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**Date deposited:** 17 December 2009

**Version of file:** Published

**Peer Review Status:** Peer Reviewed

## Citation for published item:

Kehily M; Nayak A. [Global femininities: Consumption, culture and the significance of place](#). *Discourse* 2008,**29** 3 325-342.

## Further information on publisher website:

### Publishers copyright statement:

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Kehily, Mary Jane and Nayak, Anoop(2008) 'Global femininities: consumption, culture and the significance of place', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29: 3, 325 — 342  
DOI: 10.1080/01596300802259103  
URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596300802259103>

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# **Global Femininities: Consumption, Culture and the Significance of Place**

Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak

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This paper considers globalisation from *below* by looking at young women in the context of their everyday lives. By focusing upon the daily cultures of youthful femininities, we aim to explore young women's relationship to the global within the domain of the cultural. In exploring young women's negotiations with cultural globalisation, we seek to illustrate the ways in which the cultural commodities of global flows may be appropriated, adapted and subverted within the texture of their everyday lives. Using empirical data drawn from ethnographic research, our discussion draws attention to the significance of place in the production and appropriation of youthful femininities. Recognising the place-specific sphere of consumption as an important site for the negotiation of femininities, we argue that the subject positions made available through the commodities of cultural globalisation remain anchored in time and place by young women who ascribe meaning to them within specific locales.

**Keywords:** globalisation, culture, new femininities, consumption, place

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### **Introduction**

Globalisation is said to offer young people possibilities for new forms of subjectivity and belonging, seemingly free from the immediate ties of family, peer group and geographic location (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Lash and Urry 1999). For young women in particular, globalization may provide opportunities for the emergence of new femininities. Within this framework young women have been positioned as the ideal neo-liberal subjects for post industrial times, taking centre stage in the reconfiguration of labour patterns, consumption practice and gender roles (McRobbie 2002; Walkerdine et al. 2001; Aapolo et al. 2005). It could be argued here that late modernity unshackles women from the patriarchal past. No longer subservient to the male breadwinner, the new female subject is economically independent, liberated from the confines of the domestic sphere and, with the help of new reproductive technologies, can realise the possibility of 'having it all' and 'doing it all'. The fushia-pink hue of late modernity can be seen as part

of the prevailing zeitgeist, giving young women licence to become agentic, assertive and 'out there'. Where once the lives of young women were relegated to the margins in the contemporary period they appear: their visibility is part of their unassailable presence in the new girl order (McRobbie 2006).

This gender portrait of agency and opportunity is certainly seductive. However, far less is known about how young women respond to these changes and the role that new global media play in their lives. To address this we aim to consider globalisation from *below* by looking at young women and consumption. By focusing upon the cultures of youthful femininities, we aim to explore young women's relationship to the global. In exploring young women's negotiations with cultural globalisation, we seek to illustrate the ways in which the global flows of objects, signs, media images and music may be appropriated, adapted and subverted within the texture of their everyday lives. Our discussion draws attention to the significance of place in the production and appropriation of youthful femininities. It indicates that places and institutions carry meaning and ways of being that may give rise to specific 'communities of interpretation' (Radway 1983). We suggest that these 'communities of interpretation' can also be seen as local-global conversations in which young women speak back to late modern conceptualisations of new femininities. Such locally embedded practices shape gendered subjectivities and the possibilities afforded by the glamorous commodities of cultural globalisation. In this way young women may be seen to be involved in the scripting of individual biographical projects of the self (Giddens, 1991), but these remain connected to places, institutions and peer communities that are rooted in the contemporary social mores of the local.

The study points to the significance of school as a grounding feature of the local landscape that frames young women's encounters with the products of cultural globalisation. While school may exist as a regulatory force within young women's lives, global media provides a glimpse into celebrity culture and cosmopolitan spaces beyond the school where moral imperatives appear more relaxed and opportunities more plentiful. In this respect school is contradictorily placed in late modern times as simultaneously the route to cosmopolitan citizenship and the delimiting local institution

replete with the conservative values of an older gender order. Educational practitioners and policy makers have largely overlooked the cultural as a sphere for the 'doing' of gender. We suggest that cultural studies accounts of music, television and media technologies have a great deal to impart when it comes to understanding the performance of gender in 'new times'. Our focus upon young women's engagements with cultural globalisation points to the importance of local-global negotiations to the making of gender. Furthermore, young women's participation in global media consumption across different sites indicates that many of the 'opportunities' for young women appear to exist beyond the school in the reconfigured labour and leisure patterns of late modern culture. It is our contention that exploring young women's interactions with global culture is a means of 'troubling' the more parochial understandings of gender in late-modernity.

### **Comparative Ethnographies**

The paper draws upon data from a series of intermittent but nevertheless intensive periods of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between 1993 and 2003. The data forms part of a multi-site analysis that took place in four English State Schools in different, largely working-class neighbourhoods<sup>1</sup>. It involves participant observation and interaction with young people as well as recorded interviews with students and teachers, complemented by field diaries and local sources pertaining to these areas. Although the ethnography provides close-in descriptions of young women's relationship to consumer goods we are especially keen to interpret these practices alongside ethnographic studies undertaken in other countries. Our school-based study of femininities in the UK is then placed alongside studies of young women in South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, Trinidad, Slovenia, China and Iran.

The value of a comparative ethnography is that it enables us to situate our accounts alongside a global literature on gender, youth and cultural studies to make connections across time and place (Nayak and Kehily, 2008). Secondly, it allows us to better understand the difference that *place* makes to understandings of gender and consumption.

Looking globally enables us to reflect upon the place-specific dimensions of our work and the need to internationalize debates on gender and youth. This allows us to better explore local-global relations and interpret the coming-into-being of global femininities. Finally comparative ethnography provides a means of critiquing Western assumptions of gender and globalization by allowing us to elaborate upon, or speak back to the established theories and meta-narratives of social change.

In pursuing our research questions we have been influenced by recent debates concerning the status of ethnography in an interconnected world (Burawoy *et al.*, 2000). This move gestures towards a more open-ended sense of place and a global way of looking. It contrasts with much early ethnographic approaches that tended to focus upon the detailed anthropological construction of a community, gang, village or 'tribe' (refs). This spatially 'bounded' way of looking features in most school ethnographies that have foreground the role of the institution to the making of race, gender, class and sexuality (Willis, 1977; Thorne, date; Mac an Ghail, 1994). Recognising young people as global citizens suggests that their gender practices and identifications may reach beyond school gates. For Doreen Massey (1994) a 'progressive sense of place' has the potential to prise open the local to recognise the multiple identifications and interconnections that can be made with the global. In particular modern diasporas, migrations and media cultural 'flows' permeate everyday spaces and pull apart the idea of place as a securely bounded entity.

In exploring this potential we attempt to follow the global connections young women make through popular media culture in order to understand how it may give rise to the emergence of 'new femininities'. It is our contention that looking globally need not eradicate some of the fine-grain texture of local school ethnographies. Instead, it may allow theory to travel and yield new insights on the question of gender, consumption and the contemporary conundrum of place. For if we are to argue that culture is an important site for the doing of gender then this inevitably entails a dialogue with the global. As high consumers young women regularly interact with a global bricolage of media signs,

commodities, music, film and magazines. These global products have a bearing on who they are and how they wish present in school and neighbourhood cultures. We remain compelled by the imaginative appeal of ethnography as a global project that allows us to think beyond the local and examine the worldwide transformations of gender and youth in late-modernity.

In order to unsettle tightly bounded institutional readings of gender we address three research questions: How do young women engage with and consume global cultural products? How can these practices of consumption help us to understand new femininities? In what ways is place and social context significant to the relationship between new femininities and cultural consumption? The paper begins by discussing gender and local-global styles of consumption. We then turn to comparative ethnographies to explore the relationship between new femininities, cultural globalisation and practices of consumption across three sites. This includes an analysis of television soaps, film and romance; contemporary music and dance; and new media technologies.

### **Consuming Locally and Globally**

Globalization has had a much discussed impact upon youth and culture. A commonly held view suggests that globalization in the cultural sphere produces Western hegemonic structures at the expense of local cultures. Cultural globalization has been characterized as the flow of ideas, products and practices from the Western 'core' to the 'periphery' of non-Western locations. A recurrent theme of globalization points to the emergence of social inequalities based upon the ability to consume and the ability to move. While middle-class young women exercise cultural capital and accrue social mobility to craft 'choice biographies' aimed at getting noticed in the global market place, working-class young women remain rooted to their locality, unable to access opportunities in education or work and prone to early pregnancy, single motherhood and social exclusion. Walkerdine et al. (2001: 209) argue that middle class and working class young women exist as 'each other's Other', cautionary examples of an alternative version of girlhood

that is strange and undesirable. Class-based accounts of new femininities cast a shadow over the coming-of-age party for girls in new times, powerfully indicating that a place on the guest-list is not available to *all* young women. Skeggs (2004) suggests that globalization offers the possibility of cosmopolitan citizenship, marked by participation in the global capitalist economy. Full citizenship and access to cosmopolitan spaces, she contends, appears to rest with some groups rather than others, the working-class and particularly working-class women forming the commonly excluded category. Empirical studies, however, suggest a more complex melange marked by reconfigurations of the local and the global in which individuals rework connections with family and community while undergoing personal change and social mobility (Thomson and Taylor, 2005; Henderson *et al.*, 2007).

An identifiable theme in Skeggs' work is a concern with the negative associations surrounding working-class femininity. Femininity can be understood as a class-based property premised upon appearance – what you look like serves as shorthand for who you are, defining at a glance feminine identity, behaviour and morality. Skeggs argues that appearance operates as a condensed signifier of class in which negative value is attributed to working-class forms of embodiment and adornment. Seen from this perspective, class exists as a process that works through evaluation, moral attribution and authorization. Within the symbolic economy working-class women are commonly assumed to embody a style of feminine excess, denoting an overly abundant and unruly sexuality that places them dangerously close to the reviled figure of the prostitute. The fecundity of young working-class women, particularly, is viewed as excessive and morally reprehensible. Skeggs claims that the respectable/unrespectable binary that served to evaluate the working class in industrial times now works in different ways to construct certain vices as marketable and desirable while others retain no exchange value. Young working-class mothers provide a striking illustration of a group whose embodied vice is not recoupable for exchange. 'Even in the local context her reproductive use value is limited and limits her movements...white working-class women are yet again becoming the abject of the nation' (2004:23). In contrast to theories of individualization, Skeggs suggests that mobility exists as an unequal resource, offering different points of access to different

social groups. In Skeggs' analysis mobility becomes a classed and gendered affair that confines working-class femininity to the local, offering little opportunity for movement.

Young women, however, are not only positioned by cultural commodities, they also engage in the representational sphere and produce meanings for themselves.

Ethnographic studies can point to moments of ambivalence and fragmentation that challenge the Western idea of 'global community' and cosmopolitan citizenship. For example Salo's (2003) study of gender and personhood in the new South Africa offers a closely observed and richly nuanced account of the ways in which cultural flows may be incorporated into local practices and given new meaning. The focus of her study is Manenberg township, Cape Town, a predominantly coloured neighbourhood where motherhood was regarded as the epitome of femininity. Under apartheid, adult women exercised moral authority over young people's position in the community and their transition to adulthood. In the post-apartheid era the influence of adult women was in decline and young people were looking to other sources for a developing sense of personhood. Salo demonstrates that the media and public transportation offered young people access to a cosmopolitan style that had a transformative effect upon their lives. Watching television 'transformed these domestic locales into transgressive hybrid spaces from which new ideas and practices of divergent new feminine identities emerged' (2003:356). In a locality where male violence remained a routine feature of sexual relationships, television offered young women alternative images of gender relations based upon pleasure, desire and mutual respect. Through televisual portrayals, young women 'imagined gender relations beyond the narrow choices their mothers proscribed' (2003:358). Television programmes such as soaps placed emphasis upon individuality, connections with peer group and the dismantling of older, apartheid-styled signifiers of race. Watching these programmes gave young women a glimpse of new forms of cultural capital, inspiring some to seek cosmopolitan experiences in other parts of the city – an agentic move that usually brought both new forms of freedom and constraint. Salo cites the example of Chantel, a 17-year-old respondent who traded upon her good looks and fashionable style in order to gain access to cosmopolitan spaces and social experience beyond her local community. Her mobility was made possible through the exchange

value of youthful femininity suggesting that, in her case, working-class femininity/sexuality can carry symbolic value and may not necessarily exist as a barrier to cosmopolitan citizenship.

Although our focus in this paper is upon young femininities a brief comparison with their male counter-parts is indicative of the new spaces of gender mobility. Like young women, young men also sought alternative spaces for themselves in Manenberg. Youthful male activity in the neighbourhood centred round the hokke, a building that served as the gang headquarters, local shop, radio station and social club. Through the functions of the hokke, young men in the locality were more visible than women having a public presence that was broadcast through local media. These men were heavily influenced by African-American rap culture, adopting the gangland style and practices of inner city US neighbourhoods. Their activities challenged the authority of senior women in the community while establishing the position of 'gangster' as an alternative means of achieving status in the local context. Ironically, while young women looked outside the neighbourhood to realize new forms of femininity and sociality, young men's attempts at new style masculinity further rooted them in their locality as their gangland status depended upon notions of fixed territoriality and remaining local.

McGrellis (2005) reports a similar pattern in her study of youth transitions in Northern Ireland. Young women appeared able and willing to access cosmopolitan culture in urban spaces beyond the local, while young men remained rooted in sectarian structures that harnessed them within local boundaries. Interestingly it is this aspect of Salo's study and McGrellis' work that runs counter to Skeggs' argument that working-class women remain among the most excluded and vilified of groups. Salo argues that local meanings of personhood were reformulated through young people's engagement with global youth culture. Consumer culture and new cosmopolitanism played an important part in deconstructing and reconfiguring gender relations and racial divisions. Far from imposing Western hegemony, globalized youth culture offered young people in non-Western contexts alternative structures and practices for refashioning gender identities.

A sense of place transforms cultural globalisation in significant ways. The ethnographies discussed above suggest that class, femininity, cosmopolitan citizenship and mobility may not be as fixed as Skeggs claims. It is possible to suggest that some cultural characteristics may be highly valued in the symbolic economy to be successfully utilized by working-class subjects. It is also possible that high exchange value may be attached to 'hot' qualities and attributes that traverse class boundaries such as beauty, style, sporting ability, musicality or ICT wizardry. Here working-class and once-colonized subjects with the appropriate symbolic capital can entertain the possibility of 'passing' in terms of class or ethnicity, a move enabled by the prioritization of their high exchange value qualities. A sense of place and the dynamics of local culture become important in young people's configuration of relationships between local and global (Pilkington *et al.* 2002). Through the local, processes of cultural globalization have an impact on citizenship, cosmopolitanism and social mobility which, in turn, take on shifting meanings for young people, offering different and sometimes unanticipated points of connection and desire.

### **Soap, Film and the Ideology of Romance**

Television soaps and film are global commodities assembled through a technology of production that includes the availability of hardware, financial resources, artistic input, state regulation and marketing. They can be located in Johnson's (1986:283) elaborate 'circuit of culture' as texts that are open to complex practices of consumption and may elicit fantasy and collective forms of identification. A number of soaps can be placed within the broad cultural context of young women's lives as a mass-produced, globally marketed and publicly shared media form, which speak to girls in particular ways. They are commonly regarded as a cultural resource for young women that they can, at different moments, 'talk with' and 'think with' (Nayak and Kehily, 2008).

The global impact of television soaps can be traced in the complex 'communities of interpretation' that emerge around them. Ien Ang's (1985) cultural studies account of the popular eighties American soap opera *Dallas* reveals how readers in the Netherlands may

derive emotional pleasure by situating texts within their own lives. To research *Dallas* Ang drew upon 42 letters she received (39 from women and girls), after advertising for responses in a magazine. It may seem strange how a soap essentially based upon the elite families of multimillionaire Texas oil barons could have such global appeal. Amidst the wealth, Stetsons, Cadillac cars and swimming pool cocktail parties Ang discovered viewers were implicated in complex modes of identification. She found that for her mainly female Dutch audience *Dallas* offered 'emotional realism' as readers came to associate with what Ang depicts as a 'tragic structure of feeling' that connects with the ups and downs of their own everyday lives.

This theme is reworked by Danny Miller (1992) while conducting ethnographic research in Trinidad where he was struck by the way in which everyday life came to a standstill while the US soap *The Young and Restless* was broadcast for an hour. Rather than fostering an Americanized cultural imperialism the soap was rapidly resituated into the rhythms of island life. Miller found that viewers did not use the soap as a window on the West but felt it resonated with the idea of 'bacchanal' – where hidden truths are exposed through scandal – a theme of that is replayed in Jamaican Carnival. The oil boom in the Trinidadian economy witnessed the rise of a large nouveau riche whose fragile pretensions were to implode when recession set in. Miller documents how many middle-class dwellings were repossessed by banks with financial ruin only becoming known through rumours and when phone lines were cut off in response to unpaid bills. In this way, the soap had an anticipated aspect functioning as a global product that inadvertently could offer a critique of local conditions in a way that state controlled media could not. Here, a seemingly homogenous global product is transformed into a highly distinctive Trinidadian commodity that is part and parcel of an enduring but ever-changing national culture.

The importance of looking globally is reflected in emerging scholarship on soap opera that challenges Western feminist readings. The popular US show *Ally McBeal*, which focuses upon the sad but funny plight of a hapless young lawyer whose romantic dalliances and daydreams underscore her professional persona to tragic-comic effect, has

been roundly condemned by some British feminists. Angela McRobbie (date) has been particularly scathing of the presentation of a post-feminist, pre-pubescent image of regressed girlhood she claims shows like *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* propagate. However, audience-based research undertaken by Vidmar-Horvat (2005) in post-socialist Slovenia articulates a very different reading of gender relations. In Slovenia *Ally McBeal* appeals to a number of female viewers as it resists post-Socialist attempts to draw women back into the home. Where women had been active workers under the Soviet regime they are now being recast as homemakers whose identity rests with family duties and domesticity. Watching Ally's scatty, rambling but often honest and moving court performances, enables young Slovenian women to re-think their own place in the world. This reinterpretation of gender and work suggests that young women can perform as independent and able workers and that this does not have to come at cost of being thought of as unfeminine.

Young women we spoke with were invested in many different media forms, the most popular and ubiquitous being soap opera. Story-lines and characters from soaps provided a common talking point for a range of issues and events. As with teen magazines, the open structure of soaps invites multiple forms of dialogue and interactivity (Barker, 1998; Buckingham and Bragg, 2003). Just as *Dallas*, *The Young and the Restless* and *Ally McBeal* may appeal across national borders, young women in our research were equally drawn to US programmes, Australian and British soaps. They were aware of the dramatic scope of soaps, associating popular prime time programmes such as *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* with themes aimed at a child audience, while *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale*, *Brookside* and *EastEnders*<sup>2</sup>, placed later in the schedule, risked sensitive and controversial adult themes such as sex and drugs:

Lucy: [*Brookside*] deals with it all really strictly.

Imogen: Like *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, it's like, nothing happens like that.

Claire: Just fantasy.

Lucy: All the girls are like innocent little goody goodies and all the boys would never take advantage ....

Claire: Yes, none of them smoke or drink. But in *Brookside* it's all realistic and that. It's like they've done things like drug abuse and everything.

Imogen: Yes, and then there's the lesbians.

The realism of the 'adult' soaps and their incorporation of issues such as drug use and sexuality forms part of the appeal for young people. They contrast with the 'goody goody' image of childhood femininity Lucy is critical of in lunchtime and early evening soaps. Instead 'adult' soap operas provided a form of fandom where the performance is everyday life. Following the soaps involved an evaluative appraisal of their ability to capture the rhythms and texture of 'real life'. Soap operas, and identifications with the characters within them, have the potential to challenge young people's views and opinions. They also offer spaces in which new femininities can be performed through the relatively safe mediated genres of television fiction. In a discussion of lesbianism, Emma remarked 'Since watching *Brookside* – and now *Eastenders* have got them – I don't feel as bad as I used to now'. Here, gay and lesbian characters may become 'familiar neighbours' in the televisual imaginaries of young people. This suggests that young women's negotiation of global cultural texts remains responsive to the mores of local environment, establishing simultaneously an awareness of normative values and a way of acting upon them.

For many young women television, cable and satellite is one of the most immediate portals for global interconnection. Australian soaps and American television shows aimed at a teenage audience such as the *OC* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the latter includes a 'phallic' young woman as the lead character and her friend who is a teenage lesbian) extend the repertoire of youthful sexual knowledge and incite a wider proliferation of femininities with the potential to elicit a more cosmopolitan outlook. Barker's (1998) study of British Asian girls' television viewing practices in the UK also suggests that soap operas provide young women with resources to discuss issues that may not be sanctioned within some of the religious and cultural spaces they inhabit. Of particular significance to young women in his study is the development of moral identities or what Dwyer (1999) terms 'appropriate femininities', once again suggesting

that self-generated notions of respectability inform youthful femininities in significant ways (Skeggs, 1997; Kehily, 2002). Barker found that young women's 'soap talk' provided them with a set of tools to make moral and ethical judgements. Girls were concerned with morally disciplining characters in soaps for bad behaviour and simultaneously to 'make themselves' through such discourses of incitement. Significantly girls in his study appeared to reserve the full weight of their condemnation for female characters who acted like 'sluts'. In keeping with Skeggs (1997), girls rework moral values for themselves; however, their refashioning of gender values may draw upon many of the traditional and conservative features of dominant versions. Barker's (1998) media study of British Asian girls and soap operas and our own discussions with young women indicate that soaps are woven into the fabric of young lives and read within the context of their immediate environment. Like magazines, soaps certainly provide a site for the refashioning of gender identities, offering opportunities for styling and adaptation, but these imaginaries are anchored in the local peer-group cultures of daily life.

While soaps offered many opportunities for active viewing we found that girls in our study also spoke of Hollywood film in similar ways. For many young women romantic film more than other media provided a cinematic template for relationships:

Mary Jane: When you were a bit younger and you imagined relationships did you imagine them to be a certain sort of way?

Vicky: Yeah, off the telly, never argue, never fight.

*[all laugh]*

Catrina: Well I used to think that you used to walk down the street holding hands and he bought you all these gifts....

Mary Jane: What's the reality been like?

Vicky: Much more arguments and fights, get presents but not all the time. In the films you always get the idea it's all –

Catrina: Happily ever after....

Vicky: The man trying to please the girl who is nasty to him and I used to think that I had to be nasty too ... I'm nicer now... We used to fight when I couldn't have my own way.

Catrina: You know what I got from films? You know when they have an argument and the woman starts to cry, I says whenever I have an argument with one of my boyfriends I wouldn't cry like they do on the telly.

The comments of young women in our study illustrate Winship's (1987) point – reading romantic text is a pleasurable, interactive activity producing collaborative acts of interpretation. Young women integrate their reading into the texture of daily life and make points of connection between media texts and their own experiences (Hermes, 1995). Secondly, such practices have implications for gender identity. For young women, collective viewing or discussion offers an opportunity for femininities to be produced, defined and enhanced. Here peer group relations play a part in the mediation and regulation of cultural commodities, where embracing and repelling characters can be viewed as a *gender display* intended to purvey a particular femininity in dialogue with commercially produced forms but shaped by local norms and values.

In discussion with young women we found that popular tropes of the romance genre are juxtaposed with their own experiences of intimate relationships. The romantic gestures of the form and the promise of future happiness are exposed as 'tricks' that do not retain their illusory power in real life. Themes of romance and trickery are further explored in Gill's (2006) study of 'chick lit' and post-feminism. Gill considers whether the burgeoning of this genre aimed at young women and spearheaded by the success of *Bridget Jones* can be seen as an endeavour to rewrite romance fiction for a new generation of women. Gill notes the intensification of romance in late-modernity (see Blackman, 2004), evidenced in an increasingly lucrative wedding industry and the general revival of interest in 'girly' and romantic themes such as hen parties, pamper weekends, Valentine gifts and dinner for two. She suggests that chick lit as text has much in common with its romantic predecessor, the Mills and Boon style novel. Chick lit heroines may be sexually experienced and economically independent with a job, a

mortgage and/or a child; however, they largely conform to the values of normative femininity in their search for romance, marriage and long-term happiness with a male partner. The formulaic development of the plot inevitably includes a 'rescue scene' in which the heroine is saved from the ravages of single life/workaholicism/single parenthood/dead end job by a man who melts her heart with true love.

And yet, we might wonder, do readers of romantic fiction consume the ideology of romance and the 'preferred' meanings encoded? If Vicky and Catrina's viewing of romantic Hollywood film is anything to go by, these global products and the gender identities they represent can be challenged, resisted and read 'against the grain'. As Radway (1984) and Walkerdine (1990) have demonstrated romantic fiction creates spaces for individuals that may be occupied in diverse and unanticipated ways. As Hall (2000:17) discloses because identification involves the psychoanalytic engagement of fantasy and desire it can never be complete, 'There is always "too much" or "too little" – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality'. This does not render the text meaningless, on the contrary, romantic fiction, soap opera and film provide pleasure and opportunities for 'magical' thinking; offering women potential resolutions to the lived contradictions of femininity. Versions of femininity in romantic films are rehearsed in personal encounters in the here and now, tried on, adapted and repelled. Engagement with cultural commodities is inevitably mediated by the context in which these encounters take shape, in schools, homes and leisure spaces. Through these interactions the global can be imaginatively rearticulated.

### **Music, Dance and the Cosmopolitan**

The global flow of music, image, style and media signs are thought to have a 'disembedding' effect upon youth cultures in late-modernity. They offer possibilities for more cosmopolitan forms of belonging and postmodern styles consumption that transgress the boundaries of the local (Featherstone, 1998). However, global ethnographies of youth suggest a complex melange in which gender and race signs are

still subject to place and geographical context. Through detailed observations of *di-si-ke* (that is, Chinese disco) in Shanghai and beyond, Farrer (1999) provides a fascinating insight into the global spectacle of gender performance amongst young people in China. According to Farrer *di-si-ke* is a fantasy space that allows young people to travel beyond the mundane world of neighbourhoods, work or family life. It enables young women to participate in what Farrer depicts as a 'glamorous modernity', where 'one does not distinguish oneself by class or locality' (p.149), but instead can lose oneself in the immediate and intense spectacle of dance. The cosmopolitan spaces of *di-si-ke* become sites for new sexual and gendered imaginaries in which the global is not so much resisted but appropriated, localized and transfigured into new modes of being.

Chinese disco culture operates here as a colander-like sexual arena in which Western migrants, global videos, urban music and other commodities leak and pass through. Rather than being the passive conduits of Westernization Chinese youth decipher, pilfer and make anew these mediated signs of global culture. By drawing upon the sexualised imagery of dance, dress and musical lyrics Farrer suggests that Chinese girls may perform as sexual cosmopolitans. Here, scantily dressed 'young women – whose modesty had been encouraged in Chinese society – simulate sexual excitement with lithe pelvic motions' (p.159). This simulation of image and sound occurs by mimicking the media signs of Western video and the cacophony of musical and cultural forms that interplay and overlap across one another. This heady, sexual 'inter-textuality' between music, pop stars, dancers and youthful bodies reveals Shanghai *di-si-ke* to be a multilayered arena in which Chinese young women are adept 'textual poachers' of Western images using these resources to reflexively enhance their own projects of self. This is not simply a taking on of global mass media images. Instead, as Farrer reflects, 'Foreigners became the objects of sexual fantasy and occasional sexual adventures, but even more so were the mirrors for the construction of a cosmopolitan sexual self-image' (p.157). Evidently Westerners and Western sexual imagery can each be transformed into mutable props through which a new cosmopolitan sexuality can transpire. It would appear that in a world of signs, 'image is everything'. Here, 'The disco is a place for the visual consumption of others but even more for offering oneself up for visual

consumption' (p.162), a willing transformation of subjects into objects, selfhood into signs.

In our ethnographic discussions with young women in Britain it is also apparent that global musical forms are consumed in ways that have personal meanings to those concerned and can be deployed to negotiate new femininities. Tina who was of mixed-heritage developed a strong identification with the singer Whitney Houston. This desire could be embodied through consumption, 'I had all her records, I even had a leather jacket the same as hers'. She goes on to add, 'I think she's ever so pretty and she's got a good singing voice'. However, for Tina and her best friend Samantha, the singer Madonna represented a more problematic and at best partial identification, due to her ambiguous sexuality and what they perceived as a sexually assertive, excessive femininity that needs to be held in check.

- Tina: I used to like Madonna, but I think Madonna is a \*\*\*\*\*.
- Samantha: I used to like Madonna, but I don't like the image she's got now [this is prior to Madonna's more recent demure look].
- Anoop: And you don't like her anymore, what it is about her you don't like?
- Tina: Her's showing herself up now. Her's using ... like this was in a magazine I had the other day, she just uses her body to get attention.
- Samantha: She's using her stardom to get attention, her used to make good songs an' that.
- Tina: In my magazine I got the other day it had got pictures of her how she is. Remember when she used to sing 'Holiday', she didn't look nice but she looked better compared to them silly pictures where she's just changed. You want to see how she's changed.
- Samantha: I got all her records.
- Mary Jane: Her body's changed a lot hasn't it?
- Tina: Dyed hair, no end of colours.

Anoop: What image of Madonna did you like best?

Tina: When she did 'Vogue'. I thought she looked really nice when she did 'Vogue'.

Samantha: Yeah, she did. I got a video of her when she did the 'Like a Virgin' tour when her was young and I got her Italian tour.

Tina: I tell you which one she looks weird on, her new one 'Erotica'. When she's got her hair all slicked down like that, her looks like a ... like a man. And it was on the telly the other day, and she went to a fashion show and she was a celebrity and she walked on. She'd got a dress and had cut out the holes round there [indicates to breasts] and nobody realised until she took off her jacket. And she was standing round like that with her hands on her hip.

Mary Jane: Do you think she might've been deliberately trying to shock?

Tina and Samantha: Yeah!

Samantha: I think its cos not many people liked her again, cos her started looking like a whore and her wanted to make a comeback.

Tina: I still like her records but I don't like her act at all.

Samantha: I don't like her act – I don't like 'Erotica'.

It is interesting to consider this extract in the light of Madonna's more recent history and the manner in which she is technically proficient in the marketable reinvention of self. In the eighties Madonna went from sexy pin-up girl to no-nonsense 'Material Girl' in the blink of an eye. In the nineties Madonna self-consciously flirted with the borders of the allegedly 'perverse' including S/M imagery, lesbianism, black sexuality and a gambit of illicit sexual signifiers that construed her as the 'dirty-sexy-bad-girl' of pop Tina and Samantha are so repelled by. The manner in which past images of Madonna have been marketed through a fetishization of black, lesbian and S/M iconography is further testimony to the ways in which 'difference' is incorporated, transfigured and sold back to us as titillating. However, if we look at Madonna today her lived sexual biography is much more mundane and far less 'out there' than may be imagined. She has opted for a traditional marriage, lives with a multi-millionaire, has entered middle-age, given birth,

written children's books, attends English elocution lessons and professes to aspects of religious spiritualism. Despite these practices, Madonna is an indisputable global icon. She is adept at 'working the sign', seamlessly producing her 'self' as the soft-focus, desirable cinematic sex symbol for popular music video.

As the ethnographic illustration reveals the identity of Madonna materializes through a series of global commodities including music, magazines, clothes, videos, DVDs and a dense scattering of mediated signs and images. For Bauman consumerism has replaced work as the main instrument of social cohesion to become 'the hub around which the life-world rotates' (1988:76). He suggests that consumption appears to offer individuals choice, pleasure and seemingly endless 'model identities' to inhabit but in actuality exerts a controlling force over individual freedom. However, it is interesting to note in this context that young women are not 'cultural dupes' but generate meanings from the commodities they acquire. Evidently Tina and Samantha use local peer-group cultures of femininity to assert a 'moral order' over what is acceptable and unacceptable in the making of new femininities. It is apparent that they are in part performing their femininities through active identification and dis-identification with Madonna and other global celebrities. These gender productions take place across the body of Madonna which, it is alleged, she uses to get attention. This can be achieved through hairstyles 'dyed ... no end of colours', dress and a sexually provocative 'hands on her hip' posture. The process of dis-identification is discursively enacted when Madonna's image is constructed as bad taste, revealed in 'silly pictures' in which 'she looks weird', 'like a man' and behaves, in sexually explicit fashion, 'like a whore'. Ideas of taste have been further explored by Bourdieu (1984) who suggests that identities are produced through practices of 'distinction', allowing individuals to differentiate themselves from others. Through the practices of consumption individuals and groups exercise cultural capital, express taste and articulate a sense of identity. Such practices point to the potential for consumption to become a 'moral project' (Miller, 1997:47), a vehicle for the expression of identity.

In the end Samantha and Tina negotiate their femininities through these contradictory cultural representations, partially resolved through making distinctions between Madonna's old image where 'she looked really nice' and her Erotica performances. The careful regulation of gender is seen where a balance must be struck between lacking femininity (looking 'like a man'), and the enactment of an excessive, hyper-sexualised femininity (looking 'like a whore'). These comparisons enable Tina and Samantha to demarcate between liking Madonna's music while hating her act; a gendered and local-global split that enables them to perform a particular femininity fashioned through and against these complex contradictions. These interactions can productively be read alongside those of the young sexual cosmopolitans discussed by Farrer (1999) in Shanghai. They each demonstrate the energetic role of music to incite multiple identifications. In particular they demonstrate how gender is performed through simulated acts of embodiment frequently achieved through an interplay of media signs and the acquisition of material goods. In such a reworking of the global there are possibilities for fantasy, identification and dissimulation to co-exist.

### **Virtual Girls: New Technologies, Electronic Media and Cyber-feminism**

For writers such as Baudrillard (1983) contemporary postmodern culture is characterised by endless simulation, image hallucination and simulacra. The eclectic plethora of images that abound in film, advertising and other media communication come to form a 'blizzard of signs' in which image and reality are indistinguishable. For Baudrillard this has given way to a type of 'hyper-reality' in which media signs have come to replace the meaning of objects and events, leading to what Featherstone (1998[1991]:65) refers to as the 'aestheticization of everyday life'. Thus, in one of his most notorious statements Baudrillard (1995) boldly declared that the first Gulf War did not happen – referring instead to the way in which our experience of armed conflict is mediated through television, newspaper and other technologies that ultimately become the 'event' itself. In this way reality is said to be disposable in a world where signs, symbols and images become the ultimate media spectacle. Indeed, the act of modern warfare is often a

simulated experience that takes place at a geographical remove and is signed through the use of computer images, virtual reality and technologies that permit distant 'surgical strikes' of unseen people and territories. Baudrillard's argument is that reality has been displaced, or transcended through such hyper-real events. In a postmodern world with no abiding meta-narratives we are caught within the 'eye of the storm', lost in a depthless culture where endless floating signifiers, artifice and affective intensities pervade.

In contrast to Baudrillard's focus on the dehumanising 'white noise' of electronic media, feminist theorists are exploring the possibilities for new media technologies to offer sites for the emergence of alternative ways of living and being. Here, the act of 'doing girl' is no longer restricted to the body or the physical confinement of a 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie, date) which necessitates of face-to-face interaction. In a study of Australian girls Bloustein (1998) has explored the bedroom as a space saturated by global merchandizing notably through musical cultures. Aapola *et al.* (2005) further argue that the Internet has become an important site for girls to express themselves as individuals and, through dialogue with other girls, develop a collective identity and social attitude. The radical potential of virtual realities are further celebrated by 'cyberfeminists' such as Sadie Plant (1996:182) who suggests cyberspace provides 'a dispersed, distributed emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist nets'. For Plant (1998), the ones and zeros of machine code resist the phallic economy of patriarchal binaries and can be productively compared to the type of fused replication envisioned in Donna Haraway's (1990) postmodern, hybrid and open-ended idea of a 'Cyborg Manifesto'. For Haraway the attraction of the cyborg lies in its inauthentic nature functioning as 'a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self' (1990:205).

The possibilities of virtual interactions are seen in Aapolo et al (2005) description of the US 'Riot Grrrls' scene which comprises mainly white middle-class young women.

In addition to face to face meetings, gigs, workshops and conventions, the Riot Grrrls network through zines ... The writings take up a full range of

themes and styles: angry, supportive, advice-giving, on issues like relationships, harassment, mental, physical and verbal abuse, and rape...Zines are often attempts to forge new communities beyond their locales. The capacity to build a global grrrl movement through these media is critical to many zine creators (Aapola *et al.*, 2005: pp. 20–22).

The prevalence of websites and personal blogs suggests that young women have new media resources with which develop identities and social networks. In this way the constrained space of the bedroom, once the sole refuge for girls on the margins of male dominated youth culture, is transformed into a globally connected site, networked with other young women poised to challenge the gender order. The proliferation of electronic magazines, written by and for girls, points to a level of energy and agency active in redefining feminine identities, providing a commentary on the emergence of the ‘virtual girl’ of contemporary times.

However, ethnographic research suggests that while postmodernist notions of cyborgs, mutants and other replicants may be generative of new theories and ideas, we should not over-write the manner in which social relations are embedded in place. In a parallel study of grrrl zines in the UK and the US, Leonard (1998) also suggests that e-zines encourage young women to engage with new technology and establish a presence on the Internet. However she cautions that despite the ability to transcend place, the virtual world of new femininities is redolent with the rhetoric of geography and location. Girls refer to their activities in cyberspace as building a home, ‘rearranging the furniture’ (1998:112), establishing a hideout and setting up a clubhouse – indicating that the metaphor of place retains meaning in the subterranean virtual networks of the digital age. This is particularly evident in Lincoln’s (2001:7-8) ethnographic study of UK teenage girls where she claims, ‘The bedroom is a biographical space. The posters, flyers, photographs, framed pictures, books magazines, CDs and so on catalogue a teenage girl’s youth cultural interests...’. In this respect girl’s bedrooms may well be connected to a global elsewhere but they are also material spaces of daily habitation.

Despite the possibilities afforded by new assemblages and bio-technologies it is clear that the relations between gender, computers and bodies are more complex in late-modernity than previously imagined. The Internet has, for example, emerged as a dominant sphere for pornography and the transformation of women's bodies into a high-tech spectacle that blurs the virtual with the real, but in rather different ways to those anticipated by the corpus of cyber-feminists. Looking globally, we find that in Islamic countries like Iran where sharia law is practiced new media mobile communications are reconstituting sexual relationships for young women. Young couples, who are expected to refrain from sex until marriage, are deploying 'phone sex' as a new practice of intimacy to traverse distance and the bed-hopping hazard of getting found out. As Shahidian (1999) discovered in research with immigrant Iranians in Canada, older women are also not immune to the proliferation of mediated sexual cultures. With eye-opening astonishment, a 65-year-old Iranian woman recalls how Western media led to a new sexual awakening.

All my life I lay underneath and my husband on top. A while ago, I was visiting some relatives and accidentally watched a video which showed a couple making love. She was on top and he was lying under her. So it *is* possible to do it another way (p.204).

Such accounts inform us of the value of global ethnographies and their potential for rethinking gender across time and place.

Even so the meshing of gender relations, media technologies and bodies is not always as sexually liberating as it might appear and has been seen to engender high risk forms of sexual activity. For example Iran is also witnessing a marked rise in the increase of HIV/AIDS amongst new generations. In Tehran money, consumption and mobile technologies may enable more exploitative sexual relations to transpire. It is estimated that around 300, 0000 Iranian women work as prostitutes and many target boutique clothes shops where designer-wear, mini-skirts and skimpy tops are sold.

Ahmed Reza, 23, admitted having accepted such offers. 'I was sitting outside the shop when two women came and said they wanted to try various manteaus [overcoats]', he said. 'They asked for a bargain and I offered them the standard discount. But they said, 'We cannot pay that – if you give us a good discount and your mobile number, we will serve you'. So I gave them more discount and got their numbers' (*The Guardian*, January 3, 2007).

These remarks provide a context for the more resplendent possibilities of the digital future initially envisaged by cyber-feminists. In youth cultures, technology and cyberspace though liberating in some aspects are also found to have powerful regulatory devices. Electronic bullying by text messaging, the irate disparagement of individual reputations through 'flaming' on e-message boards and, most notably, the phenomena of 'happy slapping', in which young people use mobile phone and computers to record other youth being beaten up, exist as the darker side of these virtual assemblages (see Kehily, 2007). Despite their appeal to global interconnectedness new technologies may also be more locally rooted than at first appears. It could be argued that the virtual scenes of MySpace, Facebook or Bebo while suggesting new possibilities for female friendship are themselves constrained by domestic geographies that give rise to an enhanced 'bedroom culture' which has long been a spatial prerequisite for modern girlhood leisure.

Young women are increasingly positioned as the ideal neo-liberal subjects of late modernity – flexible, technologically savvy, open to change and in control of their destiny. However, the contradictions of new media technologies are apparent where webcams, Skype and mobile phones may offer forms of communication and connectedness for young women but can also be seen as modern modes of governance and surveillance. The development of e-zines, message boards, virtual communities, text messaging, computer gaming and mobile communications suggest new ways of performing femininities but they have not necessarily signalled a break with the anxieties of the past. In popular media discourse when it comes to young women fears persist about 'gossiping' on the phone, the unwarranted advances of sexual predators on the

internet or the threat of sexist text-messaging from young peers. If our observations are anything to go by young women must continue to live and rework the contradictions of femininity in the digital age if the fluid potential of virtual girl and cyborg feminism is to be realised.

### **New Geographies of Gender**

A number of education ethnographies have focused upon the school as the formative site of gender formation. This has led to valuable accounts of how ideas of gender are produced by the curriculum (refs), teacher labelling (Stanworth, date, Mac an Ghail; refs), student interaction (Thorne, date; Connolly other refs) and the expectations that may accompany young women's transitions into the labour market (Griffin, 1985, refs). Such institutional approaches have revealed the working of gender often through an in-depth account of a single school. In order to extend beyond the spatially-bounded practice of institutional approaches we have sought to follow some of the connections young women make with global commodities and consider how this impacts upon their understandings of subjectivity. In discussing these themes we have considered the impact of cultural globalisation from below by focusing upon the texture of young women's everyday encounters and their engagements with mediated versions of femininity. To return to our original research questions – concerned with how global products are consumed, their relationship to new femininities and the meaning of place – we found that global media cultures play an integral part in young women's lives and are an important resource for creating meanings, shaping identities and forging relationships. Through an engagement with the 'flow' of cultural signs and material objects young women appropriate, adapt and subvert globally marketed versions of femininity. In doing so, they work through and speak back to the tropes of cultural globalisation in particular ways. This has meaning for the youth cultures and the schooling communities they inhabit.

In considering gender as a global project we have been inspired by comparative ethnographies that draw attention to the significance of place and the bearing this has upon 'doing girl' in late-modernity. We have used these international insights to broaden the geographies of gender. It is here that the value of looking at young femininities globally can be seen. Television, film, music, dance and new media technologies form part of the global circuit of culture where gender signs are transmitted and through which new femininities are imaginatively conveyed. Subject positions made available through global encounters may then be reworked in ways that respond to the values and norms of the local environment, offering points of negotiation, connection and dissonance. This would indicate that media signs cannot be extrapolated from everyday life, to be hygienically decoded outside of their daily contexts. Global femininities rely upon place-based forms of recognition and action in order to become locally meaningful. They are further dependent upon the youthful communities of interpretation that interact with and serve to trouble gender anew.

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning with our collaborative research on gender and sexuality in the early 1990s, based in two large comprehensive schools in the West Midlands conurbation, interviewing and observing young people aged 14–15 years and 16–17 years (see Nayak and Kehily, 1996; Kehily and Nayak, 1997). The paper also includes data gathered independently from one another, in the West Midlands (14–15 years) and a further school in London (14–16 years).

<sup>2</sup> Many of the British soap operas are fictionalised through a strong regional or local dimension which has a powerful appeal on the national imagination. For example *Coronation Street* is associated with Manchester, *Emmerdale* with rural Yorkshire, the now defunct series *Brookside* with Liverpool and *EastEnders* with London's East End. Although these representations are of course imaginative constructions the focus on place and 'ordinary' working-class folk is an attempt to achieve authenticity within the realist format.