

Insights from feminist geography: positionality, knowledge production, and difference

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ABSTRACT

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Feminist geographers investigate the messy, power-laden, and embodied relationships humans and non-humans have with their environment. This review examines foundational texts in feminist geography in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and more recent work that engages with Black geographies, Indigenous geographies, and disability geographies. I discuss three important considerations in feminist geography: knowledge production, the formation of difference, and critical reflexivity. To do this, I trace the historical development of feminist geography as a subdiscipline to identify the numerous ways that feminists intervene within Geography.

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1. Introduction

Feminist geographers investigate the messy, power-laden, and embodied relationships humans and non-humans have with their environment. Spurred by second-wave feminism, early Anglo-American geographic scholarship examined women's bodies, lives, and experiences of public and private spaces. This early work began to challenge the masculinist foundations of Geography. Eventually, feminist geographers shifted their focus to gender as an analytical framework for examining relationships to space and place. These interventions pushed feminist geography beyond "work on women" to consider the fluid and dynamic processes of gendered performances and how these performances and identities change, ground, and inform relationships with space and place. Current work in feminist geography engages with Black geographies, Indigenous geographies, disability studies, and feminist and queer theory to analyze how structures of anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, homophobia, classism, and ableism create space and varying spatial experiences. Further, feminist geographers are working to envision more equitable futures by challenging these violent structures. This review examines foundational texts in feminist geography in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and more recent interventions that tend to the intersections of race, ability, gender, and sexuality. To do this, I trace the historical development of feminist geography as a subdiscipline to identify the numerous ways that feminists intervene within Geography. I analyze how feminist geographers engage with questions of reflexivity, knowledge production, and the formation of difference by discussing recent interventions in the subdiscipline.

2. History of Feminist Geography

Feminist geography has developed immensely since its formation in the 1970s. Sharp (2011) argues that up until the 1970s the "relationship between man and the environment...was silently universalised and naturalised to represent the diversity of humanity" (430). Feminist movements in the 1970s influenced Anglo-American geographic work on women and challenged the presumption that



human connections to the earth could be solely understood through men's experiences. Sharp emphasizes how feminism “aim[s] to denaturalise [gender] binaries and to challenge the social and economic impact that gender identities have for people” (431). By the late 1970s, geographers began examining “women's different access to spatial resources” (Sharp 2011: 434). With attention to how women experience, form, and challenge space, feminist geographers invigorated the discipline.

Sharp furthers that the development of feminist geography shifted from work on gendered stereotypes about women as a distinct group to a more critical analysis of gender as one of many social, political, and cultural categories that impact how people move through the world. Critically, feminist geographers contributed to understandings of “gender as an analytical concept (rather than a simple description of difference for women)” with particular attention to the “spatialisation of [gender] binaries” (Sharp 2011: 434). Feminist geographers have troubled the naturalization of gender and sex binaries as it relates to space and place. Following Judith Butler's theorization of gender as a performance, Sharp emphasizes how feminist geographers emphasize “the role of both public and private spaces in the construction of gender and sexual identities” (Sharp 2011: 437). With attention to gender as a framework for analysis, feminist geographers demonstrate how gender performance mediates one's relationship with space and place.

Sharp notes how feminist geographies challenge masculinist ways of knowing. Following Domosh (1991) and Rose (1993), Sharp highlights how feminist geographies reveal the ways that women produce “qualitative, interpretative, and embodied” knowledge that challenges normative ideas of knowledge production and “good science” (Sharp 2011: 438). Sharp's survey of geographic work on gender illuminates how “gender has become visible and [is] a central element in the remaking of landscape around us” (439). Following this history, she suggests that feminist geography's attention to gender demonstrates: 1) “the omission of women from positions of power and influence” 2) “challenge to the dominance of objective/objectivising masculinist knowledge” and 3) conceptualizing gender as a “fragile construction, performed in different spaces” (Sharp 2011: 430–431). Each of these interventions offers much to the discipline of Geography. Feminist geographers have pushed the boundaries of the discipline by expanding the scope, theoretical approaches, and methodologies of geographic thought.

This boundary pushing is still happening today. Two recent interventions in the field, the *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Feminist Geographies* by Datta, Hopkins, Johnston, Olson, and Silva (2020) and *Feminist Geography Unbound: Discomfort, Bodies, and Prefigured Futures* by Gökariksel, Hawkins, Neubert, and Smith (2021a), represent the vibrant and growing field of feminist geography. While the expansiveness of feminist geography can make it difficult to define, these authors celebrate the wealth of different approaches, thoughts, and subjects that feminist geographers engage with. In their handbook, Johnston et al. (2020) write, “We embrace this diversity and the many links that the authors make to other critical geographies, such as queer, social, cultural, anti-racist, and post-colonial geographies. What unites this diverse scholarship is the disruption of inequalities and an articulation of difference” (2). The handbook includes chapters on topics ranging from climate change and the Anthropocene (Bosworth 2020; Marston et al. 2020; Waitt and Campbell 2020) to globalization and geopolitics (Cupples and Glynn 2020; Faria and Falola 2020; Neubert et al. 2020) to practices of place-making (Brun and Fábos 2020; Kofman and Raghuram 2020; Oliver and Faria 2020).

In the introduction to *Feminist Geography Unbound: Discomfort, Bodies, and Prefigured Futures*, Gökariksel et al. (2021b) note that

for feminist geography to hold all these stories at once, “we need an *abundant* feminism that enables the centering of contextually rooted struggles: Indigenous sovereignty, the capacity to live in your own body in a way that feels right, to thrive as a Black woman in a home that you have made for yourself” (emphasis in original: 3). This call for an abundant feminism works to “unbind feminist geography” to engage more critically with questions of knowledge production, embodied experience, and the future (Gökariksel et al. 2021b: 16). Ultimately, the vibrancy, expansiveness, and abundance of feminist geography has led to critical developments in the discipline. In the next three sections, I focus on how feminist geographers have considered questions of positionality, knowledge production, and difference.

3. Positionality and Reflexivity

Feminist geography has been deeply informed by Black geographies (McKittrick and Peake 2005), Indigenous geographies (Yazzie and Curley 2021), and queer theory (Wright 2010) to recognize gender as one of many processes that shape spatial relationships. Influences from different subdisciplines and approaches have pushed feminist geographers to consider the political stakes of their work. Rather than attempt some kind of “objective” scholarly distance from their work, feminist geographers are deeply engaged with how their research works to dismantle the violent structures of capitalism, white supremacy, (settler) colonialism, and patriarchy. To do this work, Gökariksel et al. (2021b) insist on centering discomfort within feminist geography. They write:

Taking up the work of feminism requires that scholars either become uncomfortable, by questioning received truths, disciplinary boundaries, or their own situated position within structures of knowledge production, or that they acknowledge their own already-existing discomfort, the ways that they cannot yet bring their full selves into disciplinary spaces without translation or ‘becoming a problem’ (DuBois [1903] 1989; Bayoumi 2009). (Gökariksel et al. 2021b: 2)

This insistence on discomfort encourages feminist geographers to consider how their own positioning influences how and why they do research. More specifically, feminist geographers encourage a deep process of reflexivity where the scholar considers how their political, social, cultural positions and their identity influence their work. While these processes can be uncomfortable, feminist geographers argue that they are essential to producing critical geographic work.

In her chapter, “Brown Scholar, Black Studies: On Suffering, Witness, and Material Relationality,” Vasudevan (2021) examines the intersections of racial capitalism, environmental degradation, and waste management as they impact communities. She details “how waste and race converged in the history of Badin, North Carolina, a company town where aluminum was produced from 1917 to 2017, and the implications of toxicity as a mode of racial oppression for Black life and politics” (28). More specifically, Vasudevan reflects on her positioning as a “brown immigrant scholar working in Black studies” (28). This emphasis on reflexivity is an integral part of feminist geographic scholarship. Vasudevan argues, “if power shapes knowledge production, then as scholars we must interrogate how *who* we are impacts *how* we work and *what* knowledge we produce” (emphasis in original: 29). Here, social, cultural, and political positionings shape how scholars see and examine the world. For Vasudevan, these processes of reflexivity must be critical and tend to power by orienting discussions of positionality “through situated solidarities” (30). Rather than focusing solely on identity formation, Vasudevan encourages scholars to tend to the ways that political commitments can inform research processes. They offer a

critical intervention into feminist geographic work on reflexivity by tending to the political stakes of interrogating one's positionality and its impacts on research. Vasudevan's work represents one of many approaches to critical reflexivity in feminist geography. Additionally, it expands discussions of reflexivity beyond identity and considers how researcher's political solidarities can inform their approach to research.

4. Knowledge Production

Along with reflections on positionality, feminist geographers consider how the production of knowledge shapes ideas of space and place. Sharp's (2011) survey of feminist geography's history demonstrates how the subfield challenges masculinist forms of knowledge production. In addition, feminist geographers consider how power shapes what kinds of knowledge gets considered valuable. Work in feminist geography examines how normative ideas about intellectual inquiry undermine embodied knowledge and knowledge created by Black and Indigenous folks, queer folks, and women. As such, feminist geographers interrogate ideas of who creates knowledge and how those processes happen. In this section, I discuss three interventions on knowledge production to consider how feminist geographers expand understandings of gender, space, and place.

Monk and Hanson (1982) offered early insights in feminist geography. In "On Not Excluding Half of the Human in Human Geography," Monk and Hanson challenge the historical exclusion of women in geography by arguing that the content, methods, and purpose of much work in geography ignores the role of women and feminized spaces. More specifically, they challenge masculinist forms of knowledge production by tending to gender in geography. They argue that "through omission of any consideration of women, most geographic research has in effect been passively, often inadvertently sexist" (11). Monk and Hanson argue that by excluding women from geographic analysis, the discipline cannot accurately study spatial relationships or contribute to "thinking that challenges existing social conditions" (12). The authors identify several pieces of work in geography that ignore the role women play within their homes, as workers, as caretakers, and as contributors to the social, cultural, and political places they encounter. Ultimately, they call on geographers to engage in "a more sensitive handling of women's issues" in order to "develop a non-sexist, if not a feminist, human geography" (19). While much has changed since the time of this paper's publication, Monk and Hanson's arguments continue to resonate.

More recently, feminist geographers have focused on the connections between feminist and queer theory in geography. Wright (2010) notes the connections and splintering between these theoretical frames within geography. Queer theorists have pushed feminist geographers to consider the role of sexuality in knowledge production. Citing the wealth of geographic work on gender and sexuality, Wright focuses on "developing the political potential of geographical imaginaries through scholarship that revisits the kinship binding queer and feminist theory" (57). She begins with a discussion of the creation and deepening of disciplinary divides between queer and feminist theory. Wright argues, the "allegiance within certain strands of feminism to structural visions of gender above other categories of inquiry has prompted many scholars of sexuality...to call for a separation of sexual studies from feminist studies across the humanities and social sciences" (58-59). For many queer theorists, the overemphasis on gender within feminist work obscures how sexuality influences one's relationship to space and place. Wright continues by discussing how queer and feminist theorists have begun engaging more closely in recent years. She

highlights work from Browne (2007), Oswin (2008), and Puar (2005) to reveal how a coupled or overlapping approach between feminist and queer theory reveals the "messy and complicated ways of producing knowledge [and] the messy and complicated exchange of place, power, and identity" (Wright 2010: 62). Wright shows how attention to both gender and sexuality provides feminist geographers with new ways of producing knowledge.

A more recent intervention by Yazzie and Curley (2021) indicate the importance of Indigenous feminisms in theorizing gender within feminist geographies. In their chapter, "Decolonizing Development, Challenging Patriarchy: Colonialism, Capitalism, and Gender in Diné Bikeyah" Yazzie and Curley (2021) argue that "the new energy economics of the postwar period required a gendered division of labor in Diné society consistent with the crisp binaries between public and private work" (139). By tracing the history of the coal industry in the Navajo Nation and the structuring of colonial gender binaries on Diné people, Yazzie and Curley identify how "both capitalism and colonialism worked in tandem to separate Indigenous communities from their land. The subordination of women to men within the private and public spheres was accomplished through the expansion of patriarchy and the dissolution of land-based relationality" (Yazzie and Curley 2021: 143). By connecting the structural violences of capitalism, settler colonialism, and patriarchy, the authors interrogate how gender binaries and hierarchies were used to extend US influence on Navajo land. Following Indigenous feminisms, Yazzie and Curley "challenge the fiction of hierarchical gender binaries, and the capitalist and colonial relations that rely on them" (150). Here, the authors suggest that feminist and queer Indigenous formations of gender offer more expansive ways to "decolonize our collective futures" (Yazzie and Curley 2021: 154). Further, Yazzie and Curley challenge white settler norms of gender and space by engaging with Indigenous feminist scholars and activists. Often undermined by the academy, Indigenous ways of knowing are central to conceptualizing the intimacies between capitalism, colonialism, and gender binaries as well as envisioning worlds beyond such violences.

Monk and Hanson (1982), Wright (2010), and Yazzie and Curley (2021) explain how feminist geography troubles masculinist, heteronormative, and white settler ways of knowing. Their interventions reveal the expansiveness of feminist geography. Monk and Hanson (1982) argue that tending to gender challenges the naturalization of masculine knowledge. Wright (2010) considers how categories of difference, including gender and sexuality, can be studied together or separately to understand how they inform relationships to space. Yazzie and Curley (2021) insist that Indigenous feminisms are central to conceptualizing and challenging the formation of gender binaries in the United States. Each of these interventions shows how feminist geographers are contributing to discussions around knowledge production.

5. Difference and Intersectionality

Feminist geographers are also deeply engaged with questions of difference. Most often, these questions involve the (re)production of embodied, intimate, and lived social, political, and economic categories. In collaboration with Black geographies, Indigenous geographies, queer theory, and disability studies, feminist geographers consider how difference gets formed, reinforced, and challenged across space and place. In this section, I highlight two interventions that urge geographers to consider difference in relation to power.

In "What Difference Does Difference Make in Geography?" McKittrick and Peake (2005) address difference in "G/geography" by tracing "the ways the Anglo-American tradition of Geography

has traditionally included Western white men and excluded women, non-white communities, and non-western Geographical subjects; and the material and conceptual spatialization of difference” (McKittrick and Peake 2005: 39). McKittrick and Peake “understand difference through socially produced markers...and their attendant geographies” (emphasis in original: 40). As such, geographers must tend to how, when, and where difference gets created to better interpret relationships between space and place. Next, the authors discuss how geographers theorize difference. They argue that critical race, feminist, and queer theoretical interventions push geographers to consider how “space and place are intimately connected to race, gender, class, sexuality and other axes of power” (43). Here, McKittrick and Peake emphasize how paying attention to difference in geography illuminates how knowledge is situated and produced. Finally, the authors identify how geographers have analyzed nature-culture and the body to see how “difference is *placed*” and how difference “speaks to historical and contemporary practices of racial, sexual and economic domination (emphasis in original: 47). For McKittrick and Peake, these interventions provide deeper senses of the future of Geography as a discipline and geography as the study of space and place.

Drawing on Crenshaw (1993), Valentine (2007) focuses on intersectionality as an analytical concept within feminist geography. Crenshaw (1993) theorized intersectionality to tend to the ways that intersecting forms of oppression, including sexism, racism, and homophobia impact individuals. Valentine begins with an examination of how feminist geographers have incorporated categories of difference, including gender, race, class, and disability in their work. Valentine argues that “although feminist work in geography initially focused on patriarchy, the debates in feminism over the wider social sciences eventually led to attempts to look at the relationships between the different systems of oppression of patriarchy and capitalism” (11). While these interventions offered an important way to look at structures of power that construct women, their bodies, and their labor in distinct ways, it often centered a white, middle-class, womanhood. Further, Black feminists identified how white women “consciously ignored their own whiteness,” which troubles the notion of women as a “unitary and homogenous categor[y]” (Valentine 2007: 12). Next, Valentine examines critiques of intersectionality that “conceptualize race, class, and gender not as naturally given or socially and culturally constructed categories but as emergent properties that are not reducible to biological essences or role expectations” (13). She argues that “recognizing the fluid, unstable nature of categories...[and] the ways that individuals are actively involved in producing their own lives” challenges fixed categories of individuals” (Valentine 2007: 14). Feminist geographers illuminate how these categories are messy, fluid, and ever-changing. Next, Valentine tells the story of Jeanette, a research participant in her project on queer and D/deaf people’s experiences of marginalization. Through six stories of Jeanette’s life, Valentine highlights “the constant movement that individuals experience between different subject positions, and the ways that ‘who we are’ emerges in interactions within specific spatial contexts and specific biographical moments” (15). Ultimately, Valentine’s intervention articulates how intersectionality “offers feminist geography a theoretical framework in which to develop a geographical thinking about the relationship between multiple categories” (18). These insights are particularly important to consider for feminist geographies of difference because they trouble the static nature of identity categories. Here, Valentine explains how difference gets made, unmade, and remade across time and space.

McKittrick and Peake (2005) and Valentine (2007) offer important insights into how difference gets figured within feminist

geography. Gender is one of many categories of difference, including race, class, nationality, and ability that inform spatial relationships. McKittrick and Peake’s (2005) analysis of power in the configuration of categories of difference enables us to see how the production of space and power are intimately connected. Valentine’s (2007) understanding of identity as fluid and spatially informed helps us see how power relationships are mediated by space and place. By tending to how difference gets (re)created, feminist geographers are better able to read dynamics of power in place.

6. Conclusion

Feminist geography has made significant contributions to Geography. It has grown immensely from its origins in the 1970s, which focused on including women within geography, to a robust, vibrant, and diverse field of work on gender, space, and place. Working in collaboration with Black geographies, Indigenous geographies, queer theorists, and disability studies, feminist geographers show how positionality influences research, challenge white, masculinist, and colonial norms around knowledge production, and analyze the reproduction of difference across space and place. The two most recent interventions in the subfield, the *Routledge Handbook on Gender and Feminist Geographies* (Datta et al., 2020) and *Feminist Geography Unbound: Discomfort, Bodies, and Prefigured Futures* (Gökarıksel et al., 2021a) demonstrate the breadth of work that feminist geographers are taking on. These interventions showcase how feminist geography helps us theorize the formation of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and ability across space and place. Further, the political commitments of feminist geographers provide us with paths to use geography to dismantle the violent structures of capitalism, (settler) colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy.

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