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Feminist geographies 'beyond' gender:
de-coupling feminist research and the gendered subject

Abstract

Increasingly feminist geographers are breaking the ties between feminist research and gendered subjects, envisioning feminist scholarship 'beyond gender.' How did this trend emerge? This essay traces some of the significant shifts within feminist thinking that allowed the breakdown of such boundaries within feminist scholarship, and uses historical and contemporary examples primarily from feminist geography to illustrate that incomplete, and continually contested, transformation. I suggest that the history of feminist geographers' work to address critical questions about gender, race, and sexuality from outside the discipline have resulted in feminist projects that include, but are not limited to, a focus on gendered subjects. I argue that far from being finished intellectual projects, feminist geographies 'beyond gender' represent new avenues for research about knowledge production, difference, and oppression. Who conducts research and what they study matters deeply for the scope and relevance of geographical scholarship as a whole, and contemporary feminist geographies point the way toward work that needs to be done especially around issues of uneven applications of intersectional analysis and the importance of race and postcolonial theory for geography.

Introduction

Katharyne Mitchell has characterized the relationship between feminism and geography as being fundamentally *incommensurate*: geography makes boundaries, feminism breaks them (Mitchell 2011). The unsettling nature of feminist work within geography arises from the juxtaposition of its counterhegemonic intellectual politics within what is still, fundamentally, a discipline with a long history of complicity with imperial, capitalist, and white hegemony. One of the most contested debates within feminist scholarship and politics—and feminist geography more specifically—is the attempt to break the taken-for-granted connection between 'feminist' work and a specifically *gendered* focus. Primarily within the Western academy, scholars have begun relying less on feminist scholarship founded upon gender inequality. Instead, scholars are employing feminisms that posit that, "despite the affinity between feminism and empirical research with, on, and about women, there is no ontological or epistemological imperative within feminism that this need be the case" (Moss & Falconer Al-Hindi 2007, p. 4). While partial and

incomplete, this trend demonstrates an increasing feminist engagement with scholarship ‘beyond gender.’ The de-coupling of feminist research and gendered subjects in geography is important because *who researches* and *what they study* matters deeply for the scope and relevance of geographical knowledge production, as Pulido (2002), Liu (2006), Mahtani (2006), and others have noted. Does feminist research ‘beyond’ gender have the potential to destabilize disciplinary and broader intellectual hierarchies (see Liu 2006)? Or does it risk limiting the experiences informing geographic research and relegating research about gender to increasingly smaller subfields (see Pulido 2002)? In a discipline where colonial and imperial legacies have shaped researchers and their projects so extensively, these questions matter all the more.

This essay traces some of the significant shifts within feminist thinking that allowed the breakdown of such boundaries within feminist scholarship, and uses examples primarily from feminist geography to illustrate that incomplete, and continually contested, transformation. Throughout the essay, recent feminist geographical scholarship is woven into the discussion of significant shifts in ideas, illustrating how these ideas continue to stir discussion, generate insight, and provoke new and different ways of seeing the world. This paper illustrates how a history of boundary-breaking ideas makes possible the present-day spaces where feminist geographers explore power, justice, and knowledge production, ideas that encompass but also surpass a focus on gender.

An Entry Point

Different vantage points into feminist scholarship measure different sorts of change. Starting with the Women of Color feminists’ Combahee River Collective statement of 1974, for example, illustrates the ongoing struggle with the implications of simultaneity—or later termed intersectionality—within much academic feminist research (e.g. Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991;

The Combahee River Collective 1986; Valentine 2007). Beginning with the well-rehearsed saga of Betty Friedan, the women's liberation movement, and other white feminist awakenings of the 1950s and 1960s, on the other hand, generates a more teleological trajectory of increasingly progressive feminist scholarship and politics. The story lies perhaps somewhere in the middle, where race, class, sexuality, activism, and scholarship exist in perpetual tension.

Imagine, then, entering into that place of tension, somewhere in the struggles outside and inside of the US academy during the late 1980s. Women of Color feminist and Third World feminists had begun to gain traction in their critique of academic feminism as a white, middle-class, and heterosexist field. Their critique of how raced, classed, and sexual experiences were obscured through the category of 'women' radically disrupted the notion that a singular struggle against 'patriarchy' would lead to evenly distributed gender justice. Authors such as Sandoval (summarized in 2000), Hooks (1990), Minh-ha (1999[1989]) and Anzaldúa (1987) argued that white women ignored the experiences which gave women of color a different epistemology for understanding the world. Anzaldúa (1987) theorized this epistemology as the knowledge of the *mestiza*; hooks (1990, p. 152) described it as, "the space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power;" Sandoval (2000) argued for a form of differential oppositional consciousness of the oppressed that acted as a tactical weapon, shifting strategically between different forms of oppositional practices in different situations.

The challenge of Women of Color and Third World feminists to the emerging white feminism within the academy was profound, and white feminists struggled together with their challengers to construct a politically viable, non-essentialist feminist theory of the subject. They attempted to destabilize the category 'women' through Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) theories of intersectionality and Pat Hill Collins' (1990) understandings of interlocking matrices of

oppression. If feminists could not be represented together through the concept of 'woman,' what did this mean for feminist scholarship?

The challenges to the category 'women' was one of the many taken-for-granted categories and ways of knowing that were contested by feminist thinkers of the 1980s and 1990s. Many feminist scholars within geography raised objections to blatant sexism within the academy (McDowell 1992; Monk 2010). Sexism had consequences for research, feminists noted; the exclusive academic focus on the male subject of study, and male-biased methods of data collection impacted scholarship in many ways (e.g. Bondi & Domosh 1992; Monk & Hanson 1982). For example, the pioneering research of Susan Hanson and other women in geography into women's everyday time/space geographies helped to demonstrate some of the blind spots in masculinist research (Lawson 2010; Pratt 2010). Rose's *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993) offered a particularly pivotal analysis of the gendered extent of geography as a discipline, arguing that geography faced particular reluctance to embrace feminist research insights and processes. For Rose (1993: 7), this reluctance stemmed from the geographic research subject, a "knower who believes he can separate himself from his body, emotions, past and so on, and that he and his thought are autonomous, context-free, and objective."

Feminist geographers who disputed the production of masculinist knowledge itself drew on a growing field of scholarship critiquing 'objective' science and knowledge production. Particularly influential in this debate was Haraway's (1991, p. 586) critique of the taken-for-granted 'universal' applicability of 'objective' knowledge produced through the assumption of distance, infinite vision, and total disengagement from the subjects of research. She argued against both masculinist constructions of objectivity and the insistence by some feminists that

subjugation was “grounds for an ontology.” Believing that partial objectivity was necessary for political projects, she (1991, p. 588) advocated for situated knowledge, both realizing that it represents a view “from somewhere” and simultaneously taking apart the concreteness of that ‘somewhere’ as well. People were not simply marked by ‘race’ or by ‘gender,’ she (1994, p. 7) noted, but by *processes and practices of racialized gendering* that produced “bodies in the making.”

Hanson and other researchers who initially focused on women both used ‘women’ as an analytical category (e.g. a group with fundamentally different time/space routines, see Hansen and Pratt 1995) and as bodies needed to balance a male-dominated discipline. By the 1990s, the use of feminist geographical perspectives to critique masculinist knowledge production had expanded to include masculinized analytical spaces, such as Rose’s (1996) portrayal of the imagined masculinist bounded subject of ‘real’ space threatened by imaginary, fluid, and imprisoning ‘nonreal’ spaces, as well as disciplinary spaces, like Pratt’s (2000) discussion of the masculine, tacit, and invisible boundaries of social science. Efforts to populate the discipline continue to preoccupy feminist geographers, and recent pieces by Chiang and Liu (2011) and Timar and Fekete (2010) suggest that the prioritization of positivist research and lack of female geographers in academic departments remains a significant hurdle.

While the challenges to white feminist assumptions about the homogeneity of ‘women’ and the deconstruction of masculinist knowledge production within the academy continue to be relevant and important for present-day feminist geographers, they also demanded change quickly. These issues created new imperatives to find research practices and ways of knowing that could imagine anti-essentialist subjects within anti-masculinist epistemologies. How, in

other words, could feminist academics imagine feminist without ‘woman’ and knowledge production without masculinist ‘research’?

Looking Inward

Beginning in the 1990s, these struggles turned inward, towards academic feminist researchers themselves. Feminist scholars labored to balance Haraway’s (1991) concept of situated knowledges and Dorothy Smith and Pat Hill Collins’ development of standpoint theory in the late 1980s with their convictions of the importance and authority of their disciplinary training. For geographers, this period of tension meant an emphasis on reflexivity and positionality, means by which geographers attempted to continue doing their work while making concessions to the importance of embodiment, emotion, and intersectional understandings of identity. Feminist geographers deeply problematized rituals of ‘fieldwork’ (Katz 1994; Katz 1996; Sparke 1996) as forms of “muddy boots geography” that took their expectations from the era of colonial expeditions (Aitken & Valentine 2006, p. 43). For example, Sundberg (2003, p. 188) argued that Latin Americanist geographical field research perpetuated “distance, disinterest, and disembodiment,” qualities that reproduced masculinist types of objectivity in the analysis that resulted. Feminist geographers also debated the role of reflexivity that appeared confessional in tone as a way of ameliorating their role in perpetuating imperialist, masculinist knowledge production (Katz 1996; Rose 1997). Notions of “betweenness” and relational, “positional spaces” sought to capture the tensions wrapped up in field research (Katz 1994; Mullings 2005).

Feminist geographers continue to find rich inspiration in examining the problematic aspects of fieldwork. For example, Billo and Hiemstra (2012) find that geographers who adopt feminist methodological or epistemological frameworks still struggle with some of the more

pervasive masculinist underpinnings of fieldwork-driven research. Their experiences in the field suggest that feminist geographers may “default to more masculinist research methods” and remain silent about their need for adequate research support as well as the everyday practicalities of living in the field that may limit what they can do (Billo & Hiemstra 2012, p. 7). They find that gender, reflexivity and embodiment—common feminist theoretical touchstones—are more consistently applied towards thinking about research subjects than towards researchers themselves. A “fear of seeming weak” continues to prevent feminist researchers from fully interrogating these often-obscured areas of fieldwork (Billo & Hiemstra 2012, p. 12).

Meanwhile, as feminist scholars in and out of geography struggled with their role as researchers in challenging masculinist knowledge production, Butler (1999a[1990; 1993]) and queer scholars confronted the continued feminist focus on ‘gender’ or ‘sex’ as a replacement for the problematized category of ‘woman.’ Butler (1999a, p. 417) argued that gender, rather than being a stable biological determinant, was itself only a production of “truth effects” which resulted in a *discourse* rather than an *ontological reality* of stable identity. Repeated performative fabrications—“acts, gestures, and desire”—produced the *effect* of an underlying stable reality, but this reality was as much a parody as the idea of drag performance (Butler 1999a, p. 417). Just as Foucault (1981) had earlier dismantled the notion of ‘sexuality,’ so too did Butler unsettle the concept of ‘sex’—rather than a “bodily given,” it represented nothing more than a “cultural norm” (Butler 1999b, p. 237). While the idea of the construction of gender and sex through repeated performances caused an explosion of interest in the methods, practices, and ideological discourses that constructed such effects, it also served as an attack on the solidity of ‘gender’ or ‘sex’ as unifying subjects of feminist study.

At the same time, queer studies—originating in the U.S. academy as lesbian and gay studies during the 1980s—began to become more influential, and its critiques of feminist heteronormativity more strident (e.g. in geography, see Bell & Valentine 1995; Knopp 2007). Queer studies gained insight from the development of feminist theories and their institutionalization in the academy, yet also objected to their heterosexism and reluctance to confront issues of desire (Knopp 2007). In addition, queer scholars envisioned projects of ‘queering’ that had the potential to interfere with feminist political projects and strategies (Knopp 2007). The rise of queer studies and the influence of Butler’s theories chipped away at the authority of feminist foundations based on ‘gender’ or ‘sex’ as objects of study and ‘women’ as subjects who studied them.

The relationship between feminisms and queer studies is an uneasy one, Wright (2010a) explains, and geographers continue to struggle with how to understand the connections between these areas. Tensions arose over what some queer theorists saw as feminism’s unyielding prioritization of women, or gender, in analysis, whereas feminists disliked depictions of feminism as monolithic or essentialist (Wright 2010a). As Wright (2010a, p. 58) notes, while these debates engendered suspicion, they also provide a starting point for dialogue between two areas of geography that both “engage in the deconstruction of the categories that initially formed their foundation as fields of inquiry.” Her review of recent work bridging the geographies of sexuality and gender emphasizes how geographers who straddle this divide use the ongoing deconstruction work to highlight the politics of knowledge production, and how raced, colonial, and English-centered disciplinary politics continues to shape geographical knowledge.

By continually questioning boundaries, feminist scholarship, as Mitchell noted, produces an effect of continual tension: as the credibility of objects of study such as women, gender, and

sex begins to shrink, feminist research simultaneously expands to address the production of knowledge as a whole. The boundaries defining ‘feminist’ areas of study strain, and yield to encompass increasingly broad fields of study (indeed, what field of study could be larger than epistemology itself?). Scholars in the 2000s acknowledged the diffusion of feminist scholarship across this wide range of research possibilities by describing ‘feminist’ approaches as feminisms (Dias & Blecha 2007).

Decentering Gender

Many geographers began decentering gender and employing feminisms as epistemological approaches during the early 2000s. Yet this tendency varied; for Cope (2002), for example, gender was central to forming research questions and determining what ‘counts’ as data, methods, and analysis. Yet for Nagar et al. (2002), gender represented only one of seven aspects of a feminist approach. These included a focus on power relations occurring at and through multiple scales, highlighting connections and relationality rather than binaries and dualisms, underscoring the cultural construction of difference and the contextual importance of global processes, and a concern for justice (Nagar 2002). Silvey (2004) and Staeheli and Kofman (2004) described feminist political geography in terms of politically-informed *topics* such as power, citizenship, difference, identity, the politics of scale, and the construction of political subjectivities rather than the intersection of gender and ‘the political.’

Recent work continues debating the position of gender within feminist analysis. For example, Elmhirst’s (2011, p. 130) review of feminist political ecology notes that gender becomes “seen neither as analytically central nor as the end point of critique and analysis,” but rather as one of many axes of power and difference that need to be considered in political ecological research. Like Silvey (2004) and Staeheli and Kofman (2004), Elmhirst sees feminist

research coalescing around particular topics and approaches to research, such as scale, embodiment, and the politics of subject formation. Nightingale (2011) researched the production of gendered subjectivities through everyday activities associated with community forestry in Nepal. She argues that feminist political ecology has too narrowly focused on the relationship between nature and the production of gendered bodies, marginalizing intersectional approaches where gender is employed as one of many axes of difference. Nightingale's discussion of intersectionality underscores the ongoing nature of these debates for present-day geographers.

For other feminist geographers, decentering gender allowed other important relationships to come to the fore. Hyndman (2004, p. 309) argues for feminist research that prioritizes violence, difference, and asymmetrical relationships rather than gender: "Gender remains a central concern of feminist politics and thought, but its primacy over other positionings is not fixed across time and place." Several geographers stress the necessity of fusing scholarship and political practice within feminist scholarship, compared to their often-optional place in other forms of research (Staeheli & Kofman 2004). Praxis, the "realization of ideas through their doing," becomes as important to the representations, hierarchies of power, and diffusion of knowledge within the research process as it is to traditionally 'outside' or 'activist' political commitments (Moss & Falconer Al-Hindi 2007).

Commitments to the politics of knowledge within the research process, at the university, and within communities became a central point around which many feminist geographers coalesced. Parker (2011), for example, traces feminist urban geography from the feminist materialism popular in the 1970s, which examined women's activist projects to improve city environments, to three themes that she believes bring together feminist urban geographical scholarship today: home, health, and urban politics. Yet equally important to these themes are

the politically driven feminist approaches that guide research, she argues, and feminist research that incorporates embodiment, intersectional subjectivities, and everyday scales. She stresses that the *politics* of this knowledge production is what aligns different strands of feminist urban research: research must be social justice oriented, and connected to feminist praxis (Parker 2011). The sometimes implicit linkages between feminist scholarship and social justice struggles are highlighted by such as Wright (2010: 820), who calls for scholarship that “engage[s] with the ways in which people beyond the academy wrestle with the concepts in their daily lives.” Yet the taken-for-granted association between progressive politics and feminist geographical research is in need of further unpacking.

The trajectory of feminist scholarship that embraces counterhegemonic intellectual politics ‘beyond gender’ is partially one of necessary boundary breaking. Significant and persuasive challenges destabilizing ‘women,’ ‘gender,’ and ‘sex’ coincided with important indictments of the role of the researcher and masculinist knowledge production as a whole. As trajectories of critique destabilized the subjects, methods, and researcher objectivity of ‘traditional’ academic knowledge production, the production of knowledge itself became the obvious next focus for feminist interrogation.

However, to conduct feminist scholarship without a gender foundation is also a choice, and one with political ramifications; just because certain academic trends aligned does not mean that they make the most institutional, political, disciplinary, or personal sense for any given researcher. The institutionalization of Women’s (and Gender) Studies departments—and their attendant need to consolidate support and define institutional turf—demonstrates the types of university, scholarly, and personal investment towards gender as a focal point of research that

exist within academia. Departmental agendas may also determine the pressures that scholars who choose other forms of feminisms may face (Wallach Scott 2008).

Indeed, feminist scholarship may be about questioning boundaries, but it is also the maker of boundaries as well, policing what 'counts' as feminist scholarship just as feminist scholarship challenges what 'counts' as knowledge in other disciplines. Defending the primacy of gender from the arguments for and encroachment of other types of feminisms has been a part of feminist geography, for example, for the past two decades. McDowell (1992) argued that even as skepticism rose about the usefulness of 'gender' as an analytical category, feminist geographers remained students of gender. Sexual difference and gender relations continued to be the basis of McDowell's (1999) formulation of feminist scholarship, and other scholars echoed that emphasis in the early 2000s (Bondi 2004; Oza 2006).

Important feminist geographical work does continue on gendered power relations, gendered subjects, and gendered landscapes, yet what 'counts' as feminist geography remains hotly debated. Some argue that, like Monk and Hanson (1982) warned, 'gender' is assumed to be only important for feminist geographers, and that many of the epistemological critiques and insights that are intertwined with feminist politics are being separated, depoliticized, and reconstituted in other areas of geography (Sharp 2007). Others, however, maintain the centrality of gender inequality to feminist geographical work (e.g. Pratt 2009). Current debates over the relationship between feminist geographies and queer geographies (e.g. Wright 2010a), geographies of emotion (e.g. Wright 2010b), or non-representational theory speak to the tensions and divisions over decisions about what type of work to claim as 'feminist' (e.g. Colls 2012; Wright 2010a; Wright 2010b). Perhaps one of the lessons from feminist epistemologies that

applies to feminisms themselves is that narratives can be productive while remaining in tension (Sharp 2007).

Possibilities and Cautions

Recent pieces by feminist geographers in the areas of geopolitics, security, and mobility demonstrate the range of perspectives that make up present-day feminist geography. If questioned as to how their work could be described as feminist, these authors might answer: because of scale and situatedness (Davis 2011); because of a focus on embodiment and gender (Fluri 2011); because of connections to transnational feminists' politics of differentiation and political solidarities across borders (Mountz 2011); because of emphasis on love, embodiment, and the corporeal scale (Smith 2011); and because of a focus on women and the scale of the everyday (Scholten et al. 2012). As gender is—partially, incompletely—decoupled from feminist geographical research, what defines feminism: The everyday? The corporeal scale? Subjectivities? Intersections? I have argued throughout this essay that the reason these works are all connected is because of a history of feminist geographical scholarship that has grappled with critical questions about gender, race, and sexuality from outside the discipline.

Without a genealogy like the one here of feminisms that struggles to incorporate postcolonial, transnational, and non-canonical trajectories of feminist thought, such a multiple and varied understanding of feminist geographical scholarship would never have occurred. For many feminist geographers working today, like Hyndman (2004) and Nagar et al., (2002), gender is only one of the axes upon which effective geographical analysis must revolve. Framing projects in terms of gender is not essential, per say, because geographers understand gender to be part of a wider framework of intersectionality and social justice within a feminist epistemology.

As Nagar and Lock Swarr (2010, p. 5) describe, such an approach employs understandings, analytical tools, and political and research practices that:

Attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination. Realizing such ideas through their ‘doing’—or the *praxis* of such an approach—is a matter of framing research questions and methods appropriately; constantly negotiating the power relations within the research process and through which the research project becomes refracted; flexibly engaging with different forms of collaboration, political projects, and representations of knowledge; focusing on the embodied nature of social processes and their multiscalar consequences; and maintaining an emphasis on attempts to decolonize knowledge production (Moss & Falconer Al-Hindi 2007).

Feminist themes—such as scales, bodies, and subjectivities—are directly drawn from feminist challenges to the ontological stability of taken-for-granted concepts like gender, and the homogenizing, superficially unifying (and dividing) work they do. Feminist methods are taken from feminist understandings of what may ‘count’ as knowledge, and how scholarship and research become overdetermined by power, race, class, gender, sexualized, and colonial relations (Mullings 2005; Smith 2005). Gender is part of who feminist researchers *are*, part of their projects, but most of all, it is part of the intellectual trajectory that allows us all to develop projects highlighting these criteria.

Even as feminist geographies ‘beyond gender’ offer dynamic avenues for research, it is important to acknowledge the significant, and unequally shared burdens, of feminism that centers the politics and practices of knowledge production. First, throughout the paper, the examples from recent (2010-2014) feminist geographical scholarship illustrate the complexity and ongoing nature of many of the significant intellectual moments profiled in this piece. All of the moments

introduced here, from feminisms about 'women' to engagements with transnational feminism and queer geography, are *simultaneously* engaging with feminist scholarship. The utility and meaningfulness of these debates continue to resonate in present-day literature.

Indeed, work 'beyond gender' does not mean work without gender. It is important to recognize that many feminist geographers talk about 'women' peopling the discipline because, in many places, *they (still) do not* (Chiang & Liu 2011). Indeed, the proportion of women in geography remains lower than in other social sciences (Hall 2002). 'Gender' as an axis of subject formation and difference, or the production of feminist knowledges may not resonate equally with all people (Scholten et al. 2012). The effects of geography's white and Anglo-dominant hegemonies apply as much to feminist geography as to other areas of the discipline (Garcia-Ramon 2012; Pulido 2002). Finally, Elmhirst's (2011) discussion about how feminist political ecologists rarely self-identify as such demonstrates the continued pressures on feminists academics to downplay their feminist approaches. Feminist geography remains a small, somewhat marginal, area of the discipline.

The extent to which feminist insights about reflexivity and their embrace of ethnographic methods have entered the wider discipline have given rise to impressions that feminist projects are 'finished,' or that geographers are all feminists now (see debate in Hall 2002). The debates over knowledge production, difference, and oppression emerging in feminist scholarship demonstrate the dynamic and ongoing nature of these debates, and suggest that feminist epistemology, methods, and research projects are more than just *relevant*, they are in fact *necessary*. Feminist geographies 'beyond gender' are particularly well poised to embrace such debates. Who conducts research and what they study matters deeply for the scope and relevance of geography as a whole. Contemporary feminist geographies point the way towards work that

needs to be done particularly in the uneven applications of intersectional analysis (Brown 2012), where too often gender is made to stand in for other types of difference without critical analysis, leaving age, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability understudied. Similarly, feminist analysis needs to engage with the continued lack of interrogation of race in geography research projects, both in terms of the cross-cultural work that so many geographers do, as well as the whiteness of the discipline as a whole (Mahtani 2006). Feminist analysis ‘beyond gender’ invites possibilities for a renewed engagement with postcolonial theory.

The constant tension between breaking boundaries and creating politically viable projects produces a particularly transformative intellectual perspective that relies on the multiplicity and variety of feminisms in geography today. As Wright (2010a, p. 64) notes, “no single approach is adequate for understanding the politics of everyday life and for organizing subversive actions to the discrimination, subjugation and exploitation experienced by so many around the world on a daily basis.” The intellectual politics of working towards gender justice has inspired many forms of justice—intellectual, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and more—that are part of feminist geography today.

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