

Feminist historical geographies: doing and being

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Reflecting on her own experience of being a graduate student in the early 1990s, Boyer (2004, 169-170) suggests that ‘if uncertainty existed over what it meant to be a feminist geographer, what it meant to be a *feminist historical geographer* was even less clear’ (my emphasis). That was more than 25 years ago at around the time *Gender, Place and Culture* was first published (on which see Domosh and Ruwanpura, 2018) but much the same is arguably true today, even whilst women, gender and feminist approaches to the past are now well evidenced within the sub-discipline of historical geography. As Domosh and Morin (2003, 257) noted in their review in *GPC*, feminist historical geography ‘rarely travels under its own name’ and the term remains little used outside North America. As an UK-based scholar who consciously identifies as writing feminist historical geographies (McDonagh, 2017, 2), I am perhaps particularly aware of the challenges and opportunities presented by such ambiguities and uncertainties. In what follows, I explore some of the possibilities and prospects for feminist historical *geographies* and *geographers*.

Here I define feminist historical geography as scholarship which asks geographical questions of historical material *and* is informed by feminist theories, approaches and methodologies. Its empirical subject matter is necessarily expansive and diverse, but often has a particular focus on the lives of women and other marginalized groups, and on the ways gender and space were – and are – co-constituted. This essay interrogates recent developments within this broad terrain, specifically articles and books published since 2000 and either appearing in geography journals or written by those self-identifying as geographers. The main exception is work by historians and archaeologists interested in gender, space and place, which is cited here in an attempt to open up new research directions for feminist historical geographers. The material discussed here was primarily written by Anglophone geographers, whilst recognising and acknowledging that the Anglo-American hegemony in feminist geography – and feminism more generally – is problematic (on this, see Garcia Ramon *et al.*, 2006)]. In what follows, we shuttle across spaces and between scales, roaming from the sites of empire to the intimate geographies of the home,

from landscapes and buildings to personal possessions like clothes and letters. Doing so is a deliberate act intended both to demonstrate the liveliness of feminist historical geographies broadly conceived and to counter hierarchical readings of space, society and history with their inherent danger of privileging the public over the private, and the exceptional over the everyday and mundane.

Gendering geography and empire

Much of the earlier corpus of work on the geographies of empire, colonialism and the history of geography was reviewed by Morin and Berg (1999) in this journal, but more recent work has both continued key trends and expanded upon them, not least in thinking critically about the way gender intersected with other categories of analysis. Perhaps not surprisingly – given geography’s twenty-first-century turn to mobilities – scholars have continued to examine the ways empire was constructed ‘on the move’. Building on the seminal work by Blunt (1994) and McEwan (1996; 2000) on female travellers to West Africa, geographers and other scholars have continued to recover the journeys and experiences of women, including those travelling in India (Ghose, 1998), South America (Carey-Webb, 2017; Albuquerque and Martins, 2018) and the American West (Morin, 2008a), as well as women’s experience of mobility on the seas (Ryan, 2006) and the 1928 English schoolgirl tour of Canada (Pickles, 2000). More recently, Johnson (2017) has stressed the importance of long-term residence to Charlotte Wheeler-Cuffe’s experience of producing and performing botanical science in the colonies, in this case in early twentieth-century Burma. Greer and Bols (2016) make a similar point about ornithologist Louise de Kiriline Lawrence who settled in Northern Ontario in 1927, exploring how the domestic space of her ‘Loghouse Nest’ provided a site to articulate her scientific authority.

As both Johnson (2017) and Forsyth (2013, 529) note, empire had an enabling effect on women, with ‘the colonies in particular affording women space for practising science’. Like Greer and Bols, Carey-Webb (2017, 468) critically examines the co-constitution of gender and scientific authority, here in relation to the work of *explorateur* Octavie Coudreau in the French and Brazilian Amazon between 1899 and 1901. For Coudreau, widowhood too proved enabling, so that the death of her husband allowed her to ‘bend the rules’ and position herself ‘as a scientific and racially superior authority, moving upwards in the imperial hierarchy’. Such work provides a valuable counterpoint to research on heroic masculinities (Driver, 2000; Myers, 2002; Henry and Berg, 2006; Morin, 2008b) and broadens our understanding of the complex and nuanced

ways in which gender reworked the colonial gaze (on which see Mills, 1996). It also reminds us once again of the ‘not-so-innocent part that women – military and administrators’ wives, missionaries, travel writers, tourists, nurses and others – played in imperialism’ (Morin and Berg, 1999, 320) and underlines the importance of intersectional feminist readings of empire which recognise the ways class, race and education privileged these women even whilst gender potentially constrained them.

Beyond work on female travellers and producers of scientific knowledge, the exclusion of women from geography’s disciplinary histories has continued to be an important theme for recent research, much of it focused specifically on the UK and US experience (although see Rothenberg *et al*, 2016, 27 for brief mention of conference papers by Basu and Kuzur, and Fukuda, on feminist historical geographies in India and Japan, respectively). Published in 2009, Maddrell’s brilliant *Complex Locations* charts the geographical work of women – in societies, universities, schools, and ‘war work’ – in the century and a bit after 1850 primarily in a British context, addressing women’s ‘hitherto ghostly absence’ as producers of geographical knowledge and offering nuanced and critical readings the ways gender shaped the production and reception of such knowledge. More recent work has explored women’s admission into key institutions including the Royal Geographical Society in London, drawing attention to ‘the blurred thresholds of participation and recognition’ which make celebrating centenaries problematic (Evans *et al*, 2013: 373; Keighren, 2017; see also Bell and McEwan, 1996), and the interactions between feminist militants and anarchist geographers in late nineteenth-century France (Ferretti, 2016). Other scholars have explored female geographers’ (gendered) experiences in universities – for example, Jöns’s (2017) comparative study of the careers of male and female academics at the University of Cambridge between 1926 and 1955 – as well as in spaces we might think of as lying ‘beyond the academy’. Thus Monk (2017) examines women geographers in US government agencies, Jacobs and Lees (2013) chart the contribution of British geographer Alice Coleman to urban planning and Norcup (2015, 62) explores the ‘grey literature’ of geography’s canon, including the work of schoolteacher and scholar-activist Dawn Gill on the journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education*. Such scholarship has been hugely valuable in bringing feminist theory to bear on the locations and networks through which geographical and imperial knowledge was produced, although – like studies of female travellers and scientists – it has tended to focus on ‘pioneering’ and relatively privileged women. What have been dubbed histories of ‘women worthies’ were – and are – undeniably important in positioning women as a valid subject of historical (geographical) research, but

historical geographers interested in more ‘ordinary’ lives have turned to other sites and alternative source materials. The remainder of the essay shuttles between these two intertwined themes.

Situating women and gender

Thanks in large part to the ground-breaking work of feminist geographers (see Domosh, 1998; Blunt, 2005a; Blunt and Dowling, 2006 for valuable summaries), historical and cultural geographers have reclaimed home – so long ignored as private, domestic, feminized and mundane – as both a material site and spatial imaginary worthy of sustained critical attention. Scholars have examined home as a site for reproductive labour and the construction of gendered identities especially for women (Llewellyn, 2004; Lloyd and Johnson, 2004; Tasca, 2004; Jerram, 2006; Pooley and Pooley, 2010), as well as interrogated domestic space as a site where those identities might intersect with imperial power relations and colonial and hybrid identities (Wyse, 2002; Gowans, 2003; Blunt, 1999, 2005b). Alert to both new insights from feminist geopolitics (on which see Massaro and Williams, 2013; Dixon, 2015) and what might be broadly thought of as the emergence of ‘critical geographies of home’ (Brickell, 2012), scholars have recently offered critical new readings of home as a site of unease, struggle, conflict and resistance (Gowans, 2001; see too Creswell’s (1994) study of the making and meaning of home at the Greenham Common women’s peace camp). Both Legg (2003) on anti-colonial struggle in 1930s and 1940s India and Bressey (2013) on Catherine Impey and her magazine *Anti-Caste* – published from 1888 – have examined homes as sites of gendered political activism, while Desbiens and Lévesque (2016, 89) have focused attention on the ‘informal networks of solidarity’ created by indigenous women subject to forced relocation in 1970s Quebec, the latter a vital reminder of the importance of recovering indigenous experiences. Sarah Mills (2011) draws our attention to another exciting avenue for future research: the gendered historical geographies of children and youth. She examines how the embodied practices of young girls – specifically the wearing of modified uniforms, writing and crafting – challenged gender fixity within the Scouting movement and created ‘sites for resistance to the original masculine ideal of a Scouting citizen’ (551; see too Mills, 2016, for more on the geographies of youth and gender).

As is also the case for feminist histories of geography, the temporal focus of much of this work has been on the modern period. Relatively few geographers have addressed questions about what Domosh and Morin (2003, 263) label ‘the historical construction of gendered (and

racialized and sexualized) difference' in earlier times and places, and this despite the recognition that critically examining the historical emergence and reproduction of gender categories is crucial to scholars' ability to 'intervene to context contemporary frameworks for asserting difference' (Morrissey *et al*, 2014, 124). Before the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, the existence of coverture – the common law doctrine by which married women's legal identity was subsumed within their husbands' – meant married women in Britain had few legal rights to property while inheritance practices generally favoured sons and nephews over daughters (on this, see Erickson, 1993; on the impact of the English common law in America and elsewhere, see Stretton and Kesslering, 2014). As a result, scholars have often assumed that property-owners were almost exclusively men (for a summary of the historiography here, see Aston, 2016; McDonagh, 2017). Recent work by historical geographers – often working in multidisciplinary teams with economic and social historians – on the ownership of various kinds of property (including land, buildings, goods, cash and investments) has challenged such readings, demonstrating that women were far more significant property-owners than was once thought (Green and Owens, 2003; Beachy *et al*, 2006; Green *et al*, 2011; McDonagh, 2017; Aston *et al*, *forthcoming*). Of crucial importance here was the fact that owning real estate and controlling capital offered women opportunities to shape space, whether on the domestic, urban or landscape scale (for one example of the possibilities here, see McDonagh, 2009, 2011, 2017 on the role of female landowners in managing and improving the eighteenth-century English landscape and the ways that gender and class intersected in shaping opportunities for doing so).

Yet if relatively little geographical work has engaged with the pre-modern and early modern period, there is agenda-setting research by historians and archaeologists, including rich and suggestive material on the gendering of space in medieval and early modern contexts (for useful overviews, see Beebe, Davis and Gleadle, 2012; Williamson, 2012). This has included work on space and gender in religious buildings (Gilchrist, 1994; Dolan, 2002; Flather, 2015), household space (Vickery, 2009; Smith, 2010; Gilchrist, 2012; Whyte, 2015), the street (Griffiths, 1998; Shoemaker, 2001; Gowing, 2000), sites of polite sociability such as spas and coffee houses (Cowan, 2001; Herbert, 2009) and the law courts (Gowing, 2003), as well as work on historical experiences of domestic violence (Foyster, 2005; Bailey, 2009) and forcible confinement to private asylums (Foyster, 2002). Much of this work has focused on urban and indoor spaces with rather less written about gender and rural space or landscape (although see Muller, 2005; Flather, 2007; Fisher, 2010). Read as a whole, this scholarship helps us to

interrogate and challenge idealized and binary readings of space as variously public or private, male or female, civic or domestic – and the hierarchical assumptions implicit within such categorisations – and their change over time. It opens up new topics and new spaces for historical geographical research, and helps us to ‘spot’ the women who have something been hiding in plain sight all along (as for example, in the case of female property owners). Geographers have much to bring to these debates, not least in offering critical, carefully theorized readings of home and ‘the domestic’ which are both historically and geographically-sensitive, in insisting on space, place and landscape as mediums through which gender – like class and power – is actively constructed and negotiated, and in investigating the ongoing implications of such spatial categorisations in the here-and-now.

Doing feminist historical geographies

As McGeachan (2016, 141) eloquently argues in her recent *Progress in Human Geography* report, historical geographical research is more often than not dependent on identifying and piecing together fragments and traces of past lives (though see too Hodder, 2017, on the difficulties of archival abundance in writing geo-biographies of radical, pacifist lives). Any such process of ‘listening to ghosts’ – or ‘reanimating past lives’ to borrow a phrase from Mills (2013) – is necessarily gendered, racialized and classed, and historical geographers have long recognised the methodological challenges of finding non-elite women and other marginalized subjects within historical materials (McEwan, 2003; Boyer, 2004; Mills, 2013; see too Lorimer, 2009, who calls for geographers to reflect more frankly on the process and politics of doing historical research). Feminist historical geographers then must both read established sources ‘against the archival grain’ (on which see de Leeuw, 2012, 275) as well as creatively seek out alternative sources.

One approach embraced of late by historical and cultural geographers has been the geo-biographical. Baigent (2004, 351), for example, narrates recent attempts to challenge the male-centric and metropolitan focus of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and make it ‘fuller, more varied and ‘messier’’. In the same special issue, Thomas (2004) uses the letters of Mary Curzon, the Vicereine of India, and those of her friends, family and acquaintances, to explore representations of the body and the polity, while elsewhere Ogborn (2008) has demonstrated the possibilities for writing global histories through individual women’s and men’s lives, including those of subaltern subjects. This shuttling between the (inter)national and the individual, the political and the bodily, makes space for women’s experiences by resisting

privileging public lives over private ones. One might point too to the emancipatory possibilities offered by seeking out the kinds of ‘small stories’ advocated by Lorimer (2003, 197), who uses oral histories, diaries and letters in order to re-centre little known and forgotten individuals as ‘active subjects of the narrative’.

Yet telling small stories need not always be dependent on the survival of written materials preserved in local or national archival repositories or personal collections. Instead, geographers might usefully think beyond the archive as ‘the field’ in which historical geographical research is conducted and engage with a range of alternative, material sources which offer opportunities to recover forgotten narratives and marginalized groups. Thus Thomas (2007, 369-370) uses Lady Curzon’s dresses to write ‘intimate’, ‘material and embodied’ geographies of gender, home and empire, while Bide (2017, 1) utilizes ‘the tiny clues left in old stitching’ to shed light on the hidden histories of immigrant and working-class women employed as garment workers in 1940s London. De Silvey (2007) too adopts a material approach to historical geographical analysis, writing evocatively about the remains of an abandoned Montana homestead, including clothing, magazines, notebooks and the building itself. As she asserts of one found piece:

The skirt recalls the shirt it once was, the strain of the back it covered, the hands that pulled apart the seams and reshaped it, the heat radiating from the nearness of a wood cookstove, the mice that stole patches of fibre for their nests (de Silvey, 2007, 401-402).

Those following de Silvey (2007, 404) in writing ‘through the grain of things’ need not be restricted to an analysis of smaller, more personal items such as clothing, however. Buildings and landscapes also offer fruitful ground to feminist historical geographers. Drawing on the work of Ingold, Slatter (2017) for example adopts a ‘more than architectural’ approach in order to offer insights into historical congregational experiences within Wesleyan chapels, including those of female members. Focusing on mundane and everyday experiences – of seating, fixtures, fittings and draughts – she argues that buildings are constantly ‘becoming’, made meaningful through ongoing processes of use, repair and maintenance. Such an approach echoes the work of Edensor (2011, 238) on buildings as matter rendered ‘continuously emergent’ – and always shaped by both human and non-human agents – and my own work on landscape as an ‘ongoing process and a contested practice’ (McDonagh and Daniels, 2012, 116; McDonagh, 2013). As I have argued elsewhere, recognising landscape as always ‘in the making’ offers opportunities to write feminist historical geographies of the (rural or urban) landscape which acknowledge the agency of ordinary women and men in shaping the world

around them. Attending to buildings and landscapes as more-than-human assemblages constantly negotiated through small, everyday interactions, rather than solely the creation of an architect or patron, also helps to challenge accounts which privilege the achievements of exceptional – often white and wealthy – individuals. Moreover, for feminist and critical historical geographers reticent about engaging with pre-modern written sources – on which see Jones (2004) – the surviving remains of buildings and landscapes offer exciting opportunities to counter the temporal foreshortening of much recent work in historical geography and examine the lives of women, children and others in precisely those pre-modern contexts in which we can locate the emergence of modern (patriarchal) property relations.

Being a feminist (historical geographer)

This review has signalled both the breadth and the vibrancy of historically-informed scholarship on the geographies of gender, women and other marginalized groups, including emerging work in historical geography, in histories of geography and in closely allied subjects such as history and archaeology. Even whilst there remains at present relatively little work explicitly travelling under the name *feminist historical geography*, I do think there has been progress in relation to earlier, rather bleaker assessments of the place of feminist scholarship with the sub-discipline (Jackson, 1989; Domosh and Morin, 2003; Rothenberg *et al*, 2016). Indeed, there is therefore much to be upbeat about in this anniversary year for *GPC*. Yet the article also highlights a number of points of departure for theoretically informed, empirically rigorous feminist historical geographies, arguing that geographers must pay careful attention to the relations between gender and space as they relate to the lives and experiences of non-elite women, people of colour, children and youth, and transgender and non-binary individuals. Intersectional approaches will surely bear fruit here, as will comparative studies which carefully interrogate constructions and experiences of gender as they varied – or not – across time and space. More generally, much historical geography remains focused on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and on the Anglo-American experience: there is considerable scope for work which interrogates the ways gender shaped both women's and men's lives in the medieval and early-modern period – and indeed, how pre-modern ideas moulded later experiences of masculinities and femininities – and in parts of the world outside Europe, North America and Australasia. In doing so, scholars might usefully embrace diverse archival sources and material and more-than-human approaches – including methodologies engaging buildings and landscapes in our research projects – as a means of recovering and re-centring neglected stories, both big and small.

There is thus still much to do, and the project of feminist historical geography remains of critical political import for the sub-discipline of historical geography more generally. As Rose and Ogborn (1988, 405) recognised 30 years ago, ‘the exclusion of women from historical geography is a political act’. Indeed, the exclusion of women and other minorities as subjects for historical geographical research – and within what Mike Crang (2003, 1711) has characterised ‘malestream geography’ more generally – has material consequences in the here-and-now, as Jöns *et al* (2017) have recently pointed out (for evidence here, see Maddrell *et al*, 2016 on the gendering of contemporary UK academic geography; and Monk *et al*, 2004, who present data from the Netherlands, Catalonia, Hungary and Singapore as well as the UK and North America). It also contributes to the so-called ‘Matilda effect’ and the related phenomenon of gendered and racialized citation rates across academia (with female-identifying, black and ethnic minorities scholars much more poorly cited than their white, male colleagues – on this, see Dion *et al*, 2018). In recovering and re-centring the lives of women and marginalized others – and citing the scholarly work of women and people of colour – feminist historical geographers can contribute to a wider project to develop critical historical geographies, as they also can in making disciplinary space – at workshops, in journal special issues and in teaching programmes – for work that is both feminist *and* historical. Doing so requires us to be engaged in ‘continual archival activism to salvage, excavate and recover’ marginalized others (Norcup, 2010, 396) as well as mobilize that research in order to contribute to participatory historical geographies aiming to change the distribution of power and knowledge in the here-and-now (on which see DeLyser, 2014; Bressey, 2014). Beyond our scholarly outputs, we must also actively work to address the gendered politics of historical geography *as a practice*, working alongside the wider scholarly community to address academic sexism in all its forms, be that at conferences, on field work or in the classroom. At the same time, we must acknowledge that all histories – and *herstories* – have the potential to reproduce gendered, racialized and classed assumptions and to marginalize or erase historical subjects, intentionally or otherwise. As such, we must be mindful of our own voices as relatively privileged individuals with the resources and opportunities to write, blog, and tweet about our work. Perhaps at its most fundamental, this is what *being* a feminist historical geographer really means.

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