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Television and Theories of the Public Sphere

If you're not on television, you are nobody.

—Suzanne Stone, *To Die For*

The statement in the epigraph is uttered in the movie *To Die For* by the protagonist who hopes to be a television star. She enters the field with no obvious training, but her physical appearance allows her first to be a “weather girl” on the local news and then a news anchor. The movie underscores the power of nomination bestowed on television: the medium does not just recognize individuals and events but also endows them with cultural significance and legitimacy. An accompanying, and perhaps an overpowering, subtext is the disdain expressed toward television as a shallow, superficial, inauthentic medium of communication. This double theme has been repeated in other Hollywood movies and even in television programming. Commonsense understandings of the medium and of the scholarship conducted on it shuttle between rationalizing the cultural authority of television and condemning its ability to trivialize “serious” issues. Nevertheless, all agree that television representational practices have a significant structuring influence on our everyday lives.

In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson theorized that print-capitalism was a key element in the formation of the nation as imagined community; print media allowed people to share affective bonds with those they had never encountered and thereby engendered a communal sensibility.¹ While there have been no explicit studies that theorize the ways

in which the technology of television has sustained and altered the concept of imagined community, numerous scholars have pointed out the medium's role in constituting shared imaginations.² They have attested to the power of its visual elements, the ability of the medium to seemingly transport viewers. Television provides a "window out to the world and into the home," and in so doing, it informs people's conceptions of the private sphere and their modes of engagement with the community. Television programming represents a "dramatisation of consciousness," Raymond Williams asserts. Its programs produce a flow that attempts to link viewers.³ In this book I explore not just the real and imagined communities that television enables, but I specifically interrogate the ways in which the medium can facilitate democratic community formations. In this chapter, I underscore theories that help inscribe television's role in this democratic project. I also point out why rape becomes a useful site to intervene in this arena, one that highlights the ways in which television programming mobilizes gendered and racialized bodies (men, women, white, and nonwhite) and inscribes them within democratic communities. The double theme that I have already referred to, television's capacity to bestow social legitimacy and to trivialize issues, is a key consideration as I outline the need to include the medium in discussions of contemporary democratic formations.

DEMOCRATIC SUBJECTS

In the United States, television's relationship with women has been complex and problematic. Feminist scholars in particular have pointed out that television, like other mass media, has targeted the female viewer as the primary consumer for the household and hence the key source of revenue for the industry.⁴ These studies point out that the medium has facilitated the formation of a particular imagined community, one that allocates specific roles for women and the feminine. Examining the historical moment of television's arrival into the American household, diverse scholars have pointed out that the apparatus reconfigured the domestic space. Until recently, television programming reproduced the ideological separation of the public and private realms, firmly positioning the home as the space of femininity and leisure and the public world as a place of masculinity and work.⁵ Arguing that television solicits a gendered viewer, feminist scholars have interrogated consistently the medium's relationship to women's everyday lives. They have teased out the connections between television programs and the larger social and cultural milieu in which the programs are viewed. In television's repre-

sentational practices, women's bodies have borne the burdens of the entire body politic, these scholars argue. My interest in this book lies in tracing how television programming solicits (white and nonwhite) women as subjects of democratic communities. I do not just underscore the gendered nature of the imagined communities facilitated by television but specifically explore where women fit into the democratic debates and discussions enabled by its programming.

Informed by critical race theories, other scholars have pointed out that the medium has helped reproduce and naturalize stereotypes about racial difference yet also has provided a space within which identity politics can be reconfigured. Rather than simply condemn the negative images of race that are presented, these scholars have paid attention to the cultural politics enabled by television programming, the ways in which the U.S. racial order is constructed, reproduced, and challenged. For instance, Herman Gray argues that television is both a "resource and a site in which blackness as a cultural sign is produced, circulated, and enacted."⁶ These scholars, like many feminists, point out that race cannot be separated from issues concerning gender; they should be seen as intersecting categories. Avtar Brah succinctly states that "it is crucial to make explicit that racism is always a gendered phenomenon. . . . Not only are men and women from one racialized group differentiated from their counterparts in another racialized group, but the male from a subordinate group may be racialized through the attribution of 'feminine' qualities, or the female may be represented as embodying 'male' qualities."⁷ Impelled by these concerns, I examine how racialized and gendered people are addressed in television programming. I highlight the specific locations allocated to gender- and race-based identities within the social order and the body politic.

Analyzing television representational practices, cultural studies scholars attest to the medium's structuring influence. For instance, in their recent ethnographic study, Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole illustrated how women's attitudes toward abortion are shaped by television programs. They argue that television is an active participant "in our social conversations about political and cultural matters, influencing our ideas, opinions, and values."⁸ The women's voices they document highlight the links between television programming, community, and politics. A more explicit articulation of the medium's significance to society can be found in the normative principles enshrined in television industry regulations. I am referring here to the idea of the "public good" that television programming is supposed to serve. Since the advent of radio, broadcasting regulations in the United States have proclaimed that the airwaves belong to the public and that all electronic mass

media are expected to serve the public interest.⁹ This concept also is key to theories of democracy, where it is assumed that the media will serve as the knowledge brokers of society, providing citizens with all of the materials necessary to make informed choices. These expectations go beyond the assertions made by cultural studies scholars. Indeed, they function as prescriptive guidelines for the maintenance of democratic societies. By teasing out the connections between individual programs, community, and politics, I explore the ways in which television imaging practices could facilitate democratic participation in a manner that encompasses marginalized groups and ideas.

It is now commonplace to acknowledge that democratic formations have traditionally been the domain of men and that theories of democracy have been formulated around the white male as the universal subject.¹⁰ Women and racialized subjects have not been central to these theories; they are marked as different. Today, institutional processes of democracy, such as elections, include women and others who historically were rendered absent. My analysis in this book explores the specific ways in which these “different” subjects are incorporated into television representational practices. Through this examination I foreground the location ascribed to differences in the democratic formations that are facilitated by television programming. I do not evaluate the medium’s ability to provide information but instead focus on the kinds of democratic debates about difference that the programming can facilitate. As Stuart Hall said in another context, “Because there are many different and conflicting ways in which meaning about the world can be constructed, it matters profoundly what and who gets represented, *what* and *who* regularly and routinely gets left out, and *how* things, people, events, relationships are represented.”¹¹ The analysis conducted in this book does not focus on the quantity of information that television programming provides. Instead, it examines the nature of debate that contemporary network television facilitates about one topic: rape.

CENTERING WOMEN AND RACE

Since at least the 1970s, feminists have revealed that rape is not an individual problem but one that belongs to the public realm and requires structural explanations. Statistics gathered by state institutions and scholars substantiate the prevalence of this crime. However, only after repeated and insistent demands made by the women’s movement has society been willing to acknowledge that this issue is not just a crime but one that highlights the social and material conditions of women’s lives. Scholars have pointed out that although men are subjected to rape, women continue to be the pre-

dominant victims, and above all, the fear of sexual assault structures most women's everyday lives. I elaborate on these ideas in the next chapter, but I introduce them here to point out the significance of examining television rape narratives. Analyzing the ways in which this issue is imaged in television will provide us with insights into the position assigned to women in the community the medium serves. As I have already mentioned in the Introduction, the issue of rape in the United States is deeply embedded in cultural ideas of racial difference. Rape thus provides an excellent site from which to examine television's capacity to facilitate democratic processes of debate and discussion about gender and race. Rape narratives allow us to examine where women and issues pertaining to women fit into our imagined democratic communities. In this book, rape serves as the site through which to evaluate the structuring influence of television programs on social understandings of women, sexual violence, and racial difference.

This book examines rape narratives across various genres of television programming, thus with a twofold purpose. The first is to analyze the social understandings about gender, race, and sexuality that television rape narratives encode. As numerous scholars have illustrated, television provides us with texts of the here and now, texts that emanate from the ideological center of society.¹² I examine television as a site where race- and gender-based discourses are produced, contested, and erased. The rape narratives I analyze allow me to foreground the historical and social factors that shape contemporary conceptions of sexual assault, the multiple intersections of race and gender embedded in our understandings of sexual violence, and more generally how the category of race inflects cultural understandings of masculinity and femininity. The second purpose of this project is to evaluate the range of information about rape—and, by extension, about gender and race—that various genres of television programming provide viewers. Examining a single topic across genres permits an assessment of the type of program or combination of programs that best serves the democratic enterprise of fostering debates and discussions that are inclusive of differences.

The analysis in the following chapters illustrates the complex manner in which television rape narratives propel the female body into the public arena. The presence of this topic on television and the centrality of the female subject within it are inherently destabilizing of the social order; together they contribute to an interrogation of previously established boundaries of the public. The topic of rape allows me to foreground as well the intimate connections between (racialized) sexuality and citizenship.

A primary assumption underlying this analysis is that the ways in which we understand the terms *feminine/masculine* or *white/nonwhite* and the ways

in which we use them are socially constructed. These words neither signify genetically determined properties that can be easily pinned down, nor are they binary categories. Instead, the meanings attached to these complex categories are constantly in flux, differing across cultures and time. Their significance is dependent on social, political, and economic factors, and often meaning is derived from the context in which these words are used. Hence the meanings ascribed to them are relationally derived and subject to debate. Such a postulate about the culturally constituted significance of gender and race theorizes that the influence of biological differences and indeed sexuality itself is constructed over time through discourse. I elaborate on this concept in my chapters on the analysis of specific television narratives.

This chapter focuses on the role assigned to television in democratic societies and locates the structuring framework for my analysis and arguments. I situate this chapter within broad narratives of democracy and the specific roles they assign to the media. My discussion centers on Jürgen Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere and the kinds of debates it has invigorated among media scholars. Next the chapter traces feminist scholarship that has drawn attention to the ideological nature of the public/private divide inherent in these understandings of the public sphere. Feminist and critical race theories have necessitated an examination of the normative subject of the public sphere and have drawn attention to the exclusions and marginalizations that underpin definitions of democratic participation. They facilitate a connection between the ways in which identity issues, particularly inequalities in social status, shape public deliberative processes. These interventions have endowed a racial and gendered identity to the public sphere. The chapter ends with suggestions that would make the narrative of democracy more inclusive of differences.

DEMOCRACY AND THE SUBTEXT OF COMMUNICATION

In general, democracy is interpreted as a form of government in which all citizens participate actively in decision making and in assisting with the process of governance. Most contemporary references to democracy trace their antecedents to Athens; discussions and debates in the Athenian marketplace are held up as exemplars of democratic practice.¹³ The evocative rhetoric surrounding this concept embodies many contemporary desires for the good society. In his remarkable book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams provides a historical outline of the changing meanings of the term *democracy*, which has been always polyvalent, depending on different interpretations of the words

“people” and “rule.”¹⁴ Tracing an abridged history of the word, he reveals that until the nineteenth century, democracy was considered an unfavorable condition, primarily associated with negative connotations. Contemporary definitions, connoting a benign, popular collective rule, are at some distance from these earlier understandings.

A recurring leitmotif among various theories of democracy is the importance accorded to communication. Diverse theorists have emphasized the pivotal role that communication plays in maintaining an active, participating democracy. They contend that the dynamics of democracy are intimately linked to the practices of communication; they allow citizens to make well-informed electoral choices. The mass media, in particular, are vested with the responsibility of providing citizens with all of the information they need about specific issues. In addition, the media are expected to serve as a two-way channel of communication between the state and citizens; they are to inform the public about the state’s activities and at the same time convey citizens’ opinions to the state. Despite these normative expectations, as John Keane points out, the media’s role in modern democracies has become equivalent to the transmission of decisions from the governors to the governed.¹⁵

Working within a definition of democracy that centers on the electoral process, scholars such as Walter Lippmann, have lamented over the media’s inability to perform the instrumental function of transmitting information about state activities. He argues in *The Phantom Public* (1927) that mass media provide only partial and often distorted information, affecting the public’s ability to effect well-informed electoral choices. Writing an epitaph for the public, Lippmann recommends abandoning the ideology of popular democracy in favor of a democratic elitism. Other scholars, notably John Dewey and C. Wright Mills, have provided a more expansive definition of democracy as a way of life, a process of building a community by sharing ideas and making decisions together, and not just as a political practice.¹⁶ Scholars examining the media from a cultural studies perspective have found this particular formulation a useful way to theorize the role of the media in democratic societies. They have examined both news/information and entertainment/fiction as central elements in establishing a democratic community.¹⁷ In particular, television, more than any other medium, “has gained a prominent position” within such a configuration, Peter Dahlgren argues.¹⁸

In this book I want to hold onto the urgency that these writers evoke when underscoring the media’s role in the democratic project. I simultaneously want to shift the angle of vision by interrogating the specific ways in which gendered and racialized subjects are included in the democratic project through representational practices.

MODERN AGORA

While cultural studies scholars have underscored the ways in which television and other mass media shape our sense of the world around us, it is Jürgen Habermas who has most explicitly made the connection between the media and democratic community formations. In the corpus of his work, he has forwarded a discursive model of democratic society, one where communication is central to maintaining and sustaining democracy. These ideas were introduced in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and later expanded on in his other works, particularly in *Inclusion of the Other* and *Between Facts and Norms*.¹⁹ Working across disciplines, Habermas traces the historical circumstances under which the liberal public sphere, an autonomous arena of debate and discussion, came into being.²⁰ He defines the public sphere as a forum where people meet as equals and debate issues of common concern in a rational-critical manner and then guide the state.

Written originally in 1969 but translated into English only in 1989, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* traces the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere and is limited to a feature characteristic of a specific epoch. Habermas contends that the bourgeois public sphere emerged in the late seventeenth century at the historical moment when the growth of capitalism transformed the relations between the state and civil society.²¹ It developed as the space between government and society, an autonomous forum where individuals participate in the making, exchange, and mobilization of political opinion. It is conceptually different from the state and the official economy; its participants assemble to discuss matters of common interest, to criticize the state, and to make the state accountable to the citizenry. The public sphere is essential to representative democracy since it is an area where private individuals exercised formal and informal control over the state—formal control through the election of government and informal control through the pressure of public opinion.²²

Tracing the seventeenth-century institutional location of the public sphere, Habermas identifies tea shops in England and literary salons in Europe as its original sites.²³ Here individuals outside of government evaluated state activities with a critical eye and functioned as a counterweight to the state. As in the ancient Greek city-states, the people who participated in the seventeenth-century democratic process were circumscribed within a very narrow segment of the populace. Only those who had access to specific cultural products—books, journals, plays—could participate in “democratic” debate and articulate the concerns of society. Houston Baker describes it as “an associational life of male property owners gathered to exchange rational

arguments and critical opinions shaped and mirrored by novels and the press."²⁴ Habermas acknowledges that the bourgeois public sphere was elitist and included only the literate. He recognizes its exclusionary and ideological character, but he does not retreat from promoting its norms as the constitutive basis for democratic participation.

In the second half of this narrative, Habermas accords the newly emerging newspapers the status of enabling the public sphere, replacing tea shops and literary salons. The development of capitalism and of improved printing technologies facilitated, however, the transformation of the press into the mass media. Newspapers were now accessible to non-elite sections of society, and these groups could now participate in democratic formations. Originally, according to Habermas, newspapers served as a forum for rational-critical debate and discussion. Soon the demands of profit making took over, and newspapers became a mass medium: purveyors of information and entertainment for a larger audience. The expansion of the public sphere, Habermas contends, was accompanied by a degeneration in the quality of debate. It was no longer governed by rational-critical arguments. Further, with the rise of consumer culture, the emergence of a mass media governed by the logic of the market, and the institution of the welfare state in the nineteenth century, relations between the state and society became intertwined. The distinctions between civil society and the state became blurred. With the loss of this critical boundary marker, the public sphere as an autonomous forum becomes untenable. This blurring of boundaries can be witnessed in the changed role of the media: they no longer transmit information and disseminate discourses among participants in a larger public body but have become sites for the consumption of information. Habermas contends that the media have failed in their function of facilitating democratic debate and are primarily responsible for the debilitated version of democracy that currently prevails, one marked by a culture-consuming rather than a culture-debating public.

Habermas's formulation of democracy as a function of communication rather than institutional structures has reinvigorated the debate about the role of the media in society.²⁵ Scholars have acclaimed Habermas's historical analysis and his formulation of an enabling model of democratic society. At the same time, they have been critical of the assumptions that underlie his formulation of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas is concerned primarily with the rise and decline of a historically specific and limited form of the public sphere; he fails to critically scrutinize the assumptions of his model, these scholars believe. Most of the criticisms leveled against his conceptualization can be divided broadly into three categories: its utopian underpinnings; its specific gender-, race-, and class-based exclusions; and Habermas's

reliance on a monolithic construct. In what follows, I explore first the exclusions that are constitutive to the liberal public sphere, then the historical rebuttals to Habermas's conceptualization, and finally suggestions for redefining this concept.

UTOPIAN CONSTRUCT

Habermas defines the bourgeois public sphere as an autonomous forum where people meet *as if* they are equals and debate issues of common concern in a rational-critical manner. He contends that critically reasoned argument is more important than the identities and status of participants. Michael Schudson and Nancy Fraser, among others, believe that such a version of the public sphere is utopian. They contend that the idea of a free discursive space where people can participate as though they were equals is an enabling account that can be achieved only by obscuring material inequalities and political antagonisms among participants. Habermas may present the public sphere in a rhetoric of accessibility, but it is actually constituted by a number of significant exclusions. He assumes that the public sphere is or can be a space of zero-degree culture; interlocutors are expected to set aside characteristics such as differences in status and to speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers. Fraser reminds us that social inequalities taint deliberative practices, but because he brackets out power and interest, Habermas is able to posit the bourgeois model as the ideal public sphere. Rita Felski concurs that the bourgeois public sphere is blind to the actual and material conditions that render its own existence possible; it holds fast to the idea that the people are adequately represented by the male, property-owning public. These critics cast the bourgeois public sphere as utopian, because it is structured by issues of power and inequality that remain unaccounted.²⁶

In the analysis that follows, I argue that television representations of rape, gender, and race underscore the specific modalities through which identity issues shape who is included in the public domain, how they are presented, and with what consequences. This aspect of the book highlights the blind spots that underpin the conceptualization of the public sphere.

Approaching the utopian elements from a different perspective, Michael Schudson questions the applicability of Habermas's bourgeois model to the United States. He argues that there exists no historical evidence suggesting participation in democratic debate and discussion was any different in an America of the past than it is today.²⁷ Records reveal that people attended public rallies and debates, but there is no trace of what people attended to

during these meetings. American politics and culture, Schudson insists, have not declined from some golden age in the past. Further, he observes that, unlike the Habermasian model, the American press has never served as an autonomous vehicle of political conversation; the colonial press “was not a permanent source of political conversation; its politicization was a sometime thing,” he contends. In this book I examine the possibilities for discussion television programming makes available; I evaluate the claims to representation that are built into television narratives.

REDEFINING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Perhaps feminist scholars have made the most sustained and far-reaching criticisms of Habermas’s formulation. These have stemmed from two main concerns: the masculine ideological underpinnings of the public sphere and the physical exclusion of women from it. The two issues are related, but I am separating them for clarity. These criticisms that point out the masculinist bias center on the public/private divide, the privileging of rational-critical debate over other modes of communication, and the reliance on an autonomous sphere.

As feminists have done in their critique of the social order, they have taken exception to Habermas’s reliance on a rigid public/private distinction. The bourgeois public sphere Habermas traces rests on an assumption that social activities can be divided neatly, belonging to either the private realm or to the state, and that the debate in the autonomous public sphere only deals with issues pertaining to the state. Several scholars, particularly feminists, have found this critical divide untenable. Working from a range of disciplines such as sociology, political science, and philosophy, feminists have pointed out the centrality of the public/private split to their disciplines and have contested the binary. Pointing out the arbitrary and artificial nature of the demarcation, these scholars have underscored how gender as a category remains consistently unproblematized in theories of democracy. In political science, the public/private split has been used to seal women’s experiences and participation wholly into the private sphere, while men’s activities are allowed to straddle the two spheres. In traditional definitions of political engagement, which tend to focus on the process of participating in elections, women always remain on the periphery, argue Janet Siltanen and Michelle Stanworth. Such a conceptualization of democracy derives from traditions of thought that are, in both their theoretical and empirical dimensions, rooted in masculine experience, they add.

Echoing this sentiment, Eva Gamarnikow and others observe that in sociology and political science the public realm is privileged and constructed as the exclusive domain of male and masculine activities, while family life is relegated to the private sphere.²⁸ They argue that the public/private split becomes a metaphor for the social patterning of gender and throws into sharp relief the power relationships in society. It is assumed that the public/private split is not only coincident with gender but also that the division directly affects only women's, not men's, consciousness.

Like other political science theorists, Habermas constructs the public-private divide as a place marker that designates issues as being either relevant or irrelevant to the state. In such a construction, issues relating to the family are categorized as belonging to the private realm and hence irrelevant to democratic society. Such a definition of the public realm limits the number of issues that can be included under the purview of democratic practice, feminists have argued.²⁹ The bipolar public/private structure is an arbitrary, cultural construct that not only limits the range and content of issues included in the public arena, it also reproduces a gendered discourse of domination, they contend. Primarily, they argue that the public sphere should be an arena of collective self-determination. Its boundaries should be set by the participants who determine what constitutes the common concern. There can be no a priori boundaries to the public sphere. Issues of identity or of the family cannot be bracketed from discussion.³⁰ A central argument that these critics put forth is that the public/private distinction rests on the idealized representation of the universal citizen as an autonomous (white) male.

Cautioning against a totalizing assumption that all women and women's issues have been limited to the private domain, feminists who engage in issues pertaining to women of color point out that the categories of public and private "are not simply gendered categories, they are racialized categories as well." Examining the sexual violence experienced by black women, Fraser points out that in the United States, "historically, blacks have been denied privacy in the sense of domesticity. . . . At the same time, they have lacked the public standing to claim state protection against abuse, whether suffered at home or at work."³¹ In the African-American community and for other racial minorities there is no private sphere protected from state intervention. Social workers, the police, the legal system, and other state agencies intervene on a scale that does not permit a private familial world insulated from the state.³² These scholars argue that theories of the public sphere, whether feminist or not, should take into account the ways in which race and gender intersect to produce multivalent and shifting definitions of the private and public domains.

A corollary to these arguments of the public/private split critiques another aspect of Habermas's formulation of the bourgeois public sphere: his assumption that the public and private realms are independent of each other. Several scholars, including feminists, have contested this supposition. They argue that the fault line separating the two realms is leaky. Their central argument is that relations inside of the family and household are shaped by public policies, just as conversely relations in the workplace and in politics are molded by inequalities of sexual power. Carole Pateman explains succinctly that "the private sphere . . . underpins the public world of politics; what happens in one shapes and constrains what is likely to occur in the other."³³ The feminist movement in the United States has repeatedly asserted this interdependence of the spheres and has encapsulated the idea in the slogan, "The personal is the political." As Carol Smart and Barry Smart observe, the women's movement has helped redefine our understandings of several "private" problems: these problems are not the result of individual psychologies or a result only of personal circumstances. Instead, the women's movement has illustrated that these problems are located clearly in the public sphere.³⁴ Ignoring this symbiotic relationship only legitimizes a repressive ideology, they argue. As Seyla Benhabib remarks:

Any theory of the public . . . presupposes a distinction between the public and the private. These are the terms of a binary opposition. What the women's movement and feminist theories in the last two decades have shown, however, is that traditional modes of drawing this distinction have been part of a discourse of domination that legitimizes women's oppression and exploitation in the private realm.³⁵

The dichotomization of social issues that characterizes Habermas's definition of the public sphere only helps remarginalize concerns that are of immediate relevance to women. Indeed, the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas presents as an exemplar is based on a rigid public/private split, and the exclusion of women's concerns serves as the very precondition and possibility of democratic community, these scholars argue. Within Habermas's definition of the public sphere, issues such as rape, sexual violence, and wife battery cannot be countenanced as "public" concerns. These phenomena are marked as individual problems that are not amenable to rational discussion and therefore relegated to the private realm. His conceptualization fails to consider how issues in the public realm that foster the disparity in gendered power and social location enable such instances of private male domination.

Reconceptualizing some of the structuring terms of democratic theories, feminists insist that politics comes into play wherever elements of social life

are contingent; it is an activity that may take individual or collective forms centered around a struggle over power. Power, on the other hand, is defined as the capacity to perpetuate or transform a given order; it is structured by asymmetrical access to resources and the ability to mobilize them. Political struggles are, therefore, both constituted by and the result of the organization of relations of “public” and “private” life. Conventional analyses of gender and politics ignore the extent to which the private domain is implicated in the political process. The private world—the world of personal relations and marriage, of friendships and family, of domestic routine and child care—is, as feminists have persuasively demonstrated time and time again, political as well as personal. Understanding the relationship between public and private is itself a political issue, they argue. Such a reformulation of both politics and the public and private realms allows us to introduce the issue of rape or sexual violence in general as a concern that belongs to the “public” agenda.

The public-private distinction has allowed Habermas to ignore the gendered and racialized nature of the bourgeois public sphere and to marginalize the impact of identity politics. Primarily, he assumes that social equality is not a necessary social condition for democracy. According to Fraser, Habermas believes that issues of culture and identity do not influence a person’s ability to participate in the public sphere.

Notwithstanding Habermas’s caveats, the public sphere indeed involves identity, but does so with more emphasis on actions and their consequences rather than on the nature or characteristics of the actors. Feminist research has shown how issues belonging to the so-called private realm are shaped by a battery of policies in the public arena, and it also has illustrated how policies relating to the private arena limit an individual’s ability to participate in the public sphere. Gender, race, and class shape the ways in which individuals can participate in deliberative processes and cannot be bracketed out.

Numerous scholars also have found problematic Habermas’s characterization of rational-critical debate as the only valid mode of participation in the public sphere. Interrogating the assumptions that this term encompasses, critics have pointed out that Habermas fails to define rational-critical debate and seems to uncritically assume a mode of thought characteristic of the Enlightenment. This unproblematized and crucial reliance on rational-critical debate, scholars argue, has resulted in Habermas locating the nascent newspaper of the eighteenth century as the repository of the public sphere and hence of all of the values required for democratic participation. Joan Landes, Mary Ryan, and Susan Herbst point out that Habermas’s reliance on rational-critical debate privileges masculine modes of talking and locates other modes of discursive participation in the realm of the

“private.” Similarly, Susan Bourque and Jean Grossholtz argue that, “Rational political behavior is defined by the male pattern: it is by definition the expression of male values, and irrationality is by definition the expression of female values.”³⁶

In her examination of the French Revolution, Joan Landes traces the concurrent development of an austere, masculine speech with the bourgeois public sphere. At the same moment that women and groups associated with the body (primarily racialized subjects) were excluded from political participation, a rhetorical mode that excludes the body, affect and desire also came to be dominant within the public arena. Habermas privileges this problem-solving discourse in the public sphere, equating abstract modes of speech with citizenship. Iris M. Young elaborates, “By assuming that reason stands opposed to desire, affectivity, and the body, the civic public must exclude bodily and affective aspects of human existence.”³⁷ Similarly, Laura Kipnis contends that the very substance of the bourgeois subject is constructed through sanitized modes of address.³⁸

So far I have outlined the conceptual blind spots in Habermas’s formulation of the public sphere. These arise primarily from his reliance on categories that assume the (property-owning) white male as the normative citizen. These assumptions have significant effects; primarily, they shape the type of evidence that Habermas gathers to provide his account of the bourgeois public sphere. I now summarize some of the arguments that feminist historians have made about the validity of Habermas’s historical subject.

HISTORICAL ALTERNATIVES

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and in his later writings, Habermas repeatedly points out the physical exclusion of women from the public sphere. Nevertheless, he maintains the validity of his formulation and does not believe that the occlusions destabilize his theory.

Addressing issues inherent to the public/private split, feminist historiography has drawn attention to the gendered nature of the public sphere. Feminist historians point out that Habermas’s account of the bourgeois public sphere relies on records that were framed by a male perspective, which tended to elide women’s presence in the public sphere. Feminist reconsiderations of historical social formations reveal that women shaped and influenced public discourse often using idioms of motherhood and domesticity, language that is identified with the domestic sphere. For instance, Mary Ryan argues that nineteenth-century voluntary associations provided U.S. women access to

political participation. Examining the contributions that these women's organizations made to public discourse, she concludes that traditional historical accounts of democratic political process rest on a class- and gender-biased notion of the public sphere, one that privileges the bourgeois public's claim to be the public.³⁹

Similarly, Susan Herbst examines the ways in which European women participated in the public sphere of the late eighteenth century.⁴⁰ Her analysis centers on the activities of women pamphleteers in English politics, the ways in which women shaped and influenced the proceedings of the French literary salon, and American women's participation in the Civil War. Underlining the gaps and absences in Habermas's narrative, Herbst argues that women played a key role in shaping public discourse, although their contributions remained unacknowledged. Both Ryan and Herbst conclude that the bourgeois public sphere is a masculine ideological construct that served to legitimate an emergent form of class rule. In theorizing the public sphere, Habermas failed to take into consideration the gendered nature of his basic premises. He privileges masculine sites of political participation and locates other modes within the realm of the private.

Tracing the history of women's participation in the French Revolution, Landes points out as well that it is not just the public sphere but also the discourse of modern rights and republican virtues that exclude women. She argues that Habermas's theory, with its reliance on Enlightenment rationality, has been organized around a male norm and pays insufficient attention to the specificity of women's lives and experiences. "The equation of modernity with particular public and institutional structures governed by men has led to an almost total elision of the lives, concerns, and perspectives of women."⁴¹

The versions of history offered by Habermas and feminist historiographers are affected significantly by the gender of their normative subject. Similarly, critical race theorists have pointed out that the normative subject of the public sphere tends to be the white male. Warren Montag examines the diary of an eighteenth-century Scotswoman to point out that the universal subject of the public sphere is assumed to be not just male but also white. In Enlightenment discourses, nonwhites oscillated between being characterized as non-human and human. This sensibility is reflected in the bourgeois public sphere as well. The Black Public Sphere Collective has formulated a wide-ranging criticism of the racial blind spots that mark Habermas's formulation and has offered ways to conceive a public sphere that is more inclusive of differences. Baker concludes that "the idea of the bourgeois public sphere as one compelled by reason alone, free of class and status distinctions and resolutely challenging state authority, is tremendously attractive. Even in a discussion of

Habermas's model, however, it is obvious that the idea of such an apparatus is far more compelling than its shadowy exclusive manifestation in history.⁴² Both feminists and critical race theorists draw attention to the rhetorical strategies that permit the white male to appear as the bodiless, normative participant of the public sphere. They point out that whether the normative subject is assumed to be male or female, white or nonwhite, has important consequences for the kind of narrative that unfolds. Gender and race affect the factual content of historical knowledge, what is included and what gets left out. Rather than examining the public sphere as a monolithic construct, a multiplicity of competing and overlapping public spheres, the historical evidence that these scholars provide reveals the usefulness of conceptualizing the public sphere in plural. I return to this idea in the last section of this chapter.

GENDER AND THE MEDIA

Critics of Habermas have sought to include in the public sphere discussions about issues of common concern that normally would not be classified as constituting rational-critical debate. In addition, feminists and critical race theorists have pointed out that dialogues and fragmented, repetitious narratives constitute an engendered form of knowledge building, which should be included in theories of the public sphere.

These reformulations have immediate consequences for scholars examining television. They dilute the focus on the news and permit an extension of the public sphere to other products and channels of participation. Various television genres may serve different functions, but together they shape our perceptions of the world around us. News, talk shows, and entertainment programs are not likely to represent an event or to talk about it in the same way; each genre highlights different aspects, but all contribute to our understanding of events.⁴³

For instance, James Curran argues that traditional perspectives of the media overstate the rationality of public discourse. Entertainment usually is omitted because it does not conform to a classic liberal conception of rational exchange. Curran contends that media entertainment is one means by which people engage at an intuitive and expressive level in a public dialogue about the direction of society. Entertainment, he suggests, should be seen as an integral component of the media's informational role. It can provide a way of exploring, experimenting with, and expressing a concept of self in relation to others. Media fiction and other products also provide a way of mapping and interpreting society.⁴⁴ This need to include entertainment and fiction

within the realm of the media's informational capacity has been highlighted by numerous other scholars, feminist and otherwise.

Lisa McLaughlin, in her study of the O. J. Simpson trial, reveals how "media spectacles" are able to address the issue of difference. She argues that the Habermasian model, with its reliance on rational-critical debate, is unable to adequately account for difference as a subject of debate. Rather than condemn media spectacles, she points out that television coverage of the O. J. Simpson case facilitated a wide-ranging debate about the legal system and legal practices. Further, the case raised awareness, however briefly, about domestic violence.⁴⁵ Her study points out that even seemingly "irrational" spectacles are able to facilitate debate and discussion and contribute to citizenship. The analysis in this book is informed by such an examination of media spectacles, as sites that could potentially address difference.

Scholars such as Ian Ang, Tony Bennett, and Janice Radway, among others, have analyzed media products traditionally classified as fiction to reveal that these texts too, like the news, engage in a discussion of social, cultural, and political issues. Jane Feuer and Ellen Seiter, for example, argue that soap operas and prime-time melodramas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* are potentially emancipatory sites for debate and discussion. These theorists have sought to free the public sphere from a limited definition of rational-critical debate and, by extension, from the news. Each suggests that our understandings of events are shaped by numerous media products, even those that do not fall under the information genre.⁴⁶ More recently, focusing on prime-time entertainment programs, Andrea Press and Elizabeth Cole point out that women's stances about abortion and their community are shaped by television images. In their ethnographic study, they reveal that women's responses are multivalent, but that the shared feature is the significant role television images have on cultural conversations.⁴⁷

This book extends this notion and argues that genres outside of the news—prime-time entertainment programs and daytime talk shows—are often more useful sites for debate and discussion of race, gender, and sexuality than are news programs. I argue that our diverse understandings of these complex categories cannot be completely characterized in rational discourse. For instance, when the news attempts to provide an "objective" account of events relating to these categories, it ends up reproducing bipolarized hegemonic understandings. This happens primarily because reporters rely on institutional voices, such as the police or representatives of government. We rarely hear peoples' interpretations of events and categories. Instead, through the institutional voices, we hear definitions that emerge from the ideological center of society. Further, in the interests of objectivity

and balanced journalism, reporters tend to juxtapose institutional voices with more institutional voices, ones that counter the others' positions.

This positioning of two dramatically opposed and always contrary views does not reflect the multilayered understandings that comprise the social understandings of issues. Neither does this discourse depict the cultural contestation and negotiation that at any historical moment characterize social understandings of rape, gender, and race. Further, news discourses rarely make explicit the social, historical, and cultural myths that structure contemporary understandings of the terms. Fictional programs and daytime talk shows at least hint at these historical underpinnings. Besides, with their partially open-ended structure, they provide the audience with a greater latitude in accepting or rejecting the understandings promoted by their narratives. In general, we hear the same event described from multiple perspectives in noninformation genres; these perspectives are articulated by a variety of individuals, each of whom is differently located on the social landscape by class, race, gender, or religious affiliation. These two elements—the lack of authoritative closure to the narrative and the multiple interpretations of any event—allow fictional genres to reveal some of the complex ways in which contemporary understandings of culturally constructed categories instantiate social, historical understandings. Fictional programs are able to introduce into the public arena issues pertaining to the body, affect, and desire. The news, on the other hand, relying on official sources of information, can only re-produce dominant understandings of cultural categories; it is unable to include voices from the margins that may provide a radical departure from hegemonic perspectives.

In conceptualizing non-news genres as facilitating better democratic debate and discussion of gender and race, feminist reconsiderations have been particularly useful to this project. These women-centered critiques reveal how gender and race remain problematic categories in current definitions of popular power. They suggest how cultural categories that shape identity are a necessary part of the public sphere and need to be redefined through debate and discussion.⁴⁸

In general, feminists have sought to expose the foundations of a theory of democracy that not only marginalizes but often erases and occludes women's concerns (i.e., issues of the private realm) from the notion of democratic community altogether. Even as feminists have trenchantly criticized Habermas, they also have pointed out that aspects of his formulation can be used to theorize a more emancipatory democratic politics. They have argued that his discursive definition of the public sphere frees politics from the iron grasp of the state, which has effectively defined the public in masculine terms. They have contended that Habermas's enunciation of the public sphere is

formulated in such a magnanimous way that female subjects and their opinions are a legitimate part of the common good. Rather than abandon the idea of democracy itself as an inherently exclusive enterprise, feminists have sought to reinscribe the term and to redeploy it so that issues that have been traditionally erased from the terms of participation in democratic debate and discussion are now instantiated in any discussion of community. In line with this approach, feminists reiterate C. Wright Mills' mode of distinguishing between issues that are relevant to a democratic society and those that are not. Mills characterized personal issues as "problems appearing more or less randomly or infrequently and which permit individualistic explanations, and public issues, problems which afflict many people systematically over time and space and therefore require not psychological but social structural explanations."⁴⁹ This reformulation brings under the purview of democratic debate issues such as rape that were traditionally considered "private" and not an issue of common concern.

RAPE—A PUBLIC CONCERN

Feminists have revealed that rape is not an individual problem but one that afflicts many people systematically over time and space and requires social structural explanations, hence it is an issue that belongs to the public realm. Statistics gathered by state institutions and scholars substantiate the prevalence of this crime. However, only after repeated and insistent demands made by the women's movement has society been willing to acknowledge that this issue is not just a crime but one that highlights the social and material conditions of women's lives.

Until two decades ago, rape remained a taboo subject for the media, an "always-already" private issue, hence outside of the realm of debate and discussion. While films have consistently thematized rape, in the press and on television, sexual violence appeared rarely until the 1970s. With the impetus provided by the women's movement, the media have started to explore the social, political, and cultural structures that permit such an operation of gendered dominance. If one were to follow Habermas's argument of rational-critical debate and focus on television news, rape remained an invisible subject until the 1980s. If and when issues of rape erupted into the arena of newsworthy items, they were located within the public sphere in disguise, so to speak. References to rape pointed to spectacular instances of violence, to legal transformations, or to social structural changes that helped accommodate rape as a crime of violence; issues of gender politics were always ignored.

If we expand the public sphere to include other genres, however, one sees that since the late 1960s television entertainment has engaged in the issue of rape. Of course, rape often served merely as a titillating subject, but there were instances of more substance, such as in an episode of the cop show *Barney Miller*, which portrayed marital rape, or in *Lou Grant*, where a reporter was raped in the “safe” space of her apartment. These narratives may not have dealt with all of the issues that feminists sought to foreground, and sometimes they reified numerous myths about rape, but at least they put the topic within the realm of the “public” and possibly allowed people to debate and discuss their reactions and understandings of the issue. Further, the two shows cited above contradicted the imagery of rape created in the news; the portrayals conformed to statistics, showing the frequency of acquaintance rapes rarely accompanied by violence. Then, as now, news discourses of rape focused on exceptional cases, or on instances of extreme violence and brutality, so we received a very lopsided version of rape as an event that afflicts few people and as a crime committed by abnormal men.

Like entertainment programs, daytime talk shows as a rule have dealt with issues that are considered “taboo” on the news. Thus rape has been a topic that has been discussed and debated from a variety of perspectives on these programs. In this sense, we can say, television news followed the lead provided by these “non-information” genres and only in the 1980s started to delve into the treacherous arena of gender politics as related to the issue of rape. The news, for the most part, still continues to frame the issue within traditionally acceptable newsworthy terms, say as a sociological feature, political event, or a case involving a celebrity. Rarely does the news deal with the multiple and complex gender politics at which rape directs our attention. These news narratives also hint at, but rarely make explicit, the ways in which race is inevitably imbricated in contemporary discourses of sexuality. It is only by analyzing all of the genres together or, in Williams’ words, studying the flow of programs that we can obtain an understanding of rape, gender, race, and sexuality reflecting the complex nature of our meanings for these terms and the frameworks within which we debate and discuss these issues.

RECOVERING SITES OF DEBATE

So far I have pointed out the problematic aspects of Habermas’s formulation of the bourgeois public sphere. Feminist and critical race theorists though have cautioned against abandoning the concept and instead call for a broader definition of the public sphere. Historical studies by Ryan, Landes, and

Herbst reveal that even during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the bourgeois public sphere coexisted with several competing publics. Women participated in political activity, but through a series of idioms and communicative modes not recognized as public activity. Geoff Eley points out that the bourgeois public sphere as a “natural” arena of rational-political discourse was founded on a field of contestations. Within it, people vied for space and definition and contested meanings, and in the process some were excluded altogether. These contestations occurred in class-divided societies that were structured by numerous inequalities. The emergence of the bourgeois public sphere reveals the processes by which a hegemonic ideology gained legitimacy. The bourgeois public sphere gained currency because it was comprised of members of the dominant class who could claim intellectual and moral leadership through specific communicative practices.⁵⁰

Rather than deploy the bourgeois public sphere as an ideal we should aspire to replicate, these scholars contend that public participation in governance and decision making can be better understood by conceptualizing multiple, competing public spheres, counter public spheres, where differences are recognized rather than banished. Counter public spheres do not seek a universal rationality, Felski contends. They are directed toward an affirmation of specificity in relation to gender, race, and class.

The women’s movement comprises one such counter public sphere. Feminists have used publicity—the media, films, videos, the lecture circuit, and so on—to build a forum where women can withdraw to form a collective identity, and simultaneously they have used communicative networks to point out to the rest of society the specific ways in which patriarchal ideologies are produced and circulated. The feminist public sphere is defined in terms of a shared identity; it does not claim a representative universality. According to Felski, the feminist public sphere serves a dual function. “Internally it generates a gender-specific identity grounded in a consciousness of community and solidarity among women; externally it seeks to convince society of the validity of feminist claims, challenging existing structures of authority through political activity and theoretical critiques.”⁵¹

These scholars argue that the complex interpenetrations of state and society in late capitalism prevent us from postulating an ideal public sphere that can function outside of existing commercial and state institutions and at the same time claim an influential and a representative function as a forum for oppositional activity and debate. Instead they believe that multiple public spheres should be seen as carving out a space for discussion within a social sphere dominated by the logic of the market. Thomas Holt, for instance, believes that black popular culture is a product of the political economy of a

global advanced capitalist order, but it has the potential to be a space for critique and transformation of that order.⁵²

Within a conceptualization of multiple overlapping public spheres, the media must be conceived of as enabling one of several coexisting public spheres. In the following chapters I argue that conceptualizations of the public sphere should expand to include communicative practices that cannot be described as rational-critical debate. Simultaneously, I point out that television programming is a site that participates in the maintenance of hegemony. Consequently, it becomes crucial that we consider it as facilitating one of competing public spheres. The title of this book refers to this multiplicity of public spheres, in television and in society.

Considering the centrality of the media in the effectiveness of the women's movement, Lisa McLaughlin draws attention to the striking absence of feminist analyses of the media as a public sphere. The media are important actors in the maintenance of hegemony but as the successes of the women's movement testify also are a site where contestatory ideas can be forwarded. This analysis of television rape narratives attempts to counter this "major shortcoming."⁵³

The analysis in this book examines only instances of heterosexual rape where females are the victims. This allows me to specify the ability for women's voices to be heard and included in the public arena of debate and discussion. Further, most scholars of the public sphere have identified it as a space that valorizes masculine concepts of rational-critical, objective debate. My study assesses the ability of such a theoretical structure to include a public issue that is defined primarily by feminine characteristics: emotion, pain, and subjective perceptions. Finally, in the United States, understandings of rape are intertwined with the issue of racial difference. This analysis permits as well an evaluation of the public sphere's ability to integrate racialized subjects.