

# Part II

## **Studying Lived Experience**



# 2

## Studying Lived Resistance

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### **Main questions**

- **A classical approach to studying lived experience in cultural studies is informed by the notion of ‘resistance’. How do the critical and textualist approaches define ‘resistance’? How are the two approaches to the study of resistance different? How are they similar? What are the strengths and shortcomings of each?**
- **How does a ‘contingent’ notion of resistance help to bring together the strengths of the two other approaches? Why is it more feasible to speak of, and study, resistances, in the plural?**

The classical approach to studying lived experience in cultural studies is informed by the notion of ‘resistance’. Against the backdrop of pessimistic Marxist analysis of culture as mainly ‘opium for the masses’, resistance, as a concept, provided early cultural studies with a way to argue that people have some creative and critical abilities to ‘resist’ domination. Thus, to begin to discuss ways of studying lived realities in the paradigm it is legitimate to begin with research on resistance.

However, studies on resistance can be, methodologically and philosophically speaking, rather different. Thus, in order to highlight certain key methodological issues and differences, I have distinguished three analytically different approaches to resistance (real studies on resistance often combine elements of the three). The first, ‘critical contextualist’ approach to studying resistance, such as consumption of subversive media images, is particularly interested in its effects on ‘real’ structures of dominance, such as patriarchal or class structures.

Studies done within this approach often end up rather pessimistic about the powers of resistance to transform social structures. The second, 'optimistic textualist' approach to resistance focuses on symbolic resistance, such as Madonna fans' interest in her overt sexuality, arguing its effects are, in and of themselves, 'real'. Studies done within this approach often end up rather optimistic about resistance and its ability to challenge structures of power.

Even if the above mentioned two approaches to resistance seem rather different, and arrive at nearly opposite conclusions about it, they also share a similarity. This similarity is their tendency to analyze resistance in terms of its alleged effects on a 'system', such as 'patriarchy'. The third, contingent approach to resistance, studies it in more contingent terms. It analyzes a particular resistant activity from several perspectives and from the points of view of different spheres of life, evaluating what types of power this activity resists and what types of power it buttresses. One could say that, rather than studying power vertically in terms of whether or not local activities change the system, the contingent approach to resistance studies power in more lateral terms, assessing its usually moderate effects on other activities, acknowledging that the large-scale or cumulative effects of resistance are often hard to assess.

Studies on resistance may currently be considered passé. However, I argue that many of the research dilemmas scholars studying resistance have tried to solve continue to haunt research on lived experience in cultural studies. Thus, research continues to struggle with the dilemma of how to capture the creative aspects of lived realities, while analyzing the discourses that interlace those experiences, and, in a sense, keep people under 'bad' or 'false' consciousness. The same way the issue, of whether 'real' power is material or symbolic, and how one can separate and study the two aspects of it, remains a pressing concern in cultural and social research. Thus, I would argue that the legacy of resistance studies continues to underpin contemporary research on lived experience in the paradigm, and the lessons these studies have to teach are of continuing relevance.

## **Critical contextualism**

### ***On labour and love***

To start discussing resistance-analysis one can go back 25 years to Willis's (1978) landmark book, *Learning to labour*, that explored British working-class boys' – or 'lads', as he calls them – ritualistic resistance of school. Willis' project was to investigate why 'working-class kids get working class jobs' (1), and to find this out he did a school-based ethnography on a dozen 'non-academic' working-class boys. His study explores the ways in which the lads create a counter-culture that gives them a sense of superiority in relation to the conformist boys – or 'ear'oles', as the lads called them – who were their justified target of ridicule

and violence (14). Thus, doing every sort of misdemeanor and getting away with doing as little work as possible became a source of pride for the lads particularly in relation to the ear'oles, who were seen to embody the school values, as testified by the following conversation:

- PW:* (...) why not be like the ear'oles, why not try and get CSE's? They don't get any fun, do they?
- Derek:* Cos they'm prats like, one kid he's got on his report now, he's got five As and one B.  
– Who's that?
- Derek:* Birchall.
- Spanksy:* I mean, what will they remember of their school life? What will they have to look back on? Sitting in a classroom, sweating their bollocks off, you know, while we've been ... I mean look at the things we can look back on, fighting on the Jas [i.e. Jamaicans]. Some of the things we've done on teachers, it'll be a laff when we look back on it. (14)

According to Willis, the lads' counterculture, challenging and rebuking the middle-class behavioural code, not only perpetuated their underachievement at school. It also resonated with working-class shopfloor culture, marked by male camaraderie and macho-bravado and valorization of practicality and suspicion of superiors and abstract thought. In the end, Willis argues, this rich and creative, even if also sexist and racist, counterculture, which may be seen as contesting the alienation of school and work, pushes the lads into working-class jobs and eventually reproduces the labour-structure (175).

This short description of Willis's study illustrates both how Willis studies and conceptualizes resistance. Through ethnography, he unravels the colourful, rambunctious counterculture that challenges middle-class conventions. However, Willis concludes that, eventually, this resistance does not challenge the 'real' structures of domination but, on the contrary, socializes the lads to become blue-collar workers.

Before I discuss the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of Willis's separation between resistance and 'real' dominance, I want to, however, shortly discuss Janice Radway's (1984) methodologically similar study on why women like to read romances. Radway's study is more multidimensional than Willis's, and she contextualized the reading through studying the ways in which the emergence of the romance novels was related to the industrial formula of 'category literature' and the spread of suburban bookstore-chains. As an English literature scholar, she also studied the narrative structure of the novels. The main focus of her study was, however, on readers of romances, whom she studied using surveys and a more focused interview study on a group of women from a town she termed 'Smithton'. Talking to the Smithton women, Radway discovered that, from the perspective of managing everyday life and time, reading romances created a time or a space within which a woman could

be entirely on her own, in contrast to being expected to be available for the service of others (61, 211).

What most intrigued Radway, however, was the way in which the women defined a good romance. The good romance was characterized by a formulaic plot in which the hero initially seems fiercely masculine, harsh and distant and, after a series of misunderstandings are cleared, is revealed to be an affectionate and tender, almost feminine, soul, characterized by his love and devotion for the heroine. The ideal heroine was interesting, such as intelligent and possibly slightly deviant, such as a tomboy. Nevertheless, these qualities were secondary to the attraction provided by the novels' detailed description of how the heroine, eventually, succumbed to the doting lover, as described by Radway:

In the midst of recounting the rest of the tale, they proudly exclaimed that Nanny 'spoke six languages,' was 'a really good artist,' and 'did not want to marry him even though she was pregnant' because she believed he was an 'elegant tomcat' and would not be faithful to her. These untraditional skills and unconventional attitudes are obviously not seen as fulfilling ... because they are legitimated and rendered acceptable by the novel's conclusion when the hero convinces Nanny of his love ... Here's the group recitation of this moment:

*Dot:* He starts stalking her and this is virtually ...

*Kit:* It's hysterical.

...

*Dot:* No, I don't need you!

*Ann:* And he says I'll camp on your doorstep; I'll picket; unfair to; you know ... (80)

According to Radway, there are many elements in the practice of reading romance that resist patriarchy, such as the frequently featured 'tomboyish' heroine. The doting hero can also be conceived as resisting, as it embodies a more perfect masculinity that would respond to the women's needs, in an almost motherly fashion (212). However, Radway asserts that even if the fantasizing about the sensitive man addresses a real problem, namely that patriarchy does not allow for a more feminine or nurturing masculinity, it leaves this structural issue largely intact. According to Radway, romances may even consolidate existing gender relations, as they suggest to the reader that the spouse, like the hero, loves her deeply though this may not always be apparent (215).

Thus, in a fashion very similar to Willis, Radway unearths how a rich, resistant female subculture challenges patriarchal practices through an innocuous practice, such as reading romance novelettes. However, just like Willis, Radway concludes that, in the end, this resistance does not challenge the real patriarchal structures that interlace family and human relations and may even end up consolidating them.

### ***Resistance and context***

The early studies on resistance (in addition to Willis and Radway see e.g. Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1976; Morley and Brunson, 1999[1980, 1987]; McRobbie, 2000) do not necessarily form a unified tradition. For instance, whereas Willis's study has a decidedly sociological pull, Radway's approach is influenced by literary approaches and methods, such as narrative analysis. Yet, they do share common features that are worth discussing, if one is to understand the classic cultural studies approach to lived resistance, which is still echoed in many studies done in the paradigm.

I will call the early resistance school, represented by Willis and Radway, 'critical contextualist' for two reasons. First, it takes a decidedly 'critical' view on resistance, looking carefully at both its creative as well as futile aspects. Second, it is underpinned by a focus on 'context', so that resistance is evaluated against its effect on 'reality', such as labour and educational structures or gender roles. The philosophical roots of this position can be traced to cultural studies' turn to Antonio Gramsci's theory on 'hegemony' to analyze the contradictions of culture (Gramsci, 1971; also Grossberg, 1997). According to Gramsci, 'hegemony' or cultural leadership, which legitimates existing social order, is produced by cultural institutions, such as media, school, the church and so on. However, unlike some of the more pessimistic analyses of popular culture, which saw it largely as an opium to keep the masses at bay (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979), Gramsci argued that hegemony is riddled with contradictions. He argues that, in order to be effective, hegemony has to win the consent of the people. Thus, in order to 'woo' the masses, cultural institutions need to, on some level, incorporate elements that go against the grain or 'resist' the values and interests of the powerful. At the same time, Gramsci argued that people were simply not 'duped' by the hegemonic institutions but were also capable of critically resisting their logic.

In order to understand the philosophical basis of Willis's and Radway's understanding of resistance, it is useful to look at what Gramsci sees to be the origin of people's potential to resist. The origin of people's critical attitude towards power structures are located in what Gramsci calls 'good sense', which stands in opposition to 'common sense'. The difference between the two senses is encapsulated in this often cited passage from his prison notebooks:

... 'the active man-in-the-mass' has two theoretical consciousnesses: one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci, 1971: 333)

This Gramscian distinction between the good practical sense and the confused and contradictory common sense of the masses fleshes out the 'doubly-articulated' nature of experience, which is: (1) determined by social position,

and (2) lived through ideological mediation (Grossberg, 1997: 217). What this means, is that, first, there are 'real' social structures. Second, that, on a level, people 'know' them via their practical experience of the world, which accounts for their resistance. Third, this practical knowledge of those structures gets obfuscated by ideology or hegemonic culture – which has its contradictions but mainly legitimates existing institutions – that mediates the relationship between people and the world. Thus, Radway argues that the grounds of Smithton women's resistance are located in their immediate or practical lived experience of dissatisfaction with non-nurturing relations with men, structured by patriarchy. Therefore, the women are not 'dupes' of reading romances, because of the escapism they provide. On the contrary, they read them because the reading addresses a 'real' problem. However, the reading does not provide a solution to patriarchal relationships but rather holds the women in a tension-riddled or 'imaginary' promise of true or nurturing romance. The same way, Willis argues that the lads' counter-school culture is not sheer maladjustment but lives against and reacts to the 'real' alienating aspects of school and commoditization of labour. However, this resistance, which is experienced as a kind of 'freedom' by the lads, in the end turns into a means of maintaining the labour structure (Willis, 1977: 137).

The methodological programme of critical, contextualist studies is, thus, driven by an interest in seriously studying the practices of the subjugated groups, such as misbehaviour at school or reading romances, which may appear trivial or foolish. Studying them seriously means studying them from the point of view of how they resist real structures of oppression, such as alienation of school or patriarchal interpersonal relations. However, the value of this resistance is also evaluated against an assessment of, whether this resistance changes those structures of oppression or not. The frequent answer to this question is that resistance ends up imaginary and not changing the structures, which it opposes. This approach has its undeniable insights in that it recognizes the meaningfulness of people's actions; yet, it also critically analyzes the way in which these actions may be rendered relatively futile.

However, the problem with this approach to resistance is that it presumes the scholar to be able to know what 'real' structures people are resisting. Thus, even if the scholars studying resistance posit that people's actions are meaningful, they also presume that the people themselves do not really know the meaning of their actions but that this needs to be discovered by the scholar. The trouble with this position is that it presumes that, whereas the 'people' are under the spell of cultural hegemony or ideology (such as sexism), the scholar is able to 'see' this reality clearly and correctly. This attitude does not cultivate critical self-reflexivity in the scholar, that is, it makes research blind to the ways in which the scholar's notion of 'real' structures of oppression are often heavily ideologically mediated, having their roots in the theoretical and political commitments driving the research.



***Difficult distinctions***

The question, whether scholars' interpretation of 'real' structures of oppression tells more about their theoretical and political commitments than about the structures, has been raised by Marcus (1986) and Ang (1996) in relation to the works of Willis and Radway. As these critical discussions of these specific works are of general methodological relevance, I will discuss them at some length.

Marcus praises Willis for his unusual and ambitious aim to bridge the micro and the macro. He argues that the strength of Willis is the way in which he does a careful, situated ethnography on the 'local' (the school) and, then, makes a creative leap to look at this local from another perspective (the workplace or the factory), which enables him to make the local or the 'lifeworld' to say something about the operation of the 'system' or structures of labour (Marcus, 1986: 171). Yet, Marcus argues that Willis's study also illustrates the problems in this kind of attempt to study the link between the particular and the general. His main criticism of Willis is that the study tends to use the ethnography on the 'lads' to authenticate the Marxist framework, driving the study.

Marcus argues that Willis's tendency to read his theory into, or from, the lads' behaviour is manifested, for example, by the structure of the book. The book is split into two parts. The first part focuses on the ethnography, being strife with vivid descriptions of the lads' parlance and pranks; the second part, 'analysis', is a theoretical discussion of the lads' behaviour from a general theoretical perspective. This structuring produces two orders of meaning. First there is the 'material' and, then, there is the interpretation what this material 'really' means. The fact that there may be a disjuncture between the material and the interpretation of its 'real' meaning is illustrated by the fact that, when Willis presented his study to the lads, they enjoyed listening to his description of the pranks but did not recognize themselves in his theoretical discussion on labour structures.

A further problem Marcus finds in Willis's work is the way in which Willis ends up choosing the 'lads' for further study. Willis's interest in the dozen rowdy lads – and particularly the outspoken and rambunctious Spanksey – can be argued to be driven by a classical notion of the white, working-class, rebellious subject that underpins much leftist social scientific thinking. The force of this frame is illustrated by the fact that Willis ignores any in-depth study of the middle-class or working-class conformist boys – the 'ear'oles' – who tend to become reified as representing the 'system'.

In a similar vein, Ang (1996) has criticized Radway for reading her rationalist feminist framework into the Smithton women's behaviour, or rendering them 'embryonic feminists' (Ang, 1996: 103). According to Ang, Radway sees romance reading to serve a 'therapeutic' function; it provides a literal escape from the demands of housewife and mother and also symbolically gratifies women's psychological need for nurturance (98). Ang attacks these distinctions

between 'real' oppression and 'imaginary' or therapeutic and consoling satisfaction. She argues that this distinction makes Radway bypass the main force that drives women to read romances: the titillating luxuriating in the moments of seducing and being seduced (105). Radway belittles this titillating pleasure, which ends up seeming a poor substitute for the 'real' thing, which is feminist challenging of patriarchal structures. Ang notes that the problem with this posture is that Radway ends up reading the Smithton women from the point of view of her rational feminist framework, instead of opening up a dialogue for mutual learning that would admit that Radway may also have something to learn from non-feminist women who 'may have more expertise and experience in the meanings, pleasures and dangers of romanticism' (107).

The methodological lessons learnt from these studies and their critiques are threefold. First, Willis's lads and the Smithton women may be guided in their actions by ideologies or social frames, such as working-class 'hands-on' machismo and romances. These ideologies may have their subversive and pleasurable aspects as well as counterproductive effects to the people's everyday lives and in terms of consolidating structures of labour and patriarchy. Yet, Willis's and Radway's research are also guided by ideologies, namely Marxist labour-theory and rationalist feminism, respectively. These frameworks direct the scholar's focus, so that (s)he is likely to discover things that fit her/his framework (such as the reproduction of labour or patriarchy) and omit those that do not. This points to the fact that there is no scientific 'objective' position beyond ideology, and relinquishing that positivist fantasy may make us more prone to critically reflect on those frames that mediate our interpretation of our objects of study.

Second, and related to the first point, Willis and Radway both, to some extent, jam the experience of the schoolboys and suburban women to their political and theoretical frames. As a consequence, they may not be open to some of the texture and nuance of the lived worlds of the boys and women, particularly not to those aspects that would challenge their frames, such as the experience of the conformist boys or the titillating pleasures of romancing. This 'missing' or losing of lived experience in translation is the criticism new ethnography has raised against traditional forms of research. The main criticism of new ethnography has been that the traditional research posture, which claims that the scholar 'knows' the people better than they do, may end up producing scholarship that tells more about the theoretical and political agendas driving the research than the people being studied.

Third, there is an interesting dimension to Willis's and Radway's studies, which point towards the more recent research approaches to study experience in a way that situates it as part of a wider social landscape of other locales and activities. Both Willis and Radway contextualize the specific topic they investigate, namely school behaviour and reading romances, by resorting to another perspective, which in Willis's case is the factory and in Radway's case the gendered interpersonal relations. This broadens the study in that, looked at from this

other perspective, the phenomenon under investigation seems rather different. Looked at from the perspective of the boys ending up in factory-work, their school-pranks no longer seem so 'resistant'. Even if Radway does not study the women's relationships with their partners, she alludes to it, which raises questions about the 'resistant' nature of reading about the ideal nurturing hero.

This practice of looking at a phenomenon from several perspectives resembles recent multiperspectival, such as multi-sited and polyvocal, research approaches, which will be touched upon later in this chapter and discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapters of this book, particularly in Chapter 9. However, the difference between the multi-sited studies and Willis's and Radway's research is that Willis and Radway tend to frame the other location (the factory and the human relations of the women) as being more 'real', or more important from a structural point of view, than the other one (school, reading romances). Constructing hierarchies between different sites is problematic as it denies the significance of certain activities or spheres of life. One should not declare that the subversive pleasures derived from consuming media, such as romances, is void of meaning unless it produces changes in heterosexual intimate relations (which Radway cannot really say, as she does not study the Smithton women's relationships, but see Radway, 1988 for a suggestion). It would be more fruitful to study how a phenomenon looks from different perspectives, locating it within the wider social context and illuminating its different, possibly resistant, subjugated and subjugating, dimensions. This call for examining of resistance within the larger context of different social forces and locations is the legacy and contribution of this critical approach to contemporary cultural and social research.

### **Textualist optimism**

However, there is another way of studying resistance, which I have termed the optimist, textual approach. The studies by Willis and Radway paint a somewhat gloomy picture of social reality, where working-class boys and suburban homemakers both engage in 'resistant' activities which, nevertheless, get absorbed into supporting the structures that subjugate them in the first place. On the contrary, the studies done from the optimist, textual perspective have a rather upbeat aura, having faith in the efficacy of resistance to the point that they have been branded to embody a 'populist' version of cultural studies (McGuigan, 1992; Stabile, 1995).

John Fiske is one of the scholars who has given resistance a poignantly optimistic reading. His proliferate studies on resistance range from analyzing Madonna fans' interest in her overt sexuality (Fiske, 1989), college students' pleasures derived from watching the mocking depiction of family in *Married with Children* (Fiske, 1994a) to the interplay between the controversial TV-sitcom

*Murphy Brown*, the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearings, LA riots and 1992 US elections won by Bill Clinton (Fiske, 1994b).

Unlike Willis and Radway, who temper their findings of resistance with a kind of ‘reality check’, Fiske emphasizes the importance of symbolic struggles. What this means is that he underlines that symbolic struggles are ‘real’. For example, if a lower middle-class ‘mod’ dresses up in mock high-fashion gear, he should be interpreted as resisting symbolic structures that work through fashion. This challenge to a symbolic structure, such as fashion, should be acknowledged to be ‘real’ and significant, even if it does not challenge class structures (see Hebdige, 1977). Furthermore, Fiske has argued that symbolic struggles have wide political – or quite ‘real’, if you like – impacts (1994b: 2). To prove this point, Fiske has analyzed how the debates over the depiction of single motherhood in the TV-sitcom *Murphy Brown*, attacked by the Republican vice-president Dan Quayle, the hiatuses produced by the Hill–Thomas hearings and Rodney King beatings, accounted for Bill Clinton’s victory in 1992.

In one of his classic studies, Fiske (1989) analyzes the resistant nature of Madonna and young girls’ interpretations of her. In it he discusses an interview with a young fan, Lucy:

She’s tarty and seductive ... but it looks alright when she does it, you know, what I mean ... it’s acceptable ... with anyone else it would be absolutely outrageous ...

We can note a number of points here. Lucy can only find patriarchal words to describe Madonna’s sexuality – ‘tarty’ and ‘seductive’ – but she struggles against the patriarchy inscribed in her own subjectivity. The opposition between ‘acceptable’ and ‘absolutely outrageous’ not only refers to representations of female sexuality, but is an externalisation of the tension felt by adolescent girls when trying to come to terms with the contradictions between a positive feminine view of their sexuality and the alien patriarchal one. (98)

In this discussion, Fiske defines Lucy’s liking of Madonna as providing a space for her to explore an independent form of female sexuality that is neither just an object of male desire (whore) or of male discipline (madonna). This instance, where Lucy ‘struggles’ with why she likes Madonna’s tartness is, for Fiske, resistance. He does not see any reason to resort to some outside ‘check’ to establish the effects of this resistance, such as studying how Lucy behaves in her sexual relations. It is the symbolic work that Lucy performs, liking and trying to articulate why she likes Madonna’s challenging sexuality better than some others, that counts as resistance.

Fiske’s Madonna-study, and his research on resistance over all, has provoked much criticism, to the point that he has become a *bête noire* in cultural studies, argued to epitomize the ‘banality’ of a certain line of inquiry on resistance (Morris, 1990). The criticisms of Fiske can broadly be understood to be targeted at three dimensions in his work, namely, his decontextualist method, his politics, and his tendency to render ‘Lucy’ as ventriloquist of his agenda.

The claim that Fiske's studies lack analysis of wider context boils down to the difference between someone like Fiske and Willis. Commentators (e.g. Nightingale, 1992) have argued that Fiske's study is spurious, based on a fleeting interview with a young woman, from which he draws grand conclusions. Thus, the both broader and deeper attention that Willis and Radway pay to the people they are studying makes their research better grounded in the complexities of their everyday lives, which then reveals contradictions that emerge when one pierces through the surface appearance of some resistant activity, such as pranks.

It is true that contextualizing the phenomenon one is studying, may give a richer or more multidimensional understanding of it. However, as discussed above, arguing that the fact that a resistant activity, like media-consumption, is 'ineffective', because it does not change other structures of dominance, denies the activity in question its significance. One could say that Fiske may extrapolate too much – in terms challenging structures of patriarchy – from Lucy's fleeting comment about tarts. Still, one could also say that stating that Lucy's resistance is futile unless it changes structures of patriarchy or her life, is also reading too much into her words. The methodological truth might lie somewhere between these two positions, acknowledging that Lucy may indeed really resist stale notions of female sexuality through her interest in Madonna, while admitting that this is only a small part of Lucy's life and an even smaller part of the much larger puzzle of gender inequality.

However, one may need to qualify this methodological conclusion about Lucy by saying that the methodological and political appropriateness of any statement on resistance needs to be sensitive to individual contexts. Fiske's unflinching faith in the power of texts and his populist commitment to celebrate resistance tends to render his work annoyingly enthused, making it sound as if we have arrived at an era of buoyantly democratic media and society. Fiske's celebration of how homeless men 'resist' when watching the film *Die Hard* (Fiske, 1989), feels eerie against the background of the dire social and material situation of homeless people. This type of research may also direct attention away from pressing problems of social welfare. In this light, one can see the merits of Willis's and Radway's sobering analyses of the ways in which the structures of labour and patriarchy work against the resistance embedded in the school boys' pranks and women's romancing.

Still, in a different context, cultural analysis à la Fiske may be quite illuminative. My students find Fiske's work quite useful for explaining, for example, why rap music and style, with its baggy and glaring clothes and loud music, is so popular among Korean and Japanese youth, feeling constrained by the extremely competitive educational system and strict codes for dress and behaviour, with their militaristic undertones (also Yasuda, 2002). This behaviour may not transform the educational or military systems, but it does challenge the strictly assimilationist, and sometimes militaristic, cultural rules in everyday life, which may, or may not, indicate wider cultural and social transformations.

These kinds of subversions and pleasures should not be uncritically and spuriously celebrated, the way Fiske sometimes does. Yet, they do ‘matter’ in a way that is not captured by the idea of them as mere symbolic ripples on the surface of ‘real’ structures.

However, there is also a methodological trait that unites Fiske, Willis and Radway. This is a trait that Morris (1990), in relation to Fiske, has called ‘ventriloquism’. Ventriloquism refers to Fiske’s interpretative strategy, which presumes that while people may be doing interesting things, it is the scholar who is capable of deciphering the true meaning of these words and deeds, whereas the people themselves can never really comprehend what they are doing. Morris has in fact pointed out that even if Fiske claims that he is proving Madonna fans are not ‘bimbos’, he himself renders them bimbos, who are unaware of their doings. To some extent, ideologies always work ‘behind our backs’. Yet, the dichotomous notion that people are ‘outside of the true’ and scholars ‘within the true’ makes research more likely to project its own agendas on people, that is, render them ventriloquists for their political agendas, whether it is populist feminism (Fiske), rationalist feminism (Radway) or Marxism (Willis). This problem is shared by all the different resistance studies, but it is not a problem specific to cultural studies but interlaces any positivist social scientific research. The challenge of trying to be true to other people’s lived realities has never been adequately addressed within resistance-studies, but it has been the specific focus of new ethnographic modes of studying lived experience, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Contingent resistances**

Based on the discussion of the critical, contextualist approach to resistance and the optimistic, textual one, one can conclude that they both are caught up in an imaginary, where resistance is claimed to either affect, or not to affect, the ‘system’. Therefore, they both obey the logic of a vertical notion of power, where the ‘bottom’ or the local either is, or is not, understood to change the ‘top’ or the global/systemic. However, this type of notion of power tends to attribute too much to the activity in question. Therefore, to overcome this polarized and vertical mode of analysis, it may be fruitful to shift towards a more contingent or lateral notion of power and resistance. Instead of thinking whether a particular local resistance has systemic effects, it might be a better idea to explore what kind of specific effects it has, or how it relates to other issues, events and processes in different places and spheres of life.

One of the ways in which scholars in cultural studies have tried to come up with a more complex notion of resistance is through so-called theory of articulation. In rough terms, articulation refers to the process, where ideologies are produced out of possibly contradictory elements, which accounts for their

complexity (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). This notion of ideology or discourse as an articulated amalgam has two theoretical and methodological insights that advance studying resistance.

First, by underlining the constructed and contingent nature of discourses, it shatters the essentialist tendency in some cultural studies to search for resistance in some particular and predictable places, such as white, male, working-class culture. Laclau and Mouffe argue that resistance does not emanate from a particular position (such as class position) but that this position has to be made to 'mean'. Furthermore, they argue that the idea that resistance is lodged in particular socioeconomic positions does not do justice to the multiplicity of power relations. Starting from Foucault's famous sentence, that 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1978: 95), articulation-theory pays attention to diverse forms of resistance – against sexism, racism, environmental destruction and so on. These different forms of resistances may also be more pertinent to particular areas of life, so that some forms of resistance may react to economic arrangements, others to emotional structures, and still others to cultural discourses, and sometimes a form of resistance intertwines many elements. What theory of articulation underlines is that there is no reason to determine, a priori, that one particular type of resistance is more important than others (more 'real' so to say) but that the importance of resistance needs to be evaluated in each context.

The second, and closely related, methodological lesson that articulation theory has to teach is that it draws attention to multiple forms of resistance and their contradictions. This encourages a more nuanced scholarship, which looks at lived experience and social discourses from multiple angles that illuminate different resistances and dominations. This more complex notion of discourse and identity might also push for more self-reflexive scholarship that acknowledges that, for instance, the Smithton women, may not only be resisting non-nurturing patriarchal relations with men, but their non-rational pleasures derived from romances may also be seen to resist or to antagonize rationalist feminism, represented by Radway.

The contingent notion of resistance is embodied, for instance, in some popular cultural studies collections that contain articles that present a panoply of contradicting views on phenomena, such as Madonna or pornography (Schwichtenberg, 1993; Dines and Humes, 1995). These collections illuminate, for example, the complex ways in which fans, haters, blacks, whites, men and women interpret Madonna. These analyses point at ways in which Madonna's image and its interpretations may acquire different meanings and get articulated to different politics in different places, getting intertwined with a host of political agendas that go beyond gender and sexuality, such as black religion, slavery and hyper-individualism. These collections paint a complex picture of the various politics, something like those Madonna articulates, pointing beyond the rather limited discussions of whether she is a sex object or subverts that position.

***Contradictory local(es)***

To give an example of a recent ethnography that, in a sense, applies or embodies the contingent notion of resistance one can look at Andy Bennett's (1999, 2000) study on rappers in Newcastle upon Tyne, a racially homogeneous (White) working-class town in the northeast of England. Bennett does not use the vocabulary of resistance-studies, but echoes of this tradition can be heard throughout his discussion. What makes Bennett's study interesting is the way in which he weaves or juxtaposes discussions of different aspects of Newcastle rap, and their resistant and dominant or interesting and problematic features. Bennett is clearly sympathetic towards the rappers, while also critically analyzing them, but he does not draw too clear-cut conclusions on, whether rap is resistant or dominant but rather lets the different views collide against one another.

His analysis focuses on two types of rappers in Newcastle: the black-identified and the white-identified. The black-identified rappers, congregating around a small local recordstore 'Groove', believe that black American rap is the only 'real' one. On the contrary, the white-identified ones work to come up with their own or 'Geordie' rap true to the local culture. The black-identified rappers, in a counterintuitive twist, argue that black music is truer to their identity as white working-class British, as Bennett illustrates:

*Jeff:* All the time before, white people were into black music, hip hop's just the same. There's a message in black music which translates for white working-class people.

*A.B.:* What's that?

*Dave:* It's about being proud of where you come from ...

*Jim:* The trend at the moment is to be real ... to rap in your own accent and talk about things close to you ... don't try to be American like. But that's why British hip hop will always be shite ... I went to New York ... It was brilliant, it changed my life. You can't talk about white hip hop, it doesn't exist. (Bennett, 1999: 11)

Starting from this counterintuitive posture, Bennett analyzes how this group relates to, and articulates, a series of social contradictions in Newcastle. On one level, preferring a black, American 'authentic' form of music, becomes a badge of cultural distinction for the group, defining them as aficionados or superior in relation to amateurs, who have an occasional or 'trendy' interest in rap. However, at the same time the association with blackness in a white town also becomes a stigma for the group, which, in the club and pub life of Newcastle, has to deal with deflected racist harassment, and name-calling, exemplified by the way in which the group is branded 'wiggers' (Bennett, 1999: 12). This further complicates the original meaning of 'wiggers', which usually refers to 'inauthentic' white people who appropriate black styles. This supposed 'inauthenticity' gets complicated in a nearly all-white town, such as Newcastle, where



the group has to deal with very authentic racism that is projected upon them because of their stylistic affinity. To make matters even more complicated, this stigma of 'wiggers' is worn by the group as a kind of pride, an act of defiance, which sets them apart from other local youth, who are defined as racist, small-minded, small-town people, who are into 'crap commercial music and fashion stuff' (Bennett, 1999: 14).

As the discussion hopefully illustrates, instead of defining the Groove-rappers as necessarily resistant or dominant or dominated, Bennett evaluates how they attach themselves to diverse local and global agendas, appearing differently in different lights. Thus, affinity with black music may be a bid for distinction that separates the 'true' aficionados from 'trendy' consumers. However, this affinity may also provoke local townspeople to harass the group, in a decidedly racist fashion, which complicates the idea that these people are simply 'using' black culture to construct their own identities. Still, the identification with blacks can also serve to construct the group as worldly or superior in relation to the presumably parochial and small-minded people, in a sense denying the group members' association with the provincial working-class town of Newcastle, the cultural and social status of which in the English hierarchy of towns is decidedly low.

In a similar fashion, Bennett also discusses the contradictions of white-identified rappers and also rappers in Frankfurt am Main, where rap originates from the local US bases and gets articulated to the experiences of Turkish immigrants. All in all, Bennett's study illustrates a mode of studying resistance in a way that is sensitive to its contradictions and avoids too clear celebratory or lamenting stances.

Bennett's study is also an example of a context-sensitive study, in that it illustrates how rap forms part and parcel of local and global issues and struggles, which, in a sense, melts away the division between real and symbolic resistance. Thus, when black-identified rappers in Newcastle get harassed by racists, when the rappers themselves rebuke locals as parochial White trash, and when Turkish immigrant rappers attack neo-fascism in Germany, it becomes obvious that rap, as a cultural form, gets intertwined with politics that articulate concerns that spill over into different areas of life, such as racism, regional and class differences, and new right politics and violence. Still, the point is not to argue that resistance challenges everything (or nothing). Rather, the task is to analyze what issues or structures of inequality, specifically, a particular type of resistance in a particular place and time challenges. Resistance may, or may not, challenge cultural, racial, sexual or economic inequalities, or all four of them. Resistance in a particular time and place is often intertwined with events and processes in other places, and a good way of assessing the social networks in which a particular activity happens is to study its connections with other places and events. It is difficult to assess the impact of a particular form of resistance on wider social structures of inequality. Thus, instead of celebrating the efficacy of resistance or lamenting its futility, a contingent notion of resistance asks research to investigate what exactly does it do.

## Conclusions

The analysis of lived resistance in cultural studies tends to fall into two camps. The first, critical contextualist approach tends to evaluate resistance, such as deriving subversive pleasures from media products, in terms of, whether it changes 'real' social structures. This approach often ends up on a sobering note about the ineffectiveness of resistance. The second, textualist, optimist approach argues that symbolic resistance, such as the consumption of, for example, subversive images of gender or sexuality, is 'real', as it transforms culture and can have further spill-over effects. This line of inquiry often ends up being quite optimistic about the possibilities of resistance and social change. The third, contingent approach to resistance mediates between and beyond these two approaches. It acknowledges that symbolic resistance may, or may not, have wider effects, but that symbolic effects are 'real' also. It calls for an analysis of resistances, in the plural, that is sensitive to different forms of resistance and subordination, which evaluates their implications against the local and social contexts. Thus, instead of studying whether a particular resistance transforms a particular 'system' of social inequality, which may be difficult to assess, a more contingent notion of resistance asks, in a more down-to-earth manner, scholarship to investigate what a particular form of resistance does.

### Exercise 2

- Choose a lived experience that you think of as 'resistant' (this could be anything from liking certain popular cultural forms to school or consumer behaviours). Do a mini-research on this experience, conduct an interview or observe an event or a situation. Based on your research, what elements of this experience would you identify as 'resistant' and 'dominant'?
- Think of different forms of resistance. Is the activity you are investigating resisting in terms of, for example: (1) lifestyles and behaviours; (2) cultural ideologies; (3) social institutions; (4) political or economic structures? Evaluate whether the kind of resistant behaviour you are studying has an impact or not.
- Bear in mind that what is seen as 'resistance' often tells about the researcher's own political fantasies. Think carefully what makes you deem certain ideas or actions as 'resistant'. Outline a way of further studying the experience from the points of view of different people or in several locations, in order to be sensitive to alternative, multiple, and possible contradictory, forms of resistance. Think how you could be sensitive to complexity and avoid producing simplistic dichotomies between resistance and dominance.