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Rhizomatic Encounters and Encountering Possibilities

Pamela Moss and Karen Falconer Al-Hindi

Many thanks to Joni Palmer, the panellists, and the participants in the Author Meets Critics session at the Association of American Geographers meeting (April 2008) where the conversation that we continue here began. We appreciate the gracious criticisms and are delighted with the authors' enthusiasm. Criticisms offered with such care nurture the larger intellectual project from which the book comes (see Schuurman and Pratt; Aufhauser). We feel fortunate to be able to address some of the issues identified that we believe need more attention. We thank the editors of *Thirdspace* for the opportunity.

نتوجه بالشكر الى جوني بالمر، وللمتحدثين، ولكل المشاركين في لقاء "المؤلف يحاور النقاد" والذي عقد اثناء اجتماع ، اذ ان حوارنا اليوم ليس الا تكملة لنقاش كان قد بدأ آنذاك . انا نقدر و نثمن النقد 2008رابطة الجغرافيين الامريكيين في ابريل، اللانق، كما يسعدنا حماس المؤلفين وتجاوبهم معه . فاسلوب النقد هذا يعزز المشروع الفكري العام الذي منه انبثق هذا الكتاب (راجع سكورمن و برات ؛ اوفهاوزر) كما اننا نشعر بالسعادة لأتاحتكم الفرصة لنا لكي نناقش القضايا التي كانت قد اثيرت في سياق لقائنا هذا، والتي تحتاج للمزيد من النقاش والاهتمام. واخيراً نتوجه بشكرنا للمحررين في "ثيرد سبيس".

Merci beaucoup à Joni Palmer, aux conférenciers et conférencières et aux participants et participantes à la session Author Meets Critics qui s'est déroulée dans le cadre de l'assemblée de l'Association of American Geographers (avril 2008), durant laquelle la discussion qui continue présentement a démarré. Nous apprécions les critiques gracieuses, et nous sommes ravies par l'enthousiasme des auteurs. Les critiques proposées avec tellement de soins alimentent le projet intellectuel duquel provient le livre (voir Shuurman et Pratt; Aufhauser). Nous nous sentons chanceuses de pouvoir discuter quelques enjeux soulevés ici qui méritent plus d'attention. Nous remercions les éditeurs du *Thirdspace* pour cette opportunité.

Vielen Dank an Joni Palmer, den DiskusstteilnehmerInnen, und den TeilnehmerInnen in der „AutorInnen treffen KritikerInnen“ Sitzung beim Treffen der Amerikanischen Geografen (2008), bei der der Dialog begann, den wir hier fortsetzen. Wir schätzen die großzügige Kritik, und sind vom Enthusiasmus der AutorInnen begeistert. Kritik mit so viel Sorgfalt fördert das größere intellektuelle Projekt, aus dem das Buch hervorging (siehe Schuurman und Pratt; Aufhauser). Wir sind glücklich, daß wir hier einige der Themen, die angesprochen wurden, und die weitere Betrachtung brauchen, hier aufgreifen konnten. Wir danken den HerausgeberInnen von *Thirdspace* für diese Gelegenheit.

Muchas gracias a Joni Palmer, a los panelistas y los participantes en el session del *Author Meets Critics* en la reunión de la *Association of American Geographers* (abril de 2008), en que la conversación que seguimos aquí empezó. Agradecemos las amables críticas, y estamos encantados con el entusiasmo de los autores. Las críticas cuando se les ofrecen con tanta atención va nutrir el proyecto más grande intelectual de que viene el libro (ver Schuurman y Pratt ; Aufhauser). Nos sentimos afortunados de poder hacer frente a algunas de las cuestiones aquí señaladas que creemos que

necesita más atención. Damos nuestras gracias a los editores de *Thirdspace* por esta oportunidad.

It may seem curious for editors to respond to critiques of an edited collection. But this collection is different, as are the critiques. Edited volumes are usually compilations of works that address a specific topic and reviewers tend to focus on the connections among the chapters. We take up the critiques as laid out here in *Thirdspace* that cultivate engagement with the book overall rather than with individual contributions. Most of the authors whose pieces are included in the book did not participate in defining it, and their contributions stand independent of our overarching argument. Although their inclusion supports our argument, the pieces stand on their own as individual contributions to both geographical knowledges in feminisms and feminist knowledges in geography.

We intended for the *form* of the book to be an *expression* of our argument. Drawing on concepts originally developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, we argue that feminisms and feminists in geography are more productively thought of as rhizomatic than as arborescent. That is, myriad ways of being feminist, engaging in feminist praxis and producing feminist geographies are not easily categorized by pre-existing, long-standing intellectual traditions or necessarily steeped only in gender politics. Rather, feminists *among countless types of feminisms* in geography are heterogeneous, lateral, and multiple, and are engaged in a range of effective feminist praxes in a number of different [small p] political arenas. We endeavoured to bring such an awareness into our own thinking about both the conceptual tools we would offer readers and the means through which the book, as part of the overall project, would be developed. As one concrete manifestation of our feminist praxis during the preparation of the book, we created conditions under which the content emerged from a series of collaborations. These collaborations were rhizomatic encounters between Pamela and Karen as editors and co-writers, between each of the editors and each of the authors, between the editors and the publisher, and among global feminist geography advisory board members. The results of our attempts to think and act rhizomatically inhabit the pages of the book as well as, outside the printed text, in the ways that readers have engaged our arguments in their own contexts. So it makes sense that, in keeping with the spirit of the project, the readers of the book, too, are part of the series of collaborations, as is Sara Koopman's encounter with the man next to her in the restaurant, as are Lisa Kim Davis' thoughts about the location of professional geographical meetings, as is Mary Gilmartin's frustration over being textually alienated, as is Anu Sabhlok's, Angela Richardson's, Jamee Blocher's, Patrick Webb's, Melissa Cottrell's, Meghan Dunn's, Stephanie Netherton's, Chase Medved's, and Sarah Howard's collective engagement of ideas through their individual voices, as is...

The collection began in a conversation we had several years ago. We were vexed by our own and others' complicities in the re-enactment of troubling conceptualizations and practices of feminisms in geographies. For us, it seemed as if the focus on *what* we were thinking obscured our view of *how* we were thinking it.

Diprose argues that autonomous theorizing as a model of thinking needs to be displaced by a model based on the notion that there is an affective relationship between people and ideas. She herself is moved to think differently through affect:

Despite the feminist thinking that has been done over thinking, something has made me think it is time to think again. Something has got under my skin. Something has disturbed me, made me think in a direction that was not altogether different than what I thought initially, but different all the same.
(Diprose 116)

Diprose made us sit up and take notice of the generative acts of thinking that form around ideas and subsequently solidify into knowledge. We transformed our vexation positively (à la Braidotti 163) and took up the challenge of re-thinking how else we can depict feminist geography while at the same time be active in generating something different.

As contributors to and editors of an *anti*-anthology, we wanted to hold in tension our interest in representing the diversity of feminisms in geography and our aspiration to undermine our own representation. Also alive within this tension is the recognition of the intricacies of various *things* – “acts, events, practices, processes, and end products” – that actually have an impact on thinking itself in our everyday lives and interactions with our social and physical environments (Moss and Falconer Al-Hindi 6; Falconer Al-Hindi and Moss 248). That the critics embraced this oppositional conceptualization and put it into practice (!) makes us think that we were able to articulate an issue that is very much part of feminists’ daily engagements with feminisms in geography.

Queries arising from these critiques call into question the concrete strategies we used to express our argument as part of our praxis. For example, we were not able to reprint all the articles in full because of space limitations. We cut abstracts, notes, passages not supporting the central argument of the article and associated references. Pieces by Gilbert and the Sangtin Writers were reprinted with only editorial and stylistic cuts; Monk & Hanson, Pratt, and Kobayashi & Peake, with relatively few words cut from the original; and England & Stiell, with roughly 3,000 words cut from the complicated empirical demonstration of their argument. We did not provide English translations of the German and Hindustani articles because we wanted each reader to sit with English alongside German alongside Hindustani, without translation. Our aims here were to draw attention to: the dominance of English as an academic language; the advantage one has if one can move from side to side (linguistically); the partiality of any one view; and the frustration and sadness of being excluded, yet again (in many cases). We chose to locate our discussions in and of the book in mostly theoretical terms – not because we privilege Western feminists’ interpretations of French philosophical theorizing, but because we think that (at least temporarily) differentiating theory from practice in our thinking and our doing facilitates the development of more effective feminist praxes. We concur with Claire

Colebrook who makes the case for abandoning interpretation in favour of inhabiting a text – “set up shop, follow its movements, trace its steps and discover it as a field of singularities” (3) – in explanation of her choice to use masculine writing traditions, such as French poststructuralism, to inform feminist theory:

We might argue that this strategy [of using masculine writings in feminist works] is typical of a masculine cannibalisation of thought, and that women’s non-identity and writing have always been used to shore up male identity that refuses to acknowledge any genuine otherness. But it is this risk of contagion and contamination that has characterised the odd and unfaithful position of feminism from the outset. Feminism has never been the pure and innocent other of a guilty and evil patriarchy. It has always been obliged to use the master’s tools to destroy his house, and has done so in the full knowledge that this complicity, with its corruption and contamination, is itself an action against a metaphysics that would present itself as pure, self-fathered and fully autonomous[...]. The *contamination* of tradition, its non-identity and infidelity to itself, is affirmed when writers are read in terms of what they do, and not in terms of some pre-given model of reason or authorial intention. It is this strategy – of locating oneself within a body of thought in order to dis-organise that body – that typifies not only Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari’s work, but, also, the curious place of women’s writing. (4 and 5 emphasis in original)

It is the act of thinking that we are calling attention to, not the source of the idea, nor what the author ‘meant’ Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, engaging with the thinking of unlikely theorists – and, we would argue, likely ones – can reinvigorate discussion and revitalize discourse (179). The conditions within which we attempt to effect change within the production of knowledge is arduous enough without succumbing to the seductions of well-worn and perhaps failed analyses or strategies. Staid theory or practice makes unsuccessful praxis.

Although our decision-making processes are relatively easy to explain, the impact of our decisions is not so easy to trace. Some of our decisions were associated with the parameters of the production of the book, as for example, the number of pages we had to work with. Some were associated with our vision of the entire project, as for example, our lengthy instructions to authors at the beginning of their writing including topic, style, and tone. Some were associated with being a referee and editor, as for example, pointing out what we thought an author should develop in a revision of the paper and rejecting submissions that were not ready for publication. Each decision we made resonated with our understanding of an *anti*-anthology, that is, “a semblance of a record” and “a set of tools for its destabilization” (Moss & Falconer Al-Hindi 6). We had a heavy hand in packaging the institutionalized version of what counts as knowledge - not just in terms of which articles to reprint, but also in terms of which words in each article. We wrote about the process we undertook to choose the reprints in the introduction to the book. Yet we only refer to the excerpted material

as footnotes on the first page of each reprint. Even though the authors okayed the cuts, they were under our direction to do so and worked from a set of suggestions that the two of us had worked out. We chose the reprints in German and Hindustani because of their content and because the authors of these reprints were accessible at the time. An expression of our argument could easily have been made with Dutch and Persian, Italian and Chinese, or some similar pairing; however, this specific combination of languages arose from the specificity of our own emplacement within feminist geography at the time of the planning of the book. Our concentration on demonstrating the usefulness of conceptual tools *is* our feminist praxis. Our contribution to rethinking feminist knowledge production in geography lies not with our advocacy of a feminism drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's works; instead, our contribution is the challenge to conventional conceptualizations of what constitutes feminist geographical knowledge, of what it is to engage with feminisms as geographers, and of what it is like being feminist in geography.

What is exciting about this project – we refer to this work as a project for the book is but an interim vessel within which to lodge our thinking to date – is that we hope to see how the notion of an *anti*-anthology is taken up, or not, formally and informally, in the classroom, in print, and in discussion.¹ Now that the book has been published and has been distributed beyond the confines of our computers, notes, thoughts, and conversations, we relinquish what influence we may have had in setting up its destabilization. Congruent with our argument, the ways in which our ideas and the ideas developed by the individual authors will spin off and multiply are beyond our imaginations. For example, although we did not intend to single out the hegemony of the English language in academia as the most important issue that needs to be addressed within feminist geographies, the issue, quite visibly, became a point around which readers have engaged with the content of the book. For us, the hegemony of language is merely illustrative of our larger point: in order to avoid supporting an orthodoxy within feminist geography, it is imperative that we rethink common, indeed reified, feminist interpretations, arguments, and positionings of familiar topics, particularly those related to the production and reproduction of geographical knowledges. Once freed of this hegemony, and perhaps even at some point freed from thinking in terms of hegemony, possibilities for becoming feminist (becoming feminist geographer, becoming feminisms in geography) appear, not just on the horizon, but also right in front of us, within our grasp.

In the spirit of becoming, we invite you to join us in openness to these possibilities. Having temporarily suspended the fused tessellation of theory and practice, we want to gently take it apart, then re-fuse them into a feminist geographical praxis. As our feminist praxis in the *anti*-anthology shows, our intent is not to be against something, such as orthodoxy in feminist geographical thought, simply for the sake of opposing it. Rather, we want to be caring and considerate in our thinking, deliberate in our acts, and flexible in our conceptualizations of what it is we want to explain or understand. We want to foster an environment where rhizomatic encounters help us become aware of our limits in both *what* we are thinking and *how*

we are thinking it. And, we want to engage in an *anti*-praxis, one that makes sense in its own specificity (locale, scale, purpose, and effect) and can be useful for others to pick up, examine, alter, and perhaps even launch on their own.

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¹ We note with interest that the English-language alternative rock band The Breeders recently released *Mountain Battles* (2008) that includes a song each in German ("German Studies") and Spanish ("Regalame Esta Noche") without translation on lyric sheets, CD inserts, or websites. Vocalists Kim and Kelley Deal, who do not speak or sing in either language, recorded the songs phonetically. They included the songs for what they themselves are best known for, their sound Ganz, Caryn. "Breeders' Long-Awaited 'Mountain Battles' Due April '08." *Rolling Stone*, online "Rock Daily" Blog, December 4, 2007. [<http://www.rollingstone.com/rockdaily/index.php/2007/12/04/breeders-long-awaited-mountain-battles-due-april-08/>] (August 29, 2008).

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