Travels with Feminist Historical Geography

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Travels with Feminist Historical Geography

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ABSTRACT We explore in this essay the relatively uneven “travels” of feminist historical geography within the academy in order to highlight the realized and potential intellectual productivity that can result from bringing together a feminist and historical approach to understanding place and space. We outline in what ways much of feminist geography is already historical and in what ways much of historical geography is already feminist, and then turn to a discussion of the unevenness of these intellectual journeys. We conclude by suggesting challenges for future research in feminist historical geography.

Feminist historical geography rarely travels under its own name. In many parts of the academy it is known as social or feminist history. A quick glance at the proceedings of the 12th Berkshire Conference on the History of Women (2002) suggests the range of issues on offer, from the historical gendering of the real estate profession in the USA, to concerns over the urban spatial constructions of heteronormativity. And although on closer inspection some of these concerns by feminist historians about geography dissolve into metaphor, a good deal address issues at the very core of feminist historical geography—the complex historical relationships between gender and space (see, for example, Deutsch, 2002; Hoganson, 2002). But even closer to home, as it were, within the discipline of geography itself, feminist historical geography often travels under pseudonym. What we want to explore in this article is the uneven travel of feminist historical geographies under two of those assumed names in particular—feminist geography and historical geography.

This article, then, is not an attempt to summarize major trends in feminist historical geography (for such a review, see Morin & Berg, 1999), but instead to help contextualize the subfield by highlighting, in a suggestive and not exhaustive manner, its thematic relationships to related fields. We engage in this ‘outing’ or uncovering of feminist historical geography not to lay claim to a larger subfield, but to make more explicit what can be gained from an engagement between historical and feminist approaches. In other words, we hope our ‘outing’ will make clear the intellectual productivity that has already occurred within feminist historical perspectives, albeit under different names, and how that productivity can continue. We start our article by outlining in what ways much of feminist geography is already historical, and in what ways much of historical geography is already feminist, before turning to a discussion of the unevenness of these intellectual journeys; that is, why and how feminist approaches have not traveled into various parts of historical geography (even under pseudonym!), and why historical approaches have not traveled into feminist geography.

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That much of feminist geography incorporates change through time as an important variable for understanding the relationships between gender and space/place/environment is not particularly surprising given the politics embedded in most feminist geographies—a politics that requires an ontological assumption of progressive change through time. In addition, much of anglophone feminist geography has been shaped by theoretical perspectives that are profoundly historical, e.g. Marx’s historical materialism, as well as Foucault’s ‘archaeologies’ or ‘genealogies’ of discourse, knowledge and power. Several subfields of feminist geography, however, have been particularly cognizant of the importance of historical analysis for achieving a transformative politics. Integral to much of the work we call feminist political ecology, for example, is an explicit concern with history. As many of the essays in *Feminist Political Ecology* (Rocheleau et al., 1996) make clear, demonstrating the importance of gendered environmental knowledges and gendered land rights for understanding the environmental impacts of commercialization and ‘development’ projects requires historical analysis of the changes wrought by those projects. For example, Manjari Mehta (1996) highlights how socio-economic changes in agricultural villages of the Indian Himalayas during the late 1970s and 1980s had profound impacts on the villagers’ gendered relationships and responsibilities, most often with the effect of diminishing women’s local agricultural knowledges, and their access to resources, space and power. Since Mehta’s analysis focuses on the gendered implications of the change from a subsistence, mixed-agricultural economy to a more commercial agricultural economy, the bulk of her work is explicitly historical—she explains contemporary conditions by examining socio-economic changes in two time periods: the 1950s–1960s, and the 1970s–1980s.

Other feminist political ecology studies have taken a more explicitly post-colonial approach, suggesting that understanding the complex relationships between contemporary gender and environmental practices in many parts of the world involves necessarily an engagement with colonial histories and geographies. Integral to Susanne Freidberg’s (2001) account of the gendered meanings of garden labor in villages on the urban periphery in Burkina Faso, for example, is the complex historical geography of those villages. To understand how and why garden work is explicitly men’s work in these villages, Freidberg traces the overlapping histories of agrarian change, commercial networks, and cultural ties in the pre-colonial, early colonial, mid-colonial and late colonial eras, arguing for an approach that traces ‘how gendered norms and practices—in any kind of work, anywhere—have emerged out of the local articulation of broader historical forces’ (p. 21).

Freidberg’s challenge, built partly on Doreen Massey’s (1994) assessment of the critical importance of understanding locally based gendered identities within the context of larger spatial scales, calls for a similar assessment of understanding the contemporary within the context of the historical. Pushing this challenge forward, we suggest that since much feminist analysis requires attention to place-based identities and relationships, those specific places need to be understood within their spatial context (the specificity of the local understood through its relationships to different spatial scales) and their historical context. And indeed, although not always explicitly stated as such, this historical interrogation is happening in many feminist studies of identity and place. In addition to feminist political ecology, this attention to spatial and historical context (what we could call historical geography) is particularly noteworthy in feminist analyses of work, whether that work is garden labor in Africa (Schroeder, 1999; Freidberg, 2001) or factory work...
in Worcester, Massachusetts (Hanson & Pratt, 1995). Hanson and Pratt's interrogation of the importance of locations within urban areas (both residential and commercial/manufacturing) to the relationships between women, men, and work underscores the importance of historical context. They begin their study with an in-depth historical geography of work in Worcester, Massachusetts, arguing that contemporary work patterns can only be explained with reference to the historical specificities of gendered and ethnic relationships to work and community: 'It is not simply that different gender and class identities emerge in different places, but that they are constituted in those places, in part because of the different histories and reputations of those areas' (p. 26).

As Hanson and Pratt found, it is hard to separate the spatial and the historical.

**Undercover Feminism in Historical Geography**

If the pages of the *Journal of Historical Geography* are any indication, anglophone historical geography is now significantly influenced by feminist perspectives and theories. Historical geographies of difference—understanding the historical conditions in which the categories of difference (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age) are inscribed and reinforced—are implicitly and often explicitly informed by feminist and post-colonialist theorists such as Judith Butler, Joan Scott and Gayatri Spivak. These new historical geographies of difference have confronted and decentered urban history (Boyer, 1998; Ogborn, 1998), colonial history (Jacobs, 1996; Clayton 2000), and, as Catherine Nash (1999) suggests, even environmental history, a body of literature that she argues has been most impervious to incorporating ‘difference.’

More recently this feminist influence is evident in post-colonial work on the body, bodily performance, sexuality, and the discourses of morality and medicine. James Duncan’s (2002) recent analysis of daily practices on the plantations of nineteenth-century Ceylon is informed by, among other perspectives, feminist concerns with the body, in order to understand how workers’ bodies were disciplined and dominated by British colonizers, and also how they acted as instruments of resistance, both covert and overt. Duncan’s attention to ‘embodying colonialism’ is part of a larger attempt by historians and geographers of difference to write back into history the subaltern by attending to embodied practices, part of the arsenal of ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1985). Such attempts to listen and see beyond the words and actions of the oppressors are reminders of the challenges of historical geographies of difference:

> As the workers resisted their domination through inhabiting the marginal spaces within the purified, abstract space of the plantation, so likewise, their resistance now occupies the margins of the colonial documents which themselves were part of the socio-technical apparatus of domination. (Duncan, 2002, p. 332)

One of Duncan’s tools in his analysis of bodily domination and resistance—attending to the material and discursive practices that reflected the British anxiety over the health (and therefore labor capacity) of bodies—indicates yet another feminist-inflected concern. As Duncan argues, nineteenth-century British medical texts were filled with theories that related racial difference, tropical environments, and disease. In fact, as David Livingstone argues (2002), these theories were not particular to nineteenth-century medical texts, but were participants in a ‘genealogy’ of thought that merged ‘climatic description and moral judgment’ (p. 161) in producing something called ‘tropicality’ that can be traced through Enlightenment philosophy, Victorian anthropology and early twentieth-century climatol-
ogy. Livingstone’s ‘genealogy’ of what he calls ‘race, space and moral climatology’ (p. 159) is also, of course, a genealogy of gender, one that Livingstone mentions but does not dwell on. Quoting from one late nineteenth-century climatology text, Livingstone makes the point that the ‘dangers of demoralization, degeneracy, depravity and debility however, were not just climatologically distributed: they were also profoundly gendered’ (p. 172). British women living in the tropics, it was thought, became increasingly lazy and unhealthy, in both mind and spirit. And their depravity in terms of sexual license most assuredly needed to be controlled. Richard Phillips’s (2002) examination of the complexities of regulating women’s sexuality both in Britain and on the colonial margins points to these moral dangers. These ‘embodied’ historical geographies of colonialism, therefore, are certainly influenced by feminist theory, if not explicitly engaged with it.

Uneven Travels

Yet, despite these ‘undercover’ travels, much of feminist geography remains resolutely non-historical, and most historical geography fails to consider women, or gender, or difference.

As the field is presently constituted, several significant areas of feminist geography make little analytical use of the past or a ‘developing’ present. The important work on geographies of women’s fear, for example—including domestic violence, sexual assault, and the dangers of public spaces—tends to focus on the contemporary city or domestic landscapes and the challenges that women face in them (e.g. Warrington, 2001), with little attention to how occurrences of the past helped produce increasingly horrific barriers to women’s safety today. Newer areas of feminist geography research such as disability studies and children’s geographies likewise rarely examine historical trajectories in place. Many geographies of sexualities, especially queer geographies, while implicitly hinging on spatio-historical moments of the gay rights movement, tend to look at the contemporary experiences and urban geographies of gays and lesbians in ways that are not particularly historical. And while the changing geographies of women’s relationship to social reproduction, in all its myriad aspects, take their cues from the language of an earlier socialist feminism which was highly attuned to the historical record (Women and Geography Study Group, 1984), more recent studies of men’s relationships to the geographies of social reproduction do not tend to explicitly engage with the past.

Meanwhile, much of historical geography focuses on topics seemingly divorced from gendered considerations. For example, while feminist political ecology work is oftentimes framed historically (cf. Mehta 1996), the bulk of environmental history work in geography—on land and resource use, agricultural systems, environmental change in wetlands, forests and so on, remains largely untouched by feminist theories and thought. Many of the recent historical geographies of cities, on topics such as urban planning and the development of transportation and trade networks, tend to focus on a scale that, with certain important exceptions (e.g. Robinson, 1998), allows researchers to bypass a feminist sensitivity that they might entertain if researching other topics. This issue of scale is an important one, as it is not only certain areas of geography that have been opened to feminist analysis, but also certain topics within them as well. (The home, for example, has received much more attention in feminist geography than in other subfields, quite obviously a reflection of women’s ‘location’ in it.)

This lack of gender sensitivity holds true for much of the historical work that deals with rural geographies, the growth and development of regions and towns, and settlement patterns as well. Study of immigrant settlement patterns and integration has been, of
course, a centerpiece of much anglophone historical geography throughout the twentieth
century. And yet, the manner in which ethnic 'difference' is conceptualized in much of
this work—as an assumed, always already constituted component of research subjects’
group identities—contrasts with more recent feminist post-structural work that treats
identities as multiscalar, multilayered constructs that are produced, reinforced and
challenged ongoingly through socio-spatial interactions. The benefits of the latter need
not be belabored here; suffice it to say that a feminist approach offers considerably more
insight into how identity 'differences' intersect with processes of human oppression and
liberation.

The historical geography of religion, also with certain recent exceptions, has remained
immune from the insights of feminism (see Kong, 2001). And again, if conference themes
are any indication, of the 230 presentations at the 2001 International Conference of
Historical Geographers in Quebec City, Canada, approximately nine had an explicitly
feminist orientation. In fact, the leaders of that group continue to refer to themselves as
a 'fraternity' of historical geographers (Baker, 2001), a designation that, if perpetuated,
might well discourage some from taking interest in the subfield.

Explanations for why feminism has not reached into particular areas of historical
geography, and why history has not reached into certain areas of feminist geography, are
far ranging, to say the least. They involve everything from the larger social contexts of
gender relations within which geographers live and work, to the institutional constraints
and scholarly foci which carry the most cachet in geography departments themselves and
which greatly influence career advancement, to theoretical and methodological debates
going on across geography and other related disciplines, to how and where scholarly
works get recognized and published, and finally, to the cultural and intellectual milieus
within which academic scholarship is produced—how 'evenly' or 'unevenly' ideas and
intellectual subcultures travel within the social sciences and humanities generally, and
why. For example, the recent proliferation of feminist historical geography scholarship
that treats travel writing as a genre of colonialist discourse can easily be framed as
extensions to Edward Said's ground-breaking works on representation and cultural
imperialism that profoundly impacted upon disciplines across the social sciences and
humanities. At the same time, some important areas of 'difference' beyond race, class
and gender have only recently been recognized as such across intellectual topographies
at this broad scale (e.g. disability and religion), and it might only be a matter of time
before more in-depth historical geographies of them appear.

An array of institutional problems prohibits scholars from identifying strictly as either
feminist or historical geographers; both of these subdisciplines have been marginalized
within anglophone geography, to a greater or lesser degree (and depending on location).
Most geography departments in US universities today, for example, rely on a single
individual or course to 'genderize' their curriculum, and historical geography has an even
tougher time in an intellectual market of human geography that foregrounds the pressing
demands of today's economic and urban problems. Thus many scholars, in the US
context at least, would not choose to work in 'historical geography' or identify their work
as such, for concern over career advancement—and thus perhaps not focus on 'past
landscapes' or geographies for similar reasons. The fact that North America's only
historical geography journal is published in-house by a university, with just one issue per
year, is symptomatic of this larger problem. But of course, these institutional problems
have distinct geographies. In the UK the situation is much different, where cultural-his-
torical geography is perhaps the most 'main'-stream of human geography streams, due
largely, no doubt, to the rich intellectual debates about British imperialism taking place
there for which there simply is no counterpart in the USA (yet). Nonetheless, probably more historical work appears in geography across the board than feminist, though paradoxically, it remains the case that, at least in the USA, there are far more job opportunities for those who identify themselves as feminist geographers than historical geographers.

Beyond such institutional problems, however, there are some very real intellectual/methodological issues that help us understand the reasons for these uneven travels of feminist historical geography. Attention to recent methodological debates within feminist geography, for example, suggests the difficulty of incorporating historical analysis. Like historical geography, much feminist geography is based on qualitative methods of research. Unlike historical geography, however, much of the qualitative work in feminist geography is ethnographic in nature (see Limb and Dwyer [2001] for a comprehensive discussion; also see *The Professional Geographer*, 1994). Perhaps because of the long-standing commitment to participatory research or research ‘from the bottom up’, gathering ethnographic evidence appears to many as the most compelling manner in which a researcher might deeply engage with the materiality of space and place. Meanwhile and obviously, ethnographic research is not possible on long-deceased historical subjects. For many this raises the thorny issue of for whom is historical geography research conducted? In other words, the apparent lack of specific subjects to emancipate might lead some to wrongly assume that historical geography is apolitical or lacking in political weight.

Likewise, the archival focus of most historical geography presents a challenge to feminist geographers. The politics of archives are such that what remains as evidence is oftentimes written and preserved by white, literate, power-wielding men, and the issue of how one might read the silences or hidden spaces in the archives is an important though complicated one. It has long been acknowledged that scholars must search out non-traditional sources to recover women’s historical geographies, but such sources are not always readily available. Moreover, concepts of history itself, and of historical geography, are shaped not only by what is in the archive, but by how what is there is read. Many feminist geographers have addressed the question of who has the power to make, record and interpret history (e.g. Rose, 1995), while others continue the important work of discovering appropriate strategies for approaching the archives and reading the silences embedded in them (e.g. Barnett, 1998).

Moving analysis away from the gendered subjects themselves and onto the historical conditions in which those subjects have come to be constituted as ‘different’ has certainly broadened the ways in which archival material can be used by historical geographers, and questioned the extent to which feminist geographers can rely exclusively on ethnographic data to relate ‘truths’ about subjectivity. Nonetheless, these methodological issues remain problematic, and shape scholarly trajectories. For example, post-structural analysis of the spatio-historical regulation of gender constructs and relations has been enthusiastically adopted by some in historical geography, yet attention to women themselves, and the more liberal feminist agenda of ‘women’s progress,’ remains rather sidelined. Thus, writing women’s lives, voices, stories, and experiences into historical geography still remains a pressing issue (Morin & Berg, 1999), as does, perhaps, the question of why certain feminisms ‘make it’ in historical geography and others do not. On the other hand, feminist geographers have incorporated historical perspectives almost always as backdrops to their analyses of contemporary gendered identities, rarely as constitutive of those identities, thus ‘fixing’ their subjects’ identities in time and place. Using historical analysis to understand the social/political/economic systems in which
identity and difference are constructed, therefore, would contribute to a politics of change.

These two areas, we suggest, present enticing challenges for future research in feminist historical geography, under any name: showing, through example, how understanding the historical construction of gendered (and racialized and sexualized) difference is necessary to any work for contemporary social change, and how all historical subjects are gendered ones. The real question is not so much what we call it, but what a feminist historical geographic analysis offers to our understanding of the contested and contingent nature of identities and differences in and through and out of place.

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