girls and boys' proper roles. In the 1970s, the debate over sexual difference entered into childrearing discourse, shaking up long-held beliefs about children, sex, and gender.

Many child development experts implicitly supported a mainstream feminist stance on gender equality. They argued for the benefits of treating male and female children equally and thereby rejecting categories of sexual difference in childrearing. For example, in 1972, *Parents Magazine* discussed parents' mixed feelings when they realized their daughters' intelligence. Although parents expressed pride at this realization, some also feared that their daughters' brainpower might come at the cost of their femininity. The magazine dismissed those old-fashioned fears in favor of a women's movement-inspired approach: 'Does a girl really need to be passive and dependent to be feminine, attractive or a good mother? Our notions of what is natural and proper for women are obviously socially determined, and the time is long past when so narrow a view of femininity had any social justification' (Limmer: 64). Individual women heeded this message and encouraged their children to play with a variety of toys, including those traditionally targeted to the other sex. As *Parents* approvingly reported, one Seattle-based National Organization for Women member gave her pre-school aged daughters trains, baseballs, blocks, boats, and a hammer and nails, while another NOW member gave her son dolls (Limmer: 38).

Still, many commentators disagreed with such a 'liberated' approach to childrearing and insisted that the maintenance of sexual difference was essential to children's development. Child psychiatrist Arthur Kornhaber argued that women who did not want their daughters to learn feminine ways were, 'robbing their daughters of their sexual identities. In extreme cases, these kids are being taught at a crucial stage in their development to hate their wombs, their bodies, the whole idea of having and caring for children' (Woodward: 79). Psychologist Rhoda L. Leonard echoed Kornhaber's alarm about the neglect of biological destiny: 'Putting pressure on boys and girls to behave like the opposite sex is placing them under a great strain because these pressures are at odds with biological endowment' (quoted in Schlafly 216: n.6). Even some of those commentators who believed that more cross-gender play was good for kids warned of the limits of biology: 'There is a certain biological point from which there is no digression, and parents who try to raise their little girls to be boys or who don't respect the maleness of their sons are doing them a grave disservice' (Olds: 90). While some of these

arguments against the elimination of sexual difference in childrearing had deliberately anti-feminist motivations (e.g., Schlafly quoting Leonard in order to bolster her own anti-feminist claims), others, like the pro-sexual difference discourses circulating on a wider range of topics, spoke to the pull many felt in the 1970s between full equality between the sexes and respect for long-standing (and maybe even biologically determined) categories of difference.[4]

This tension affected the everyday lives of children and teens as strongly as it did the thoughts of child development experts and reporters. For example, in 1974, journalist Thomas Bolton published an autobiographical piece about his seven-year-old daughter's attitudes toward sexual difference. In the essay, he relates how Betsy insisted to her parents and sisters that 'Boys are doctors, girls are nurses,' because 'doctors wear pants and nurses wear skirts,' and that she knew so because she had seen it on TV. Though her father tried to convince her that girls could be anything they wanted to be, including doctors, Betsy insisted, 'I'd rather be me. I don't ever want to do boy things' (76, 78). Despite her father's awareness of the women's movement and his attempts to explain it, Betsy insisted on and gloried in her difference from boys. Such resistance to the tenets of radical and liberal feminism, to the impetus to dismiss differences between the sexes, appeared throughout the worlds of children and teenagers in the 1970s. As the Cambridge High School yearbook remarked, referring to that year's fads and fashions, 'Some of the girls even began to wear dresses again!' (*Ca-Hi*: 83) This excitement over the re-feminization of the female half of the Cambridge student body speaks to the pro-sexual difference backlash against radical feminism that affected not only ideas about childrearing, but also the daily lives of young people throughout the country.

Youth Audiences and the 1970s Debate Over Sexual Difference

Given the pervasiveness of the 1970s debate over sexual difference throughout American culture, it is not surprising that such matters also pervaded references to television in the everyday lives of children and teens. For example, numerous journalistic accounts from the period describe adolescent girls adopting the feathered hairstyle of *Charlie's Angels* sex symbol Farrah Fawcett, suggesting the significance of Fawcett and her status as a symbol of feminine sexual attractiveness. Fawcett's appeal was closely tied to the way the *Charlie's Angels* series engaged the question of sexual difference. In *Charlie's Angels* as well as its many contemporaneous imitators, the sex symbol heroines, three private detectives working as team, were depicted as being able to do anything men could do and as thereby asserting a liberal feminist rejection of sexual difference. At the same time, however, the program made a point of emphasizing not only its protagonists' sexy femininity, but also their fundamental femaleness. These characters' female bodies came in handy when working undercover as centerfold models or beauty pageant contestants and their nurturing women's hearts came in handy when guiding wayward youths or comforting shaken crime victims. Make no mistake about it, these programs insisted, these characters were *women*, with all of the physical, mental,

and emotional traits that make that category of persons distinct from men. The excessive assurances of the characters' sex/gender status also carried over into the publicity around the actresses themselves, which contained repeated allusions to their heterosexuality, their femininity, and their acceptance – indeed, their embrace – of their fundamental difference from men (Levine: 152-157).

The widely reported stories of teenage girls adopting 'Farrah hair' and being subjected to either admiration or ridicule by their peers provide glimpses into how these constructions of sexual difference entered into young people's everyday lives, and the ways in which those constructions could be contentious. In one such story, a group of fourteen-year-old Kansas girls reportedly threw acid at a classmate who had recently adopted the Farrah look (Miller: 38; Rosen: 102). Farrah hair garnered a more welcome response from graduating senior Sarah Rosenberg's peers at Madison West High School. In her school's 1978 yearbook, Sarah was identified by her nickname, 'Fawwah,' seemingly inspired by her wide smile and impressively feathered blonde hair. A member of the Ski Club, the Water Ballet, and the Social Committee, Rosenberg was apparently well-liked by her peers, her nickname a complimentary homage to Fawcett's athletic, girl-next-door sex appeal ('Seniors': 190). Taken together, these two cases suggest that Farrah hair – and the image of fundamental sexual difference via sex appeal to which it referred – could elicit opposing responses among young people, likely as a product of the local context within which the style was adopted. That such a visible symbol in the 1970s debate over sexual difference could earn girls either disgust or reward is telling of the contention central to 1970s sexual difference discourse – and of television's place within it.

There is also evidence that 1970s television's discourses of sex and gender pervaded young people's everyday lives by offering up objects of sexual and romantic fantasy for adolescents coming into sexual maturity. For example, in La Follette High School's 'senior wills' for the class of 1975, the friends of Rod Larson, a white mid-westerner, willed him 'a date with Christie Love [the black woman cop/sex symbol of the 1974-75 U.S. series]' ('Senior Class Will': 14).   In another example, pre-teen Anne Eickelberg dreamt of being a nurse in M*A*S*H's 4077th military unit and recorded this fantasy in her diary. In this dream, the mischievous playboy character, Trapper, looked at her and said, 'You're cute!' In 1976, at age thirteen, she continued her attraction to older men, as she documents in an entry detailing her love for the government boss of TV's Six Million Dollar Man and Bionic Woman, the middle-aged Oscar Goldman (18-23). Others have confessed retrospectively their attraction to 1970s TV stars, from Chastity Bono's memories of Charlie's Angel Kate Jackson as 'the woman of my sexual dreams' to Girlfriends writer Winnie McCroy's remembrances of the overwhelming beauty of Wonder Woman Lynda Carter (quoted in Nolan: 12; McCroy: 26). Such traces of 1970s television show us its power to pervade young people's sexual and romantic fantasies in ways that transgressed normative sex and gender roles. Young people's desires for television figures at times put aside or even consciously rebuked the dominant culture's preferred object choices for them, challenging boundaries of race, age, and sexual orientation.

While the sexualized dimensions of 1970s television played a significant part in the everyday lives of teens, there is some evidence suggesting that younger children conceived of television and its characters in ways that helped shape their sex and gender identities, too. Photos of kids dressed as Wonder Woman, or posing next to pictures of their favorite Angels reveal the aspirational quality of many children's TV-related fantasies. For example, comedian Susie Felber proudly displays her childhood Wonder Woman photo on her blog, and Marla Davishoff remembers asking to pose next to her Kate Jackson poster to emphasize their similarities in hairstyle and dress.

Children such as Susie and Marla were doubtless encouraged in their admiration of these television heroines by a television merchandising industry eager to maximize the profit potential of 1970s television's most popular shows. Beginning with the Mego Corporation's 1976 Cher doll, a flurry of celebrity and TV-character dolls were marketed to kids in the 1970s. Mego produced dolls bearing the likenesses of Starsky and Hutch, *Happy Days*' Fonzie, Wonder Woman, Suzanne Somers, Jaclyn Smith, and Farrah Fawcett (Forkan: 20). Kenner Products sold *Six Million Dollar Man* and *Bionic Woman* dolls and accessories. Shindana Toys produced a line of dolls modeled on black celebrities, including Jimmie 'J.J.' Walker. Hasbro Industries released a series of *Charlie's Angels* dolls and playsets while Mattel Toys sold Kate Jackson, Cheryl Ladd, and Donny and Marie Osmond dolls. The *Charlie's Angels* kid-targeted merchandising market extended far beyond dolls and accessories, including a hair care set, cosmetics kit, jewelry sets, vinyl luggage, shoulder bag, and trading cards.

The very existence of such toys and dolls clearly served the interests of the manufacturers and licensees who profited from them, but their adoption by children also indicates they had a meaningful presence in kids' everyday lives. The dolls themselves were marketed in distinctly gendered ways. For example, Kenner Producers labeled its *Six Million Dollar Man* as a 'poseable figure,' not a doll, in all advertising and packaging, clearly concerned that parents would not buy a toy for boys that carried the 'doll' label. In contrast, the company's Bionic Woman doll was regularly characterized as such in catalog descriptions and product packaging (Kile; Mandeville: 93-95). The bionic dolls were also differentiated from one another in terms of their accessories and their placement in stores. The Steve Austin figure offered such accessories as a bionic transport/repair station, a command console, and a space suit. The Jaime Sommers doll had a sports car and a house, but also a series of glamorous outfits and the Bionic Beauty Salon, with which girls could 'diagnose Jaime's systems' as well as 'style Jaime Sommers' hair with her own comb and brush for that special date with Steve Austin.' While accessories like these solidly categorized the Bionic Woman as a girl's toy (and the Six Million Dollar Man as a boy's toy in contrast), Kenner also issued instructions to retailers for gender-specific arrangements of the products. Stores were to sell the Steve Austin and Jaime Sommers dolls in both the girls' and boys' sections but to make the Bionic Woman fashions available only in the girls' aisle (Mandeville: 92).

Kenner Products clearly took great pains to differentiate its male and female dolls from each other. By pairing Jaime with stereotypically feminine accessories and by isolating the most gender-specific elements of the product lines from children of the other gender, Kenner was stringently unambiguous on the issue of sexual difference. Surely the actual children playing with the dolls had broader imaginations and more flexible identities than toy manufacturers like Kenner assumed. Still, the pull of sexual difference was strong in the 1970s, and children were no less subject to it than was the rest of American society. Analyses of the TV-themed toys and dolls of the 1970s can thus provide some insight into the possibilities presented to children, but it is difficult to know from the sales figures, and even from an examination of the toys themselves, how these products were used by kids.

Yet we do know that even those children who were not regular TV viewers or had never watched a show like *Charlie's Angels* were familiar with the characters and the stars who portrayed them because of the vast licensing market surrounding such shows. A series of studies of children and TV play conducted in the period offer insight into television's place in children's everyday lives. Researchers Jerome and Dorothy Singer argued that the licensed product market created a 'commonality of experience around certain personalities,' for the middle-class pre-schoolers they studied in 1977 (128). They found that even three and four-year-olds were familiar with Farrah and Cher and the Bionic Woman. Another researcher, Navita James, found four-year-old boys taking turns jumping off a box and shouting out the name of one of the Angels as they hit the ground at an Ohio daycare center (199-200). At this center, most *Charlie's Angels* play was the province of six-year-old girls, so it is likely that these boys were merely repeating names (and perhaps even the action-oriented activities) they picked up from the older kids' play, or from commercials for the *Angels* dolls, or from the broader atmosphere of interest in these female action heroine characters amongst children of the 1970s.

Both boys and girls played with and around TV's female sex symbol characters of the 1970s, and much of this play grappled with gender distinctions. Researchers repeatedly found girls playing Charlie's Angels, Bionic Woman, Wonder Woman, and Isis (from the Saturday morning children's series *The Shazaam/Isis Hour*). Sometimes through their dolls but more often on their own, the girls would run, jump, and pretend to beat up the bad guys (James: 204). Some of these children understood the unusual appeal of this sort of play. As one six-year-old explained, one of the main reasons she liked playing Wonder Woman was that she got to run around when she did so (James: 204). Although such active behavior was more often associated with boys, Jerome and Dorothy Singer found that, 'Girls are moving closer to boys than ever before in their identification with heroic figures, adventurous achievement, and feigned aggression.' They cited not only the women's movement and changes in childrearing practices as causes, but also television, in particular 'the introduction of female superheroines "Wonder Woman," "Bionic Woman," and "Charlie's Angels"' (Singer and Singer: 81).

This research also indicates that girls pretended to be male characters, such as Batman or Starsky, as well as the new female heroines. Perhaps used to a dearth of female action heroines to emulate and thus practiced at imaginative cross-sex identifications, or perhaps drawn to the transgression of sexual difference inherent in occupying a male role, girls were able to take on a range of active TV play identities in the 1970s. The fact that they continued to take on male roles, even when female characters were available to them, suggests that they had come to understand that one's sex did not necessarily circumscribe one's actions. This is especially evident in light of the fact that boys nearly exclusively took on male roles (Singer and Singer: 81; James: 212, 227; Paley: 102; Palmer: 112). Boys did not feel the need to be female characters, given the long history of available male heroes, and may have subconsciously recognized the step down in privilege inherent in a boy taking on a female role. Another study found the same kinds of gender disparities in children's imaginary playmates based on TV characters. Girls had both male and female imaginary friends while boys imagined only male characters as their friends (Palmer: 112).

Boys' adherence to clear-cut sex and gender differentiation carried over into their interactions with girls. One study reported that older boys especially would bar girls from their TV play, claiming, 'You can't play because there are no women in this game' (James and McCain: 793). Such resistance to changing gender roles was repeatedly confronted with girls' increased awareness that being female did not equal being cut out of the action. When boys attempted to bar her from their *Star Trek* play, arguing that there were no women aboard the Enterprise, one five-year-old girl reminded the boys of Lieutenant Uhura, the program's lone female, and lone black, crew member (James: 227). The boys continued to bar her from the game, but her awareness of television's new female roles and the challenge they posed to an unquestioned belief in fundamental sexual difference is notable nonetheless. Girls' challenges to boys excluding them from TV play took other forms, as well. When confronted with play around a series with few female characters, they would claim to be the female guest stars or they would simply invent roles that did not appear in the series itself. For example, James documented a group of girls claiming that they were Starsky and Hutch's girlfriends to get in on the action play around that series (178, 196).

As much as many of the girls in these 1970s studies resisted conventional gender roles and challenged a notion of fundamental sexual difference, the studies also make clear the many ways in which girls, as well as boys, accepted and even perpetuated unequal divisions of power. For example, white boys and girls at the Columbus, Ohio daycare center James studied asserted a fundamental racial difference by insisting that the few black children at the center play only black characters (keeping their options for play quite limited, given the small number of black role models on 1970s TV, particularly action-oriented TV) (178). (The inner-city African-American boys Murray studied, however, engaged in a wider range of TV play identities in their home lives, where they were ostensibly apart from white children.) Children also perpetuated role-playing inequalities

according to differences in age. For example, amongst a group of children playing *Batman*, the older kids insisted that their younger playmates be 'low-power' characters like 'Batmite' or 'Batkitty' while they pretended to be the more powerful Batman (James and McCain: 789).

These kinds of race and age-based distinctions, alongside the gender-based discriminations amongst the groups of children studied, illustrate the power-laden nature of children's interactions with one another, and the multiple axes of identity along which these interactions occur. While such power struggles no doubt transcend the 1970s and its TV play, the debate over sexual difference and its elaboration through the era's female action heroine sex symbols have historically specific dimensions. The new availability of female heroines broadened girls' involvement in action-oriented play, and allowed them to challenge the fixed gender roles typical of a naturalized notion of sexual difference. Yet the television representations upon which this play depended, and the larger social debate over sexual difference to which these programs and their ancillary products spoke, also included an affirmation of woman's fundamental difference from man, an affirmation that often worked against principles of sex and gender equity.

Perhaps inevitably, girls' play with and around TV's new heroines also tended toward reassertions of fundamental sexual difference in ways that reinforced rather than challenged traditional roles. Kindergarten teacher Vivian Paley noted that when the girls in her classroom pretended to be powerful characters like Wonder Woman or *Star Wars*' Princess Leia they nonetheless tended to engage in sedate activities, not unlike those they enacted when playing 'house' as the more generic 'mother' or 'sister' (98-99). At the Columbus daycare center, the most popular TV game was 'Bionic House.' In this form of TV play, the children pretended that they were members of a bionic family (bionic man, bionic woman, bionic brother, sister, even bionic kitty). Although the children insisted that they were bionic, the game did not involve their powers in any way. Instead, it was a conventional game of 'house,' in which children pretended to make and eat meals, clean up, and generally enact the business of everyday life (James and McCain: 795; Paley: 206-207). Since boys and girls were both involved in playing Bionic House, the game seemingly allowed for a reassertion of conventional domestic gender roles. This play may have been encouraged by the television series' tendencies toward narrowly defined sex/gender roles, in that Jaime Sommers first appeared as Six Million Dollar Man Steve Austin's girlfriend, and Jaime would later become 'mother' to Max, the bionic dog. Thus, these series suggested a kind of heterosexual familial normativity, despite the couple's bionic powers and their relatively short-lived romance. These programs, and the his-and-her action figure/dolls sold alongside them, may have reproduced a sex/gender binary that fit well within the heteronormative play of 'house.'

Wonder Woman games also included a variation on 'house' called 'Wonder Woman House.' In this case, however, all family members were Wonder Woman (James & McCain: 795). While this may seem another assertion of the feminine reign over domesticity, the fact that Wonder Woman House was all female was perhaps more

representative of a separatist commune than a heterosexual nuclear family! The girls who played Wonder Woman House may have been seeking a reassurance of sorts, a reminder that they could fill conventionally female roles in a conventionally feminine game while nonetheless embracing Wonder Woman's superpowers and sisterly bonds.

Although Wonder Woman House asserted conventional femininity somewhat ambiguously, other instances of the Columbus children's Wonder Woman play more directly affirmed fundamental sexual difference. The same six-year-old girl who liked playing Wonder Woman because she got to run around most liked being the superheroine because she was pretty (James: 204). Other children took similar pleasure in the character's appearance. Five-year-old Jill explained that what she liked best was wearing the Wonder Woman costume (James: 204). To play Wonder Woman, the girls would put on capes and bullet-deflecting bracelets (fashioned out of bottomless paper cups) (James: 198). While decorative, the bracelets were also part of the character's armor, tools with which she fought evil, so their presence suggests that these kids did value the character's strength. But Wonder Woman's strength was repeatedly linked to her more feminine characteristics in their play. For example, some of the girls used Wonder Woman play to dress up in long gowns that would fan out as they spinned, transforming into the superheroine. For these girls, Wonder Woman's look was just as significant, if not more so, than were her superpowers. Much as did the series itself, the girls who played Wonder Woman in the 1970s could assert the superheroine's (and their own) femininity *and* take on typically masculine activities.

Through such ambiguity of gender roles, these kids participated in the debate over sexual difference in the same, tentative way as did much of mainstream American culture – by letting girls do 'boy' things while simultaneously declaring that they were indubitably girls. That girls moreso than boys entertained sex and gender ambiguity, albeit while asserting fundamental sexual difference, points out some of the limits of this period's questioning of sexual difference and its impact on young people's everyday constructions of self. This was a period in which the naturalness of sex and gender roles was up for discussion, but where a more flexible conception of girls' and women's roles could receive greater social acceptance than could any variation in boys' and men's expected identities.

Assessing the Historical Evidence of Everyday Life

The observations of the researchers who studied children's television play in the 1970s offer a useful piece of evidence of television's place in young people's everyday lives. Together with the other artifacts and examples I have found, this material suggests some of the ways in which encounters with television helped to shape children and teens' senses of self in a particular cultural context. The specificity and mundanity of this evidence is surely valuable for those of us who believe that media have their most significant impact in the minutiae of everyday life, as well as those of us who argue for the necessity of understanding those aspects of history too often neglected by official

documents. However, it is also possible to see the array of sources that form my 'team' of evidence as simply anecdotal and idiosyncratic, as revealing little beyond the details of their singular existences. Indeed, even as a media historian and a cultural studies scholar invested in audience reception practices, I myself am at times uncomfortable relying too heavily on such evidence to make a case for any larger social phenomena.

Still, having gathered and compiled this evidence in the spirit of Radway's 'radical anthropologization' I nonetheless believe that these traces of everyday life *do* tell us something worth knowing. These particular pieces of the past tell us that television, especially in the form of highly recognizable figures such as Charlie's Angels, had a presence in the everyday lives of America's youth during the 1970s. Analyzed in the context of debate over sexual difference and the foregrounding of such matters in television programming itself, they tell us that children and teens found in their encounters with television a space for the negotiation of sex and gender identities, a space that sometimes allowed for the reassertion of dominant sex and gender norms and that sometimes allowed for more oppositional forms of identification. They illustrate that young people negotiated the many discourses of sex and gender pervading 1970s American culture, including those appearing on television, in their encounters with peers and in their play. And perhaps most significantly, these glimpses of the past reveal that practices of audience negotiation need not take place solely, or even primarily, as conventional textual interpretations and may instead be enacted in the practices of everyday life.

Such conclusions are inevitably partial and limited, and are perhaps ultimately not all that conclusive. But they do provide vivid illustration of some key assumptions of cultural studies of media reception, assumptions that have been more fully elaborated in theory than they have been documented empirically. This experiment in studying media audiences and everyday life of the past has applied the lessons of contemporaneous ethnographic audience research to historical scholarship. I believe that the value of such research lies in its opportunity for linking the micro to the macro, the individual to the social, and the everyday to the epochal – principles central to cultural studies scholarship as well as to contemporary historiography. More such research across a range of fields concerned with media reception, participatory cultures, and the practices of everyday life in the present or the past could usefully employ Radway's model, and my elaboration of it here, in pursuing the question of the quotidian and its ultimate relevance for matters of broader social and cultural import.

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[1] My focus on television, as opposed to other media or a combination of media, comes from my own knowledge about this medium, particularly during the 1970s. See Levine. Of course, other media surely played as significant a role in young people's constructions of their sex and gender identities during this period (e.g., magazines targeted to teen girls). Radway's proposal would surely take into account a range of media products and so my decision to focus on television makes my analysis more a partial than a full attempt at Radway's plan.

[2] This stance has been heavily critiqued as universalizing and essentialist. See Alcoff; Echols, 'The New Feminisms . . . ,' 'The Taming of the Id.'

[3] The name 'cultural feminism' is a label that has been applied to this branch of feminism by scholars and historians. The so-called cultural feminists of the 1970s most frequently referred to themselves as *radical* feminists. However, I am reserving that title for those feminists who rejected the notion of fundamental sexual difference. I borrow this distinction from Echols, *Daring to be Bad*.

[4] The perceived tension between difference and equality in the 1970s debate over sexual difference assumed the mutual exclusivity of the two categories, an assumption that more recent feminist thought, particularly that from a post-structuralist perspective, has dismantled. See, for example, Scott.

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