

# *The Ghost Reader: Recovering Women's Contributions to Media Studies*

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*The Ghost Reader: Recovering Women's Contributions to Media Studies*, reviewed by Leonarda García-Jiménez and Esperanza Herrero, *History of Media Studies* 4 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.32376/d895aoea.02cbe46d>.



Elena D. Hristova, Aimee-Marie Dorsten, and Carol A. Stabile, eds.  
*The Ghost Reader: Recovering Women's Contributions to Media Studies*.  
256 pp. London: Goldsmiths Press, 2024. \$30 (paperback).

ONE OF THE MAIN outcomes of the current wave of feminism is the growing effort to recover historical female referents in many different areas of society. This is also happening in the field of communication.<sup>1</sup> This feminist reconstruction of communication's intellectual history is based on a fundamental conviction: gender has been a constitutive element of communication studies from its very beginning.<sup>2</sup> The book *Women in Communication: A Biographical Sourcebook* was a pioneering act in this line of research.<sup>3</sup> Ever since it was published, many other approaches have worked towards reclaiming women as an essential piece in the foundation of communication studies, especially regarding European and North American histories.<sup>4</sup> Of particular note is the recent feminist revival that has also emerged in Latin America.<sup>5</sup>

This body of research points to an obvious but often ignored fact: women have always been present wherever communication and media studies have been developed, even if most of them later became ghosts or, at best, simple footnotes. The narrow historiography of the field has erased their names and, in return, constructed a very masculinized history in which women have no place.<sup>6</sup> In response, a

<sup>1</sup> This work is part of the R+D+i project "FEMICOMI: Analysis of female roles in communication research in Ibero-America," reference number PID2021-123143NB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033; and by "ERDF A way of making Europe" (European Union). All the information is available at <https://www.femicom.es/en/home-en>.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Lee Ashcraft and Peter Simonson, "Gender, Work, and the History of Communication Research," in *The International History of Communication Study*, ed. Peter Simonson and David W. Park (New York: Routledge, 2015); Sue Curry Jansen, "The Future Is Not What It Used to Be: Gender, History and Communication Studies," *Communication Theory* 3, no. 2 (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Signorielli, *Women in Communication: A Biographical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

new, valuable reference work has been added to the field: *The Ghost Reader: Recovering Women's Contributions to Media Studies* is a book that claims that the intellectual history of communication studies can no longer be told without addressing women scholars. The authors draw on Rebecca Solnit's reflections on ghost libraries to address the "ghosts in our canon" (1–3) those individuals—those women—who contributed to the construction of media studies from the margins, excluded or relegated. The ghosts they refer to are those ever-present but invisible figures, those who often embodied different traditions of research, and whose loss is nothing less than a narrowing and homogenization of communication studies scholarship. Our field's tradition needs to be contested, they claim, by un-ghosting the stories of many of these forgotten women.

Framed by meta-analysis and feminist epistemologies, the book reconstructs the biographical profiles and recovers the work of eighteen women who worked in Europe and North America between the 1930s and 1950s. These were the years in which the field of communication and media studies began, a field that was not only shaped by the success stories of its "founding fathers," but also by the ambivalent stories of success and suffering of these intelligent and strong women—some of them immigrants—who lived and developed their careers in the turbulent twentieth century, a century that was particularly hard for women researchers who did not want to become ghosts confined in private spaces, but rather wanted to reclaim and regain their place in the public sphere and in the labor market.

The book is made up of eighteen chapters (with fifteen different authors) in which some of the stories of pioneering female researchers in the North American and European tradition are recovered. These are eighteen women who deserve a place of their own in our intellectual history; they are Gretel K. Adorno, Violet E. Lavine, Marjorie E. Fiske Lissance Löwenthal, Shirley G. Du Bois, Herta Herzog, Mae Huetting Churchill, Marie Jahoda, Romana Javitz, Claudia Jones, Dorothy B. Jones, Patricia L. Kendall, Eleanor Leacock, Helen M. Lynd, Hortense Powdermaker, Jeanette S. Smith, Lisa Sergio, Fredi Washington, and Gene Weltfish. All of them studied communication, or aspects relevant to understanding communication, while simultaneously inhabiting a hostile academic environment, much more hostile to women than most professional spaces, activist circles, or even the media.

In this book, each of these eighteen pioneers of communication research is recovered from a double perspective: first, the authors propose a biographical-experiential profile of each of the women; then, an excerpt of their work is included. We believe that this twofold approach is appropriate, especially because the recovery of intellec-

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Christian Fleck, "Lazarsfeld's Wives or What Happened to Women Sociologists in the Twentieth Century," *International Review of Sociology* 31, no. 1 (2021); Aimee-Marie Dorsten, "Thinking Dirty: Digging up Three Founding Matriarchs of Communication Studies," *Communication Theory* 22, no. 1 (2012); Leonarda García-Jiménez, "Female Contributions to Communication Theories: A Teaching and Scientific Proposal," *Anàlisi* 65 (2021).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Clemencia Rodríguez, Claudia Magallanes, Amparo Marroquín, and Omar Rincón, *Mujeres de la comunicación* (Berlin: FES Comunicación, 2021); Yamila Hiram and Santiago Gándara, "Visibilidad y reconocimiento a las mujeres pioneras del campo comunicacional Latinoamericano," *Revista Mediterránea de Comunicación* 12, no. 2 (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Dorsten, "Thinking Dirty."

tual figures cannot be done without considering life stories, giving that knowledge is also a personal and lived experience. Ultimately, the biographical-experiential approach recovers the personal stories that are often key for understanding an author's work. Can we fully understand Herta Herzog's (chapter 6) contribution to audience analysis, or Mae Huettig Churchill's (chapter 7) critical approach to the US film industry without understanding the circumstances of their personal lives? We do not think so, hence the importance of placing each of these women's works in their own specific and biographical context. For Herzog's "intellectual curiosity and analytical bears," as Elana Levine states on page 67, underlie her long research career (e.g., her study on anti-Semitism cited in the chapter was published just a few years before her death). Something similar happens with Mae Huettig Churchill and the rest of the women included in the book. Huettig Churchill, the daughter of Russian émigré anarchist parents, was also a person harassed by the FBI for her membership in the Communist Party. Research and researcher are but one and the same, so knowing her personal circumstances helps us understand her critique of the low quality of Hollywood cinema and the threat posed by the "maze of intricate relationships" behind the film industry (including "distribution and exhibition"), as Aimee-Marie Dorsten points out (77).

At the same time, the selection of original works authored by women that is included in each chapter functions as an invitation to read them and give them a voice. It is them speaking directly to us, after we have been introduced to their personal lives and struggles. At first glance, selecting a few pages from an entire career seems like a titanic and enormously difficult editorial task. We believe there is an unavoidable risk of oversimplifying an author's work. However, *The Ghost Reader: Recovering Women's Contributions to Media Studies* rises to the challenge, and we find a brilliant selection of texts to offer as a first step in getting to know the authors and their contributions to early media studies. We sincerely believe that reading a few pages of "What Do We Really Know about Daytime Serial Listeners?" (67–72), one of Herta Herzog's most emblematic works, or *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* (78–83), one of Mae Huettig Churchill's most important contributions, will make the reader want to turn to the original sources and continue the dialogue with these fascinating researchers. If this does not happen, there is a risk that the ghost will continue to hover over our heads.

The result is not an ordinary book. Rather, it is a sourcebook: a book designed to be consulted by professors, students, and researchers. In general, a book written for anyone and everyone who wants to pluralize their approaches to communication research through women's voices.

The eighteen European and North American women recovered by *The Ghost Reader: Recovering Women's Contributions to Media Studies* were present in the early moments of the field but were eventually consciously or unconsciously erased by an androcentric field. Thanks to this book, these brave and resilient women will no longer be ghostly shadows in the history of communication and media studies.

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