I want to begin by thanking the editors of this special issue for the opportunity to reflect critically upon my contributions to research in the arena of media and minority representation. I came to this field when I was a television news producer. I was struck by the lack of journalists of colour on the floor of the newsroom and puzzled by the lack of critical and nuanced attention given to stories related to race. This led me to complete a review of the literature on media and minority relations when I became a postdoctoral fellow. I made recommendations for future research in this area, based on interviews I conducted with journalists, communication scholars, and leaders of not-for-profits. It has been particularly gratifying for me to see that this piece has proven valuable to other scholars who are now conducting research on this topic. I was asked to do a follow-up piece on research on immigration and media in Canada (Mahtani, 2008).

More recently, my research is exploring diversity—and the complicit and complicated use of this term in newsrooms. Diversity is employed in a myriad of ways in news discourse, as diversity has been seen as not making just good moral sense, but also good business cents, too. My research demonstrates that some newsrooms have undergone what I have come to call “diversity fatigue”—when journalists and senior media managers seem to be discouraged with the implementation of initiatives to diversify representations, including but not limited to workshops, training, and rainbow rolodexes. To counter this syndrome, organizations like the Poynter Institute—a school for journalists, future journalists, and teachers of journalists—have devised an alternative framing for diversity, insisting that a commitment to diversity simply means a commitment to excellence in journalism. Focusing on teaching students the value of complexity in stories, providing ample context, and ensuring that stories include the voices of different kinds of people, Poynter is working with journalism schools and successful journalists to develop an alternative approach to the diversity debate. I am curious about this positioning and look forward to learning more as I continue my research.

At this point, however, I feel it is more helpful—and, indeed, more important—to focus on the ways that research in this area has been examined than to...
talk about my own work. I have been surprised recently by the critiques leveled against research in this area. These critiques are not dissimilar from ones that we also hear in our classrooms among impassioned students. In my view, these criticisms deserve a closer look. A better understanding of these critiques will help us become better scholars and teachers. Thus, I work through some general, vernacular comments about the ways that this research has been framed to address some of the criticisms.

**Critique one: We do not celebrate the good stuff**

I often hear this critique when I am at a dinner party and am invited to speak about the work I do. The response is one of dismay: “Why are you always going on about what’s bad? We now have *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and Ian Hanomansing on TV—doesn’t that show that progress is being made?”

Put another way, sociologist Sean Hier, in his critique of research on media and minority relations, points out that most findings “fail to address (or simply ignore) important changes taking place in Canadian culture over the past three decades” (Hier, 2008, p. 132). By focusing on predominant paradigms of misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and silence in media and minority debates, we are simply refusing to see the cloud’s silver lining, namely, “the potential influence that media have on patterns of ethnoracial harmony, acceptance and incorporation in the country” (Hier, 2008, p. 132).

This harks back to “red-boots multiculturalism” for me. In the late 1970s, with the emergence of multicultural policy, we saw an emphasis placed on funding ethnic groups’ celebration of fun, food, and festivals. I see some parallels here. While it may well be useful to look at the particular ways anti-racism is articulated in some media coverage, I think there are some very real political reasons this area has not been researched: precisely because it can create a space that unwittingly emphasizes the supposed decrease of racism in media representations. Hier claims that “racism in Canada is not as pervasive as many analysts suggest” (Hier, 2008, p. 135). I would suggest that racism is only taking on more subtle, pernicious, and complicit forms, both in the academy and in media representations. Racism may not always be as explicit as it was in my parents’ day; but it surely persists, despite more progressive practices and policies in an era of neoliberalism. Thus, beliefs such as Hier’s are troubling, both in their pervasiveness and because they ignore the very real material impact of racist representations on people’s everyday lives.

**Critique two: We are too specific**

It has also been said that research on media and minorities has relied on a key methodological approach, critical discourse analysis, and that the time periods chosen are far too narrow to make justifiable generalizations. For example, Hier comments that “analysts select media coverage over certain periods of time or select coverage pertaining to certain events, thereby ignoring other events” (Hier, 2008, p. 132). Researchers have also been chastised for apparently focusing only on mainstream media, as opposed to what has been problematically deemed “the ethnic press.” I would counter, simply, that we are seeing an emerging plethora of studies analyzing the role of the ethnic media (see the work of Faiza Hirji (in
press), Catherine Murray, Sherry Yu, Daniel Ahadi, and Karim Karim (2007), among others and that these critiques are, today, largely unfounded. Further, discourse analysis is used to unveil the dynamics of power in a text and the production of a text. This requires careful reading and dissection. Moreover, connected to my point above, to trivialize work in the field because of its supposed (specific) limited scope in space and time is to neglect the very real, intense, and local natures of racial marginalization that mainstream media representations can—and often do—generate and effect.

**Critique three: We are too general**

I am even more concerned by the ongoing belief that we are only here to show that racism exists in media representations. Some erroneously believe that research be divided into dichotomous camps: either emphasizing that racism exists or that it does not. I think our research is more nuanced than that. Hier states that “we require a greater amount of empirical data before we can accept the all-encompassing claim that mainstream media available in Canada only misrepresent minorities” (Hier, 2008, p. 133). I have yet to see a study that insists that this is the media’s only role. No one is denying the reality that media also do include more positive representations. But to generalize media researchers in this way denies the complexity of our work. It is not about providing more positive content; rather, it is my hope that we offer up portrayals that more accurately reflect minorities in all their multidimensionality. These kinds of critiques allow a focus on what the researcher did not do, rather than what they did well. It is precisely because we do not have enough studies that point out the pernicious power and salience of racism that we continue to produce research that points to the varied forms of racism in representations.

**Critique four: Keep ourselves out of it—we have an axe to grind**

Hier insists, “almost all analysts have a self-avowed commitment to exposit racism in all its forms and manifestations, [and as such] they tend to seek out explicit examples of stereotypical, sensational and spectacular media coverage” (Hier, 2008, p. 132). Similar criticisms have been directed toward my own research as well, insisting that if I was not a woman of colour, I surely would not be fighting for social justice through my research. But is this the right question? Should we not be asking instead what role our identities play in the acquisition and analysis of our research? It is valuable for us to remember the implication of the personal in the analysis of the study of inquiry and consider how our own personal standpoint affects our evaluation. Some of us (and, it can indeed be easily argued, all of us) have a personal relationship with our research; we may be people of colour or former journalists, among other alliances. But the issue here is first and foremost not one of identity, but one of transparency. Many of us do make our standpoints clearly known; for example, Yasmin Jiwani (2006) does not shy away from letting the reader know where she is coming from in her analysis in her important book *Discourses of Denial*, which examines media representations of minorities. She in fact highlights it, insisting that she is a woman of colour, in a minority position, and she thoughtfully explores her own activist role in the court trial she analyzes. And Faiza Hirji, in her forthcoming book *Beyond*
Resistance: Canadian Youth, Indian Cinema, and Identity Construction (Hirji, in press), explores her own positioning as a South Asian woman doing research on South Asian populations.

I could go on, but suffice it to say that I believe these critiques only serve to undermine these scholars’ valuable contributions, disguising a dangerous epistemology. Frances Henry aptly reminds us that “divergences, inconsistencies and differences in theoretical approaches are the hallmark of social science research on all subjects” (Henry, in press, emphasis added), including, but not limited to, studies on media and minorities. Thus, not only do these criticisms obscure the potential for more productive alliances that can be developed between communication scholars, but they perpetuate long-standing exclusionary practices regarding who defines and what constitutes valid norms, beliefs, relations, and values in Canadian society. In this way, these criticisms underpin a complicit epistemology informed through cultural privilege that naturalizes exclusions of (racial, religious, cultural, gender) difference. There is a racialized (il)logic that is privileged here: when White people write about White matters, these same critiques are not made.

A way forward?
Let me end on a more positive note. I have been inspired by new interdisciplinary relationships in critical journalism studies that may be beneficial for us to consider in the area of media and minority research. I have been encouraged by the emerging work of scholars such as Mike Gasher and Sandra Gabriele who are thoughtfully considering how geography and journalism can complement and enrich each other. And I would welcome new work on pedagogical approaches in this arena—how do we teach about media and minorities in our classrooms? And what impact might that have in the newsroom, if any at all? We would do well to pay greater attention to the sites where news is produced, like the newsroom, but also other places—increasingly, this includes Twitter, Facebook, and of course more pedantic sites where journalists pose questions to their interviewees. It is my hope that these kinds of questions will lead to more productive conversations around the veiling, validity, and value of difference, rather than downright critique and dismissal.

References
