Why Is Buying a "Madras" Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis

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"Sometimes I think about the people in America who will wear it. I wish always a good relationship between India and America."


Flipping through the pages of a Lands’ End catalog that arrived in the mail a few years ago, I was invited, simply, to buy “Madras” (fig. 1). The sign “Madras” does not refer to the major Indian metropolis, known until recently by that name, but to a baseball shirt. The visual image under “Madras” is of a white woman yet the linguistic description alongside anchors the sign to something “authentic” and “drenched in color.” To me, the “color” referenced something unmistakably racialized. (For the advertising designer and her putative audience, the “color” may well reference putting on a tan, temporarily, or perhaps, it refers to the shirt, not the person.) This confusing juxtaposition of images and referents is contradicted in text and visuals a few pages later in the catalog, where the reader is informed that “Madras” is a type of cotton cloth, not a shirt, which is made in “small villages around the Indian city of Madras” (fig. 2). The photographic images on this page are of an obviously Indian weaver.
Madras
Women’s authentic Madras, drenched in color.

Baseball Shirt.
Hand-dyed and broidered pure cotton
Madras only gets better as time goes by.
This roomy baseball-style shirt has a buttio
front closure, small button-through welt
chest pocket. A fake locker loop. A short shirr tail hem that just begs to be left out.
Colors below.
Regular XS 4, S 6-8, M 10-12, L 14-16,
XL 18-20.
2754-8410 32.00

Fig. 1. From “Cotton People,” Lands’ End Direct Merchants catalog. April 1995, p. 8.
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First Madhilar had dressed his loom with a warp of yarn. Then spread water on the yarns with a wet cloth to make them more "workable." And then—a marvelous sight!—set down on the bench and began weaving, raising and lowering the yarns with foot pedals, while he sent the shuttle flying and weaving through them with his little brown hands. This cloth he weaves today is a sunny blue and yellow plaid, the kind you think of when you think Madras. Surprisingly, these plahs may not be native to India—many people we talked to think native handweavers simply copied the tartan patterns worn by the Scottish regiments that occupied southern India in the 1800s. "Ajanta is my favorite color," smiles Madhilar, pointing to the hue we know as turquoise.

Madhilar learned his craft from his father, who learned it from his father, and has passed his skills onto his two sons, who also weave Madras on their own looms. He's woven Madras since 1962, when the "bleeding madras" craze hit its peak, but even before that, he and his forebears wove a similar cloth called "hangings."

He makes a decent living for himself and his family, and is now semi-retired, weaving about 20 meters a day. We ask him if he wears Madras himself. "No, no," he says, stroking his head, "it costs too much."

A huge irony and a pity, we think, although the boldly colorful cloth would seem a little out of place on this modest man, in this pastoral setting.

"I'm proud of my cloth," says Madhilar. "Sometimes I think about the people in America who will wear it. I wish always a good relationship between India and America."

Next time you stop into one of our sunny Madras shirts, perhaps you will think of Madhilar, and even hear the faint click-clack of the shuttle, from a place far away.

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Fig. 2. From "Cotton People," Lands' End Direct Merchants catalog, April 1995, p. 11. Reproduced with permission of Lands' End, Inc.
and his wife standing by his side. Back, I thought, to familiar systems of representation and familiar geographies, but the accompanying text now informs us that "Madras" are "tartan patterns worn by Scottish regiments that occupied India in the 1800s." The dizzying relay of signs and times is apparently for good purpose, because by the end of the narrative on how "Madras" (here, the cloth) is produced, the addressee is assured that the poor Indian man "makes a decent living" weaving it. So, next time you "button into one [here, the shirt] . . . perhaps you will think of [him], and even hear the faint clack clack of the shuttle from a place far away." Globalization sounds good. Buying "Madras" shirt/cotton cloth/Scottish tartan pattern/ Indian metropolis is a political act that delivers a living for the poor, Third World, male breadwinner and his wife and children.

At around the same time I received the Lands’ End catalog, I was researching changing gender and sexual relations in agrarian work in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh, South India. I have done research in villages there for fifteen years and was studying the intensification in cotton production that has been accompanied by a pattern of uneven decline in small-holder fortunes. It is mainly women’s labor that grows cotton in this region, as that is the normative sexual division of labor. The area under cotton has increased greatly since the mid-1980s, and women and children, in particular, are working more in the cotton fields. Some are even earning more. Life for women in agricultural labor and small-cultivator households is still, however, very precarious. Many households have to borrow money often even to meet daily consumption expenses for food, medicines, and emergencies. There is a general and widespread expression of the desire for a better quality of life, not just more money.

The disjuncture between Lands’ End’s representations of cotton producers “ten thousand miles away,” ripe for rescue by “Madras” consumers in the United States, and “reality” is troubling, even as it includes and implicates me as a viewer, consumer, and researcher. Yet, a “realist” unpacking of the cotton commodity chain—one that would work back through multiple political economic relations from Lands’ End to its sources in rural India—although useful, would not address my concerns with the uneven impacts of neoliberalism on women’s livelihoods in India and with U.S. gender and race inequality nor my commitment to anti-imperialist
genealogies and a politics of representation that does not collapse difference through binary analytics and naturalized moralities. In this article, therefore, feminist commodity chains are theorized as an alternative analytic framework to what I categorize as realist commodity chain analysis. My choice of “realist” to describe what is commonly called global commodity chain analysis is to underscore this method’s devotion to what is real as opposed to what is imaginary. Feminist commodity chain research, as we will see, is concerned with “real” lives but also how they are imagined; it questions ways of knowing that assume reality is completely knowable and thus explainable through empirical analysis.

This article begins with a review of realist commodity chain analysis and discusses why it is inadequate. Feminist commodity chains are then theorized as an alternative for framing an understanding of power. Two sites are explored: the United States, where “Madras” cotton shirts are retailed by a transnational company, Lands’ End, and villages in Andhra Pradesh, South India, where cotton is produced. At each, different methodologies are deployed and different sorts of evidence are garnered. In the United States, the representational strategies of Lands’ End are explicated through a close reading of the text and images in one of its catalogs. Then, based on ethnographic research for over a decade, and particularly over the course of a year, the discussion shifts to a meditation on work in rural South India. Material changes in women’s and men’s labor and livelihoods as cotton production intensified are read against processes of cultural production, particularly the production of femininities and masculinities. In all three sections, which form the core of this article, the everyday interplay of gender with the materiality of culture and the culture of materiality form the basis of my critique of realist commodity chains. The article concludes with a discussion of how feminist commodity chain analysis enables a critical commentary on globalization.

A Critique of Realist Commodity Chains and the Feminist Alternative
Global commodity chain analysis, or what I characterize as realist commodity chain analysis, was introduced by World Systems theorists in the mid-1980s in response to changes in the structure of capitalism, broadly
characterized then as the "new international division of labor" and, since the 1990s, as "globalization." One of the main empirical characteristics of globalization has been the extension of production activities across national boundaries. In particular, a great deal of manufacturing no longer takes place primarily in the advanced industrialized nations of the North—the United States, Western Europe, and Japan (what World Systems theorists identify as the "core" nations)—but has shifted to nations of the South ("peripheral" and "semiperipheral" nations). Realist commodity chain analysis tracks value-added, the amount by which the value of an article is increased at each stage of its production, as the process of production transcends national boundaries. By identifying where and how value is added, realist commodity chain analysis studies the new spatial features of economic globalization and new institutional relationships at different geographic and organizational scales.

Realist commodity chain analysis is useful in many respects and seriously wanting in others. It is worthwhile because it offers a conceptualization of globalization as connections across places and times. The analysts Terence K. Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, are interested in demonstrating how "the capitalist world system constantly reproduces a basic order that permits the endless accumulation of capital." They use realist commodity chain analysis to argue that globalization is not new and that capitalism as a world system is of expansive scope and has been since the seventeenth century. Others, such as Peter Dickens, Miguel Korzeniewicz, and Gary Gereffi, do not reach quite the same judgment. They argue that whereas internationalization of eras past also involved the extension of business activities beyond national boundaries, it was a simple quantitative process; globalization, on the other hand, involves the functional integration of production or a qualitative process of change. For these latter theorists, realist commodity chain analysis tracks the reorganization of production that is salient to the new state of capitalism. In particular, they shift the scale of analysis from national to multinational corporations—"drivers" or "lead firms"—which now increasingly control the process of integration. They are able to demonstrate how multinational corporations overcome the nation-state's protectionist measures and enhance their competitive advantage by lowering labor costs and increasing indus-
trial flexibility. They also employ realist commodity chain analysis to analyze how the “drivers” that enable capital accumulation differ and change from time to time. In sum, realist commodity chain analysis provides good reason for why historical deliberations on globalization are important and a method to focus on linkages and scales of analysis beyond particular places. It is dynamic and processual in its understanding of the changing relationships among institutions, the state and transnational corporations, in particular.

My critique begins with the absence in realist commodity chain analysis of an accounting for women’s labor in the new international division of labor (or what realist commodity chain analysis characterizes as “trade-led globalization”). There is more than enough evidence that this pattern of industrialization is “female led as much as export led.” Second, the assessment that the global labor process has become feminized is also now common; not only are more women economically active in all regions of the world but the conditions that used to characterize “women’s work”—irregularity, casualization, insecurity—now characterize the conditions of many kinds of labor. Third, there is a lack of attention in realist commodity chain analysis as to how states and multinational corporations use gender ideologies to further export-oriented economic strategies. The gender and cultural politics of national regimes vary greatly. Some nation states, and the multinational corporations which operate in them, have opportunistically intensified or recomposed gender ideologies in some instances and decomposed them in others. And lastly, realist commodity chain analysis fails to recognize the importance of the household as an institution critical to the new international organization of production. States promoting export-oriented production and overseas migration have often selectively adopted familial ideologies that blur the lines between what is good for households and for the nation. As often, the costs and burdens of structural adjustment and economic restructuring are passed on to women in households as their unpaid reproductive labor and undercompensated work bear the brunt of national policies of globalization.
In response to these critiques, realist commodity chain analysis could be modified to be feminist with an analysis of women’s labor and of gender ideologies at each node of the commodity chain and at institutional scales that include the household. This article presents a more radical critique of realist commodity chain analysis. It proposes feminist commodity chain analysis as an alternative rather than an additive. Consequently, my theorization of feminist commodity chains begins with reflexivity about how not to reaffirm master narratives of globalization that naturalize gendered and racialized constructions of difference and reproduce binaries between First and Third World. This suggests that the epistemologies feminist commodity chain analysis deploys are, at least in part, interpretive. They alert us to the masculinist undertones of realist commodity chain theorizations, such as Gereffi’s characterization of the “seminal” contributions of “drivers,” for example. More broadly, feminist commodity chain theory underscores how categories of knowing and representation can reify or produce new gender and racial biases. Instead of assuming a telos (a linear path to progress) as in realist commodity chain analysis of the state of capitalism, or assuming a direction to the flow of investments, from First World to Third World, and of commodities the other way, feminist commodity chain theory begins with the possibility that global commodity chains—as connections across times and places—are neither linear nor unidirectional nor closed.

Also, feminist commodity chain analysis goes beyond the macrostructural economism and, in particular, the productivism of realist commodity chain analysis, its preoccupation with changes in the structure of industrial production. Feminist commodity chain analysis is attentive to “tracking globalization” in people’s everyday lives, experiences, and imaginaries. Therefore, rather than being narrowly focused on the value-added in the material process of production, in feminist commodity chain analysis the complicity of other discourses to processes of capital accumulation is key. Production produces more than just commodities; individual and collective identities are constituted in the process of production. Feminist commodity chain analysis examines how gendering takes place within and through the process of production, and constantly articulates with other social striations.
A related critique feminist commodity chain analysis forwards is a critique of the tendency in some versions of realist commodity chain analysis, the most political versions, for an essential identity, “the working class,” to sneak back in as the basis of a common political ground. In Sydney Mintz’s celebrated study of sugar and in Edna Bonacich and Richard P. Appelbaum’s study of the apparel commodity chain, for example, the importance of gender is acknowledged but only as “supplementary” to a discussion of class. Thus, although Mintz acknowledges that sugar was a time and money saver that made possible women’s entry into the working classes in Britain, he ignores how “woman” in Britain and “woman” in the Caribbean were produced very differently through those same processes. Similarly, Bonacich and Appelbaum acknowledge that immigrant women form the bulk of apparel workers in Los Angeles, but their treatment of gender is, on their own admission, “fleeting.” Feminist commodity chain analysis demonstrates the importance of gender to theorizing class in nonessentialist terms.

Moreover, most realist commodity chain analyses ignore the constitutive link between production and consumption (“as a unity of opposites,” following Marx). Consequently, the question of how consumption and the relationship between consumption and production has changed is not a primary focus of realist commodity chain analysis even though one of the main characteristics of the new regime of “flexible accumulation” is the ability of producers to cater to ever-changing consumer needs. A study of consumption, not just production, and how they are co-constitutive and gendered, is necessary to map how commodities connect people in distant locations and enable them to imagine and perform their place in the world.

Finally, that poor producers should desire the products of their labor has been undertheorized by realist commodity chain analysis. Mintz’s study is justifiably celebrated because it does link production to consumption; however, even Mintz ignores the desires of Caribbean sugar producers, although he has a fascinating discussion of the creation of British working-class tastes for sugar. In Mintz’s work, as in Bonacich and Appelbaum’s, the idea that producers may wish for the products they produce is never entertained.
In sum, in feminist commodity chain analysis, global commodities are understood as having to work both materially and semiotically across their multi-sited lives in production and consumption. Feminist commodity chain analysis recognizes the relationality between the material and the cultural and the contingency of that relationship. It deploys gender as an analytic of power to track the open-endedness, contingency, and rupture of commodity chains. In the sections that follow, feminist commodity chain analysis offers a commentary on globalization that is more differentiated, layered, and complicated than realist commodity chain analysis.

Distant Lands, Moral Ends

The advertisements for "Madras" appeared in a sales catalog of the Lands' End clothing company in 1995. Titled "Cotton People," it is one in a series of Lands' End's Guide to the Goods catalogs that celebrate the company's sourcing directly from distant lands, "the direct merchant way." The catalogs are a visual cornucopia of consumerist choice: about 140 pages of full-color advertisements for hundreds of items of clothing, in a wide variety of colors, sizes, and prices. Alongside the Madras women's baseball shirt already mentioned are advertisements for a Madras women's tunic and a women's jumper with the accompanying text: "This Jumper's a real McCoy: hand-woven Indian Madras." lest that linguistic puzzle prove completely incomprehensible, it is cleared up two pages later with a "true story" narrative.

interspersed with the ads, the four "true story" narratives in the catalog are written in the genre of travelogues and are accompanied by pictures taken by professional photographers; that is, they are both visual and textual representations. Both author and photographer are acknowledged in newspaper-style bylines imputing a journalistic stamp of authority to the text and pictures. The catalog featuring the Madras advertisements also distinguishes the duly authorized "true story" narratives from the clothing advertisements by presenting the text and images of the stories in black and white, not color. Each of the stories is about a "real" person; we are convinced so because their presence is faithfully recorded in photographs. They are also identified by name, and each is represented as a "dedicated," "hard working," laboring personality, a human being. By
Hooray for the cotton people!

As we travel around the world in our direct merchant way, visiting mills and manufacturers, always trying to develop even better cotton products, we're always impressed by the dedication of the cotton people. They work hard, they talk straight, they persevere in often difficult circumstances.

So in this issue, we'd like you to meet some of these cotton people, who contribute so much to the cotton products we offer at Lands' End. Thanks to all of them for their hard work and hospitality, and as always thanks to you for shopping with us.

Back in 1987, Arizona farmer Larry Hancock posed for our cover. Now he's moved west, to the scorching Parker Valley. See page 27.

In the Indian village of Panapalam, Vadivel Mudaliar weaves colorful magic into Madras. See page 11.

Not a slub, not a start mark escapes the eagle eyes of fabric inspector Rita Headrick, of Tennessee's New Cherokee Plant. See page 71.

Charlie Newsom carries on a 60-year family tradition, at his cotton gin in Turkey Creek, South Carolina. See page 31.

Fig. 3. From “Cotton People,” Lands' End Direct Merchants catalog. April 1995, p. 1. Reproduced with permission of Lands' End, Inc.
linking “Cotton People”—from cotton farmer to cotton ginner to weaver to apparel factory worker to you, the consumer—Lands’ End presents a “real” commodity chain. Three of the “Cotton People” are American: one is an Arizona cotton farmer (“Larry”), the second is a South Carolina cotton ginner (“Charlie”), and the third is a fabric inspector in Tennessee (“Rita”). (See fig. 3.)

The fourth personality in the Madras story is identified as “Mudaliar” (see fig. 2). He and his wife, “Ammal,” live and work in the village of Panapakam outside the city of Madras, we are informed. The “genuineness” of the Madras cloth is traced to production in their “cottage.” Mudaliar is, in fact, the name of a caste group not a personal name. Similarly, “ammal” (“mother” in Tamil) is a suffix that predicates a woman subject, as in Moganamman or Tilakamman. Fixing “Mudaliar” and “ammal” to the male and female bodies, as the advertisement does, invokes coherence and individuality even as it erases the “real” people whose images appear by making them referents for abstract categories of caste and gender. The “original” people referred to in the images are located in a specific context. By abstracting them and generalizing their story they are made icons of Otherness.

This displacement of the Other is consolidated by underlining the race-manual work connection in the story title, “Beauty from the toil of the hand,” and in describing how the man sends the shuttle “flying and weaving . . . with his lithe brown hands.” The aesthetic that Lands’ End puts forth seemingly valorizes tradition, nature, manual work, and non-Eurocentricty, but simultaneously difference is emphasized in unspoken hierarchical binaries, those of modernity, manufacture, mental work, and whiteness. We are thereby induced to link the image with a system of expectations that have been previously codified—and, one may add, previously codified in the specific context of U.S. slavery, that raced bodies are “naturally” good at manual work and sexualized bodies at reproduction as black feminist scholars such as Angela Davis and bell hooks have argued.¹¹

But the Other is also displaced through the decontextualization of history. On the one hand, the “authenticity” of Madras is established by marking it as being the “same as it has been for hundreds of years,” unchanging and traditional and, therefore, ripe for the introduction of industry, modernity,
and progress. On the other, the untruth of that narrative of timelessness is laid bare by the identification of imperial “occupation” as the means through which Scottish tartans come to be “copied” by native South Indian weavers in the 1800s. (Presumably this is what makes the jumper “a real McCoy.”) The text tries to contain the history of the subjects within one story, the history of the commodity in global exchange, first, as a commodity imported with the Scottish regiments of the British imperial army, then, as a commodity exported as “bleeding Madras” in the 1960s, and now, as simply “Madras” in the late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century. Even as it attempts to do so, however, it ruptures and yet another story emerges. This is the story of “Mudaliar’s” forebears “who wove a similar cloth (to the Scottish tartans) called lungies,” we are told. (In Indian languages, “lungi” refers to the wrap-around lower garment that men wear, not a type of cloth.) So, “Mudaliar” (or his forebears) not only “copied” the Scottish tartan, with whatever ingenuity it took to modify the specifications of their weaving for a non-native market, but also adopted the cloth for their own clothing. In two of the pictures that show him at work on his loom “Mudaliar” is, in fact, wearing a faded Madras checked lungie (pictures at top left and bottom of fig. 2). But the Lands’ End narrator cannot see this and so convincing is the text alongside the photograph that neither do we! Retrieving the Madras story in Indian weaving and dress tells a history of not simply the commodity in global exchange but one that moves into meaningful commodity status in everyday use in the locality in which it is produced.15

Another representational strategy deployed by the catalog is the placing of the Other at the poor end of the cotton chain with the tantalizing possibility that First World consumption will translate into “a decent living,” “Mudaliar” is so poor, he is quoted as saying he cannot wear the cloth he weaves, because “it costs too much.” His nonconsumption is justified not by evaluating why he is paid so little but by invoking other tropes of difference. Now, it is not just his traditionality, or raced manual work, but his rurality that is invoked: “the boldly colored cloth would seem out of place on this modest man in his pastoral setting.” The bucolic referent, the laboring man as close to nature, hand weaving on a loom made of bamboo, is repeated recursively by embodying the cloth as “natural.” It is
"100% pure cotton," woven of "Varalakshmi cotton," and colored with "alamプラ bark and other natural dyes." There is an equation between the man and the cloth and both signs are anchored to the referents of nature linguistically. In fact, cotton is far from natural. It consumes more chemical pesticides than any other crop in the United States and in India. And in the United States over 75 percent of cotton crop was grown from genetically modified (GM) seeds in 2000.* This marks a phenomenal growth in the adoption of GM cottonseeds from around 40 percent three years previously. The trend is fast spreading to the other major cotton-growing countries in the world. But U.S. customers are enticed to wear "handspun, hand-dyed and handloomed" cloth, "cool" and "softer than they’ve ever been," from "Indian master weavers." Lands' End's imaginary, however, cannot picture the Indian weavers as consumers enjoying or desiring the cloth, only producing it; even photographs, so insistently made to present "reality" can, as convincingly, be disassembled.

But it is not just Third World producers that are represented; the Lands' End catalog simultaneously mobilizes First World consumers by constructing a moral global identity, a consumer whose individual purchase can have good effect in the South. Consumption in the North is no longer just "shining white teeth and freedom from body odors and emotions," in Theodor W. Adorno's words, but also a culture of global moralism. Consumerism becomes not simply the ideology that the consumption of more material goods is an index of self-worth, but "the active cultivation of a material sensibility for the common good," as Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff put it.* Metropolitan consumption is productive of global identities not just for northern consumers, but also for southern producers; therefore "Mudaliar" not only dons the cloth himself, but in the quote that opens this article expresses pride in his cloth and imagines his place in the world through its consumption. Sounding more like an internationalist than a supplicant, the connection he envisions to the consumer of his cloth and his hopes for goodwill between the two nation-states, the United States and India, index the open-endedness of commodity chains as they traverse different domains. The chain of signification simply cannot be closed off in the manner that realist commodity chain analysis proposes, with an identifiable beginning and end from raw material to finished product and the
orderly transmission of value from labor to capital; rather commodity chains cross borders as global connectivity discourses that link subjects from diverse locations into globalization’s seductions, albeit differentially."

As in the narrative of “Mudaliar,” the commodity chain in cotton proves brittle in the case of the other working-class subjects it links. The cotton ginner’s wife, for example, disrupts the unspoken teleological account of economic fulfillment in the First World by explaining how her husband, Charlie, is down to ginning only his own cotton crop of five or six hundred bales a year, not the six or seven thousand bales the gin once processed. Their cotton gin is one of the few “little gins left but they slowly dyin’ out,” she remarks, as everyone now takes their cotton to the “newer, faster” gin. The cotton farmer, Larry, too, has just lost his cotton farm to an agribusiness and has had to move across the state to lease a new plot of land—“hardcrabble earth, broken irrigation ditches, weeds”—from the Colorado Indian River tribes. However individually driven these men may be, the uneven impacts of the market and capitalist accumulation intrude, even in the United States. Between 1980 and 2000, at least 500,000 family farms went out of business in the United States. Most of these were small farms, reflecting the increased concentration of U.S. farming in the hands of very large family farms and agribusinesses. This consolidation has been subsidized by U.S. tax payers, with just 10 percent of all farmers receiving 61 percent of the more than $20 billion in agricultural subsidies in 1999-2000."

But it is not just through discourses of race and global moralism that Cotton People are linked in the Lands’ End catalog, their stories are also humanized by gendering them in multiple and similar ways. Each of the stories is about individuals, but these are individuals who are very much in the context of a “family,” a normative nuclear, heterosexual family. The importance of kinship and the patriline is made legible in the stories of the male weaver and the cotton ginner by a common narrative thread on the passing down (with blood and semen) of skills and the means of production—looms, land, and gins—from father to son across three generations. Gendered identities are also firmly entrenched by making women’s labor in production invisible. In the South Indian weaver household, the normative sexual division of labor most probably makes the woman responsible for dying the yarn, winding, and preparing the loom. But in the Lands’ End
story “Mudaliar’s” wife’s labor is completely erased. Her work is not mentioned once in the text, even though in the photograph she is standing next to her husband holding a reel of yarn. (Once again, there is a failure to see what is visually present.) Similarly, it is Charlie, the cotton ginner, who is valorized as the “hardworking hard-pressed cotton man,” too busy working to talk to the “reporter,” although we are informed, in passing, that his wife, Gail, runs a general store. And it is Larry, the cotton farmer, “a man with cotton farming in his soul,” who works “sixteen hours a day, seven days a week” and provides for his “now young family with a 6-year-old daughter and 11-month old twins.” Although his wife, in all probability, labors on the three other businesses besides the cotton farm that they must run to make ends meet, and also does the physical work of caring, she is completely nameless and unseen.

The labors of Gail and of Larry’s unnamed wife speak to the crisis in U.S. agriculture; for small farm families’ survival necessitates “pluriactivity” or the pursuit of multiple jobs by family members. It is estimated that 92 percent of all U.S. farming families earn incomes from off-farm jobs. Pluriactivity usually restructures the gender division of labor within households. Yet, in the Lands’ End catalog the only position these women can inhabit, in common with the South Indian woman, are as housewives. The trope of the family as a nuclear, patriarchal, heterosexual family is consolidated across space. Just as all the women are constructed as universally dependent subjects, all the men are constructed as universally hardworking breadwinners. In fact, less than a quarter of all families in the United States are made up of “married couples with their children.” Seventy percent of all women work outside the home.

Rita, the fabric inspector, is the only woman in the Lands’ End catalog who is valorized for her labor in production; there is no mention of her husband, although there is of her male boss. She too, however, is portrayed as working only to fulfill her role as a mother in generational reproduction: “I want my children to go to college,” she says. Thereby Rita is also constituted within the regulated boundaries of gender identity, not as housewife this time, but as mother. However, she too disrupts the coherence of that construction by reading back the very local social relations of gender that position her unequally—she works at the “New
Cherokee” plant because it’s “about the best-paid place a woman can work around here in rural Tennessee.” Tennessee had an average poverty rate of 14 percent in the late 1990s, higher than the national U.S. average. In general, rural poverty rates in the United States are higher than urban poverty rates. For people in female householder families, poverty rates were at least four times higher than the national average.25

While the Lands’ End catalog weaves First World consumers into the cotton commodity chain through a discourse of global moralism, consent is simultaneously fabricated for neoliberalism by encouraging First World producers to become internationally competitive and efficient subjects. Rita, the fabric inspector, and “everyone we [the Lands’ End journalist] talk to at the plant” in rural Tennessee are “very aware that they’re competing in a world market, whose customers are no longer bound by national allegiance.” The threat of factories moving overseas, we are informed, keeps these workers “working that much harder to make sure the quality of their fabric is first-class.” This is, of course, no idle threat. Between 1973 and 1999, an estimated 650,000 jobs in the U.S. apparel industry were lost. Of these, an estimated 300,000 jobs were transferred to Mexico as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At another node of the commodity chain, the U.S. textile industry lost 150,000 jobs in the decade of the 1990s, and textile mills continue to close in the southern cotton belt.26 An overwhelming number of textile and apparel workers who lost jobs were women and minorities. The national border as it is multiply traversed through commodity flows and labor defines the Other both beyond the nation and within.

Thus, Lands’ End articulates a cultural politics of labor’s visibility that is raced and gendered even as it brings, or attempts to bring, distant people into conversation with each other in ways that realist commodity chain analyses are incapable of seeing. A semiotic reading of the value-chain challenges one that is merely economic and productivist. Commodities were shown to be constituted materially and culturally. The close reading of the catalog of a U.S. multinational corporation demonstrates that the global commodity chain is not linear, unidirectional, and closed; it is constantly opened-up and refracted even as it weaves subjects from a range of social positions and locations into the fabric of consent.
Producing Cotton: Changing Wage and Labor Relations in South India

The basic raw material for Madras shirts is fabric that is woven from cotton fiber. The export of cotton yarn, fabric, and garments still provides a major link between India and the global economy and accounts for as much as 40 percent of India’s exports. India has the largest area in the world under cotton production. Cotton is grown by millions of farmers of all classes in nine states in the North, West, and South of the country. Cotton textile production is India’s core industrial activity, second only to agriculture in employment, with higher value-added and export earnings than any other form of manufacture. Given its economic weight, and the fact that cotton was a powerful symbol of nationalist protest against British colonialism, the cotton commodity chain—raw cotton, yarn, fabric, garments—was one of the most regulated in post-Independence India from 1947 to the mid-1980s.

In the 1990s, however, the government of India, at the behest of the International Monetary Fund, implemented a series of neoliberal policies aimed at “freeing up the market” by dismantling the domestic regulatory apparatus and allowing foreign capital and consumer products into the country. The free import of raw cotton is now allowed and the ban on the export of raw cotton has been liberalized. Ceilings or quantitative restrictions on the export of yarn, which were in place to protect and promote the small-scale industrial sector, have been eased. Textile mill machinery can now be imported more freely and tax breaks are available to exporters of yarn and cloth. The spinning industry has also been deregulated. Government subsidies to farmers for food, credit, and power and special schemes for small-scale manufacturers are in the process of being reduced or eliminated. For the first time in India’s post-Independence history, controls in the form of quantitative restrictions on imports of many types of yarn, fabric, and garments were removed on April 1, 2001, in keeping with World Trade Organization mandated deregulations. In 2005, the Multi-Fiber Arrangement, which controls the world trade in textiles through a set of bilateral quotas between the United States/Europe and developing countries, will also be dismantled.

These neoliberal policies have increased the vulnerability of Indian
cotton farmers to fluctuations in international cotton prices in unprecedented ways. Domestic cotton prices are now closely guided by international cotton price movements so that developments in other major cotton-producing regions in the world (especially China) and fluctuations in the rupee/dollar exchange rate have a bearing on the returns to cotton farmers. (This is in addition to price fluctuations due to the climate, the monsoon, pests, and textile mill demand.) Further along the Madras commodity chain, producers of cotton yarn, textiles, and garments are also now vulnerable to international economic events, as the Asian crisis of the late 1990s and the U.S. slowdown of the early 2000s demonstrated. After the decontrol of imports in April 2001, cheap textiles and garments from Bangladesh, China, Taiwan, and South Korea have increased the competition for Indian manufacturers in the domestic market. The cotton commodity chain is, therefore, a good example with which to challenge realist commodity chain analysis.

Cotton has been one of the most profitable crops for farmers in India. It is also, however, one of the most financially intensive and risky crops to cultivate. Up-front costs for seeds, labor, and pesticides are high, and cotton has been increasingly vulnerable to pest infestations and low prices. Despite the risk, the long-term trend at the national level has been an increase in the acreage under cotton. This is also true for the state of Andhra Pradesh (see chart on following page). In 2001, Andhra Pradesh produced more cotton than any other state in India. Since the late 1980s, farmers of all classes have taken to cotton cultivation. Consequently, cropping patterns have changed in significant ways. Cotton uses more women’s labor than most other crops grown in this part of the country, so the gender dynamics of such a transformation—not just in everyday lives of local people but through globalization—warrant study.

Gender ideologies naturalize women’s and men’s work as different in South India, as they do elsewhere. They are sedimented as social practices in the sexual division of labor in agriculture; therefore it is considered women’s work (nādivalla paunila) to spread the manure on the fields in preparation, sow the seeds, weed, and pick cotton. Men’s work (mayarulla paunila) is to plough and level the fields, hoe, irrigate, and spray fertilizers and pesticides. Because there is next to no mechanization, with the increase in
the area and the intensity of cotton cultivation both women and men are working more. Yet, given the sexual division of labor, on average, for each acre of irrigated cotton, women are employed for one hundred days more than men. This is mainly because work that is gendered female, especially cotton picking, is so very labor intensive.

The most common type of employment available to poor women and children—those who have little or no land and must therefore rely on selling their labor—is casual or daily wage work (roolu coorle). The availability of daily work is intermittent—it depends on whether or not there is a demand for labor to undertake some particular agricultural task such as plowing, weeding, fertilizing, or harvesting. Similar to most work in the informal sector, daily casual work is insecure and vulnerable and fluctuates erratically with the seasons. Typically, landowners assess their labor needs each morning and go to the spatially distinct localities (gere) of the village in which the poorest and “lowest” castes live to hire the laborers they need. In Telengana villages in Andhra Pradesh, the site of this research, the “untouchable” or low castes are Madiga and Mala; therefore landowners or their wives or supervisors tend to go to the Madiga-gere or the Mala-gere for this purpose. Depending on prevailing wage rates and the urgency of the cultivator’s demand, a daily wage is negotiated. Often, neighbors in the gere recruit each other for this work and share information on the prevailing wage rate. The “freedom to go wherever the wage rate is highest” (instead of being “tied” to one employer in return for work during the off-season) is a stronger ideology today than in the early 1980s. It is articulated by both laborers and employers.

In addition to daily wage work, two other types of casual labor arrangements prevail. Group work (gumpu or grata panni) is paid according to a pre-negotiated contract or grata between a landowner and a group of, on average, ten to twenty women and one to four men. The transplanting of rice or onion and harvesting of food grains, groundnut (peanut), or onion on a specified plot are the most common tasks that are contracted out to groups (gumpu). In the late 1990s, not just the transplanting and harvesting of grains, but the weeding of cotton, became contracted work in some villages. The second type of work, piece-rate work (kg lekka or saltu lekka panni), is paid according to the number of kilograms of cotton picked
or the number of rows weeded. Unlike time-rated work, such as daily casual work, piece-rate work links the wage per day to individual productivity and group work links the amount one can earn per day to group productivity. The frequency of piece-rate and group work, in which workers now discipline themselves and each other to be more and more efficient, is increasing. In both types of labor, the working day is longer, the pace of work is furious, and the self-disciplining, through monitoring of oneself or of others in the group, to produce more is constant. These disciplinary practices reduce the supervisory role of landowners. But simultaneously, consent for the new work regime is voiced in workers' own preferences for the "free choice" to move to a job of their choosing and in their self-representations as "efficient" workers.

The most assured and secure form of employment for agricultural labor households is permanent attached work (ghasam), in which a laborer works full time with a single landowner and is paid an annual wage. The relationship is supposed to be a yearly contract, but in the past many lasted several years, sometimes even decades, because they were tied to the repayment of loans. According to prevailing gender ideologies, only boys and men are employed as permanent attached laborers (ghasaghalat), as the long hours of work at the landowners' house would leave little time for women to do all the reproductive work (gendered female) in their own homes.

The table on the following page tracks changes in the daily wages paid to different categories of agricultural labor between 1984-85 and 1998-99. It shows that women's, men's, and children's real wage rates increased between 1984-85 and 1996-97. In 1996-97, female wages were a substantially higher proportion of the permanent male labor wage than ten years before and at peak times they were equal to them. On average, children's wages were also a higher ratio to permanent male wages in 1996-97 than earlier. And the male casual wage, which used to be lower than the standard labor unit, was equal or higher than it in 1997. Until 1996-97 these findings confirmed the female labor absorptive nature of agricultural intensification, the increasing trend toward casualization of labor relations, the augmenting value of children's labor to household income, and the continuing but decreasing wage inequality between the sexes.29

Despite the increase in women's employment and real earnings until
Changes in Daily Agricultural Wages, Telengana, Andhra Pradesh, 1984-85 to 1998-99

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<td><strong>Female</strong></td>
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<td>Nominal Wage in rupees</td>
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<td>15.00-35.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real Wages (1960-61 rupees)*</td>
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<td>1.00-1.25</td>
<td>1.07-2.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanent Male Wage Equivalent</td>
<td>0.31-0.51</td>
<td>0.53-0.67</td>
<td>0.50-1.00</td>
<td>0.42-0.97</td>
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<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
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<td>Nominal Wage in rupees</td>
<td>4.50-10.00</td>
<td>20.00-25.00</td>
<td>30.00-35.00</td>
<td>30.00-40.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real Wages (1960-61 rupees)*</td>
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<td>1.66-2.08</td>
<td>2.14-2.49</td>
<td>1.74-2.32</td>
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<td>Permanent Male Wage Equivalent</td>
<td>0.46-1.03</td>
<td>0.88-1.11</td>
<td>1.00-1.17</td>
<td>0.83-1.11</td>
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<td>Real Wages (1960-61 rupees)*</td>
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<td><strong>Permanent Male</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nominal Wage in rupees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real Wages (1960-61 rupees)*</td>
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<td>1.87</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanent Male Wage Equivalent</td>
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+ Daily wage equivalent was calculated by dividing the annual average wage of male permanent labor by 360 days.
the late 1990s, life for agricultural labor/small-cultivator households is very precarious, with loans often needed to meet even daily consumption needs for food and healthcare. The assessment that the quality of life has not improved was voiced by the majority of women and men of the 125 small-cultivator and landless households that I surveyed in two villages in 1997. Seventy percent believed that the quality of food consumption was worse and 82 percent thought that people’s health was the same or had deteriorated. This was despite the fact that 54 percent believed that their dependence on the rural elite had diminished. In a follow-up survey in 1999, I found that the real daily casual wages of females and males and the real wages of permanent attached labor had decreased. Only the real daily wages of children had increased, if marginally. If the decrease in adult real wages is the unfortunate beginning of a longer term trend, which it seems to be, we may expect increasing indebtedness, migration, and perhaps a politicization of these concerns as basic consumption is compromised and the quality of life diminishes further.

A realist commodity chain analysis of the Madras cotton shirt would stop with an assessment of Lands’ End, a buyer-driven apparel chain, and would miss the transformations in agrarian work relations in the cotton fields of South India. With state deregulation and financial intensification, these changes index the shifting relations between capital and labor and are crucial to an understanding of the global political economy. A realist commodity chain analysis would also miss the interweaving of these changes with the cultural politics of gender, to which the next section turns.

Producing Femininities and Masculinities
In this section I study three sites—hybrid cottonseed production, discourses on spending, and permanent labor arrangements—to unpack how processes of gendering produce identities and signify power. In so doing, feminist commodity chain analysis relates processes of gendering to other local social striations, those of age and caste, in particular.

The cotton commodity chain has been lengthened backward so that cottonseed production has itself been commodified. Whereas earlier, seeds of cotton, like those of other crops, would be stored from the previous harvest, they have now been replaced by hybrids. Many of these hybrid
seeds do not biologically reproduce themselves; they must be manufac-
tured in each crop cycle. Andhra Pradesh is promoted by the state as “the
‘Seed State’ of India, with its progressive farmers taking up production of
seed for a wide variety of crops on behalf of Government and of private
companies.” No other crop in the region (other than chili) is as profitable
as cottonseed with returns of around Rs. 30,000–40,000 per acre (worth
$666–$888 in 1999). In 1999–2000, one seed company owner estimated that
there were about 17,000 acres in Mahbubnagar, Kurnool, and Anantapur
districts of Andhra Pradesh State devoted to seed cotton production.

Although celebrated by the state and seed corporations as “modern”
and “scientific,” in practice, hybrid cottonseed production combines tied
labor at one end of the commodity chain with agribusiness contract farm-
ing at the other. It is children’s labor that is tied for the whole season to one
seed grower through a cash loan or a bag of grain. During the period
when cotton flowering is at a peak, for 100 to 150 days, ten to fifteen chil-
dren are employed per acre of seed cotton. In the households I surveyed,
most of the children’s parents had been paid an “advance” before the sea-
son; that is, a loan of Rs. 500 to Rs. 3,000 (worth $11 to $70 in 1999 or 25 to
200 days’ wages). The majority of children laboring in hybrid seed cotton
production are from households that are poor–landless or small holders–
and in which adults, too, hire out their labor as the primary source of
livelihood. Most are from low-caste Mala and Madiga households,
although in recent years they have been joined by children from the service
castes (Boyya, Golla, Kurruva, Dudekula, Sakkali) as well.

The increase in children’s real wages documented in the Table on page
754 is thus specific to the particular context of cottonseed production in
this part of Andhra Pradesh. It has increased the incomes of agricultural
labor and small-cultivators households in inviable ways. It has also
meant that a greater number of children, girls particularly, but since the
mid-1990s, boys as well, are being taken out of school and employed as
full-time, independent laborers. As Srinivas Reddy, one of the big culiva-
tors interviewed, remarked, “The schools have emptied out, except for
the Reddy [high-caste] children.”

Children as young as six years of age work as “seed children” (seedu pallalu).
Their day begins at around 8:30 in the morning and lasts until 6 or 7 in the
evening. For working a nine-and-a-half to ten-hour day, children get paid Rs. 15-20. In other words, for working, on average, at least two hours more than adults, seed children get paid 75 to 100 percent of the adult female wage. In addition to their daily wage, children are paid extra for delinting cotton (Rs. 10 bag of 25 kg cotton) and for catching pests (Rs. 0.05/worm). Children are not only considered a more reliable source of labor by seed producers who employ them for a whole season, instead of day-to-day, but are also easier to discipline with physical abuse. Physical force is simply not acceptable anymore in the case of adult workers.

Hybrid cottonseed is produced by cross-fertilizing the flowers of two different varieties of cotton manually. Every afternoon, the flowers of one variety—the “female” (adi podhu) are emasculated, that is, their pollen-producing anthers or reproductive organs are removed, and a plastic tag with a hole in the middle (significantly red in color) is thrust around their pistils (the female, ovule-bearing organ of the flower that has a sticky top called the stigma) to mark each. The next morning, the pollen-laden anthers from the flowers of the other variety—the “male” (moça podhu) are rubbed against the stigma of the female flowers (which have been tagged the previous day). “One male flower crosses around six female flowers,” Mahboobee, a girl aged twelve or thirteen, informed me. This work, of emasculation and cross-pollination, which I call flotal sex work, is mostly done by girls. “Naturally.” Three or so days later, if the “crossing” has been successful, the plant begins “to provide a womb” (qabblam) for the cotton boll and its hybrid seeds.

The most productive seed children “set” 120 to 150 bolls per cotton plant. Each child is responsible for cross-fertilizing flowers on 130 to 150 cotton plants a day. The naturalization of girls’ labor as particularly suited to hybrid cotton cross-pollination is socially constructed by both the seed producers and laborers around the girls’ “nimble fingers” and, especially, the work of emasculating flower buds, which takes “small, delf fingers” (chetulu timgtai). The girls’ “quickness” and “agility” in moving between the plants in a densely cropped field are also reasons why they are “naturally suited to the work.” Girls are employed because they are the “same height as the plants” and “supple benders”; adults who have to keep bending to get at the buds “constantly complain of back pain.” In contrast, girls are
“contented workers,” who turn up for work “happily” day after day, and “don’t rebel.” Girls are thus embodied as disciplined, laboring subjects through their extraordinary suitability for hybrid seed cotton work.

Both seed growers and laborers also gender girls’ labor as such through a discourse of sexuality. Emalesation and cross-pollination are, as we have seen, sexualized by sexing the flowers of the two varieties that are crossed “male” and “female,” in Telugu, but, more importantly, floral sex work is inscribed as appropriate for girls, premenarche. Gender ideologies take the form of proscriptions on adult women performing floral sex work and extend to girls who have reached menarche (“who have become big people [pedda mansa]”). One seed grower, Ramesh Babu, explained, “After girls reach a marriageable age, parents don’t like to send them.” Normative ideologies apart, many girls are in fact being employed postpuberty. Even though the seed children are typically contracted by a grower for the entire season, girls who are menstruating are expected to stay away for a few days haunted by the specter that they will destroy the yield of the entire cottonseed crop. “Like pickle [a hot Indian relish], like if a menstruating woman makes pickle, the entire thing will go bad,” Shankaramma explained. Anamakka, whose granddaughter does floral sex work, said, “If a menstruating woman tries to cross-fertilize cotton, the unripened fruit will burn or drop before it develops fully. It simply won’t stand.”

The laboring subject and the sexual and reproductive subject, working in the thoroughly modern, scientific activity of hybrid cross-pollination, are mapped thereby onto the young female body. Of course, this stratification by age also corresponds to the fact that girls are paid less than adult women.

In 1999, however, more boys were being engaged in seed cotton work. Earlier, it was likely that boys were in school while their sisters worked. Now, similar to girls, boys too are in arrangements of labor tied through loans. As with the girls, some part of the advance their parents have been paid is withheld out of their weekly wage packet. Because girls and boys are now working together on the same tasks, and being paid equally, the possibility opens up that gender ideologies could change. In fact, the labor market continues to be segmented by sex. Boys continue to be gendered male in at least two ways. They are sent back to the farmer’s fields after
dinner to delint the cottonseeds from the cotton bolls. They work until late, sometimes midnight, and sleep in the field. Although the extra “night work” that boys do inevitably increases the burdens and length of their work day, restricting this activity to boys also polices girls’ sexuality because they are not allowed to go “roaming around” at night.

A second way boys are gendered male is by giving them back a portion of their weekly earnings as “tea money” (chai paisa). Girls, on the other hand, turn in their entire weekly earnings toward everyday family consumption expenses, mostly for food. In the process, girls and boys are being constructed as different sorts of consumers. The money boys get is spent on movies; little treats like tea, biscuits, or fruit; and, as they get older, local cigarettes (beedies), country liquor (kalhu, sara), and gambling. This not only germinates the idea that male wages, at least some part of them, are meant for the personal expenses that define masculinity, and not everyday household reproduction, but it also resonates in the ways in which space and time are gendered. Boys are more likely to be seen in village weekly markets, at tea stalls, under shady trees, or at other public places; they are more likely to travel on buses and tractors; and they are much more likely than girls to be seen about at night. The prerogative of men of all classes to spend a portion and sometimes all their earnings on personal consumption is thereby reproduced and with it ideologies that mark masculinity. In the process, gendered uses of public spaces and public forms of transportation are also reinscribed.

The same ideologies that construct masculinity by making it men’s prerogative to spend at least a part of their earnings on personal consumption also do so by deeming it men’s responsibility to provide for productive investments in agriculture and bulky household expenses most commonly for daughters’ dowries (katnam), funerals, major illnesses, and house repairs. In many landless/small-cultivator households the savings to cover these expenditures simply do not exist and the getting of loans to do so is tied to their men’s relationships with men in the richer households. In some cases, rich male cultivators provide direct loans of money, bullocks, or tools for agriculture, and in others, they provide collateral or stand as surety for loans. Repeatedly, poor women articulated the belief that, “Women’s earnings are good only for consumption. It is men who get the loans.”
Masculinities are also being expressed in changing ideologies of permanent *ghasam* (work). In the late 1990s, men in agricultural-labor households were increasingly withdrawing from permanent attached labor arrangements. Not surprisingly, the men who do this work, which is often tied through debt indenture to particular landlords for many years, are poor and mainly of the Mala and Madiga castes. Those who hire permanent laborers, on the other hand, are usually the richest cultivators of the high Reddy and Kamma castes. The men who had withdrawn from attached labor arrangements articulated their reasons for doing so in terms of attached labor being “excessive,” “demeaning,” and “unfree.” Naganna added, “It’s too much work, it’s too difficult work.” Partly as a response to withdrawal, even the terminology used to describe permanent labor relationships is changing. Instead of *ghasaghadlu*, the men are now being called *master* (supervisor) suggesting the quality of the relationship is being transformed from a form of indentured servitude to contract employment.

There are three possible and overlapping explanations for men’s withdrawal from *ghasam*. First, material conditions have changed. The availability of land to lease has increased; therefore men who own very little or no land can now make cultivation and sale of produce their predominant means of livelihood. Cultivation on leased land substitutes for the sale of their labor through permanent employment. Second, the articulation of freedom from permanent labor relations is coterminous with the rise of low-caste politics in Andhra Pradesh State and all over the country in the 1990s. A third possible explanation is an incipient awareness of environmental injustice. With the increased use of chemical fertilizers and, particularly, chemical pesticides on cotton, everyone who works in the fields is exposed to toxins as they are carried in the air and leach into the water and soil. The impact on the young permanent laborers whose job it is to spray fertilizers and pesticides is the most obvious. Ravelamma, a mother whose teenage son has stopped hiring himself out for spraying work, explained, “When chemical pesticides [mudalidu] are born, we all die.”

The most extreme manifestation of ideologies of masculinity is in the suicides of hundreds of men in Andhra Pradesh. In 1998, as cotton prices plummeted and the costs of production, particularly from increased use of pesticides, soared, more than 300 men, nearly all from small farm fami-
lies, committed suicide. Some farmers lost their entire crop because they planted spurious hybrid seeds; others lost the crop to pests that refused to be controlled by repeated sprayings of pesticides. Ironically, it was the deepening debt to pesticide dealers that precipitated suicide. Men killed themselves by imbibing the very pesticides that caused deep economic and psychological distress. "[P]esticides have become the curd-rice of the peasantry," a contemporary Telugu ballad darkly parodies."

This crisis of masculinity is also morbidly enacted in another kind of disembodiment, the sale of kidneys by men to finance cotton cultivation or pay off debt. In 2000, The Hindu newspaper reported interviews with several marginal farmers in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh who had made the trip to Delhi to sell their kidneys for Rs. 50,000 ($1,200). One of the farmers quoted explains, "We feel proud of ourselves. We did not commit suicide by consuming pesticide. We sold kidneys from our own bodies. We did not resort to the rule of beg-borrow-or-steal to clear our debts. And, in the process we gave new lease of life to many terminally ill patients." His wife, on the contrary, is reported to have "said in a choked voice that she would not hesitate to shoulder the responsibility of her husband and the two female children henceforth. Breaking into tears, she said, 'He may be looking hale and hearty after the operation. But, surely he is ill. He cannot lift a bucket of water. He is no longer a strong man.'" In Judith Butler's account, bodies are "a peculiar nexus of culture and choice, and 'existing' one's body becomes a personal way of taking up and reinterpreting received gender norms." In the case of the Andhra Pradesh cotton farmers, exiting one's body is the personal expression of some men.

Thus, the cultural politics of work and labor relations and of social reproduction are constitutively gendered in the cotton fields of South India. The interarticulation of material vulnerabilities and social practices and the gender/sexual relations of work and social reproduction are neither homeostatic nor do they necessarily deepen patriarchy. "Patriarchy" as a singular concept is incapable of explaining the exiting of bodies as crises of masculinity. Gendering powerfully affects men's psyche even as their practices are responses to changing political and economic conditions such as the increase in women's and children's real wages, a downturn in small-holder fortunes, the new weightiness of their votes, or the expense
of a daughter’s dowry. Even if realist commodity chain analysis had paid attention to the increasing casualization, self-disciplining, and tied-labor relations as sources of surplus extraction along the cotton commodity chain, it could not have analyzed how these are imbricated in gendered norms and proscriptions and how they metamorphose over time. Realist commodity chain analysis ignores the complicity of other discourses with the process of capital accumulation. In contrast, in the discussion of floral sex work, spending patterns, and permanent labor arrangements feminist commodity chain analysis enabled an exploration of how age and caste, in addition to gender, regulate the determination and circulation of value. Feminist commodity chain analysis, moreover, highlights the contradictory, contingent, and recursive processes of mediation at work as commodity chains are constituted materially and culturally.

Conclusion
In this article feminist commodity chains are theorized as an alternative way to frame an understanding of power. As a critique of realist commodity chain analysis, the juxtaposition of consumption and production of a Madras cotton shirt dislodged the grand narrative of capital accumulation through teleological change. In contrast to realist commodity chain’s emphasis on the First World, specifically, its analysis of how multinational corporations located in the metropoles drive the producer-end or buyer-end of the commodity chain, feminist commodity chain analysis is cognizant of how globalization is locally constituted, mediated, and experienced in the First World and the Third. The uneven, contradictory, and contingent impacts of capitalism as it metamorphoses were explored in diverse, but connected, localities and identities.

Although arguing for locational situatedness, the purpose was not, however, to resurrect the binary geographies of First World/Third World or the narrative of progress that underlies realist commodity chain analysis. Instead, feminist commodity chain analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding representations of place and of the space linking uneven worlds, not just the quantum of capital and commodities as they flow across national borders. Epistemologically, feminist commodity chain analysis goes beyond the confines of narrow economism, an understanding
of how wealth is distributed between “cores” and “peripheries,” to be mindful of the cultural politics of representation and visualization. The reflection on racialized and gendered representations of labor’s place and global moralism in the Lands’ End catalog are examples of this concern.

Realist commodity chain analysis is also critiqued for its limited concern with productivism. Feminist commodity chain analysis contributes to an understanding of how production produces individual and collective identities discursively and to the complicity of other discourses in the process of capital accumulation. For example, both Rita, the Lands’ End fabric inspector, and Mahboobee, the floral sex worker, are produced as women through and in production and with the complicity of other discourses, global market competitiveness in Rita’s case and norms of appropriate patterns of behavior in Mahboobee’s. Feminist commodity chain analysis also emphasizes the importance of other identities, not just that of class, and thus opens up the possibility of theorizing class in nonessentialist terms. Therefore, for example, although both the working-class Charlie and the working-class Nagamma are regulated to be more efficient workers projecting the possibility of a transcendent working-class internationalism would ignore the very different processes of inclusion and division on which their identities as men rest.

By its attentiveness to the interarticulation of the material and the cultural, feminist commodity chain analysis also disrupts the binary between production and consumption. Although realist commodity chain analysis claims to be about commodity circuits, consumption culture is often ignored. Two examples in this article illustrate how engaging consumption culture in the same frame as production culture frees the analysis to include not just the major contradictions between capital and labor but also partial resolutions and limited transformations: global moralism morphs to the possibility of imagining cosmopolitanism in the case of “Mudaliar”; a culture of male personal consumption in Andhra Pradesh reproduces gendered generational inequality but simultaneously evokes the possibility of withdrawal from permanent labor arrangements and precipitates suicide and kidney sales as dire resolutions to crises of masculinity. In other words, commodity chains are not closed but fragile and subject to change.
In conclusion, feminist commodity chain analysis enables a commentary on globalization in terms of the uneven impacts on everyday lives. As consumption is reimagined and production is multiply reorganized, feminist commodity chain analysis forces us to rethink what commodity chains are and how they must be understood.

NOTES
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1. No wonder the city’s name was changed to Chennai!
2. Definition of terms I frequently use in this article: “Neoliberalism,” the major economic ideology since the 1990s, has led governments to deregulate, privatize, and restructure national economies so as to become more internationally competitive.

The definition of “realist” as “devoted to what is real, as opposed to what is imaginary” is from the Oxford English Dictionary, see http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/.


Finally, I prefer “multinational” to “transnational” to describe corporations that cross national boundaries, although transnational is preferred by realist commodity chain analysts like Gary Gerfeli (“Shifting Governance Structures in Global Commodity Chains, with Special Reference to the Internet,” American Behavioral Scientist 44 [June 2001]). This is because, although “trans” national signals that many of the largest corporations have interests beyond national bounds and would like to function in a manner similar to supranational institutions, the nation continues to be an important definer of boundaries and all corporations still have to be incorporated in one nation state, although they might operate in multiple.
7. See, for example, Diane Elson, "Gender Awareness in Modeling Structural Adjustment," *World Development* 23 (November 1995): 1851-68.
10. "Tracking Globalization" is the name of Robert Foste's new book series for Indiana University Press. It will focus on how "commodities in motion" allow people to imagine new identities and reevaluate their place in the world.


24. The contemporary relationship of U.S. imperialism to Native American peoples haunts the lands' end stories, in the appropriations of land, as in Charlie's lease from the Colorado River Indian tribes, and of signs, as in "The New Cherokee."


28. On average, women pick 20-30 kg of cotton per day. At the peak of the season, I even recorded one woman who picked 54 kg. By comparison, one mechanical, five row cotton picker, commonly used in California and the U.S. cotton South picks, on average, 60,000 lbs or 27,000 kg per day.


31. There are usually about 2,450 plants per acre, 80 percent "female" and 20 percent "male." Seeds are planted at a distance of four feet from each other.

32. All quotes, here and to the end of this section, are from interviews conducted in 1997 and 1999.

33. In 1999, the introduction of "male sterile" varieties of hybrid cottonseed had significant implications. These varieties cut the labor demand in half, because the pollen-bearing reproductive organs of one of the two varieties to be crossed is sterile. With no risk of self-pollination, emasculation (or removing the stamens) and the tagging of each bud on the "female" plant variety is unnecessary. More adult women were being employed to do the work of cross-fertilization because it is emasculation of buds that girls (and young boys) are constructed as being most adept at. By 2001, after the failure of a couple of "male-sterile" crops, many seed growers had switched back to the heterosexual variety.

34. The withdrawal of men from permanent attached labor relations is also noted in studies of the other regions in Andhra Pradesh state and in several other Indian
states, such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. See da Costa and Venkateshwarlu; and Anil Kumar Vaddiraju, “Emergence of Backward Castes in South Telengana: Agrarian Change and Grass Roots Politics,” Economic and Political Weekly 34 (February 1999): 425-30; Undefeated Relations.

35. From one or two pesticide sprayings per crop cycle in 1984-85, the number of sprayings had increased to as many as thirty times per crop cycle by 1995-96. In general, cotton consumes 55 percent of all pesticides produced in India. Andhra Pradesh accounts for 25-30 percent of the total pesticide used in the whole country.
