

# A Companion to Feminist Geography

*Edited by*

Lise Nelson & Joni Seager



# **A Companion to Feminist Geography**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*Lise Nelson and Joni Seager*

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### The Poetics of Bodies, Spaces, Place, and Politics

my womb  
a public domain  
erotica a doormat  
trampled on by  
birthright

my womb a  
legislated periphery  
no longer mine  
but public space

my womb  
a palestinian front  
fighting for  
the right to be  
a private space

“My Womb” by Esmeralda Bernal (reprinted with permission from the publisher of *The Americas Review*, Houston: Arte Publico Press–University of Houston, 1986)

The ideas and materialities woven into Bernal’s poem evoke some of the key insights and sites of feminist geography. Locating her poem within the gendered body, Bernal weaves together the politics of public and private space, the state and nationalism. While no single poem can represent the diverse issues and questions in feminist geography, the centrality of the body in her poem is significant. Only a few decades after feminists levered “woman” and “gender” into the lexicon of geographic thought, it is “the body” and the multidimensionality of embodied experience(s) that continue to anchor feminist geography at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

The body is the touchstone of feminist theory. Within contemporary feminist theory “the body” does not have a single location or scale; rather it is a concept that disrupts naturalized dichotomies and embraces a multiplicity of material and symbolic sites, ones located at the interstices of power exercised under various guises. From the pivotal second-wave feminist understanding that “the personal is political” to the postmodern decentering of a singular notion of gendered experience, feminist theory draws on understandings of embodied experience to fundamentally challenge bedrocks of Western social and political thought. Feminist geography, anchored in the body, moves across scale, linking the personal and quotidian to urban cultural landscapes, deforestation, ethno-nationalist struggles, and global political economies.

But what does it mean analytically, theoretically, and methodologically to center the body? What contours define the map of feminist geography? Where is feminism on the map of geography? What do feminist geographers *do*? This companion to feminist geography approaches these questions by assembling the work of a wide range of contemporary feminist scholars in geography, ones located in Anglo-American as well as global contexts. It examines historiographies of feminist thinking and charts emerging research trajectories that continue to transform not only feminist geography as a field, but the discipline of geography itself.

## Changing Terrains of Feminist Geography

Most chroniclers mark the emergence of feminist geography in North America and the UK in the early 1970s, sparked by movements both within and outside the academy. Within geography, feminist critiques emerged as part of the ferment of “new” radical geographies – especially Marxism – that was raising challenges in the 1970s to the hegemonies of positivistic and corporatist geography (for discussion see Mackenzie, 1984). This was a productive, but also thorny, convergence. The degree of synergy between Marxist and feminist frameworks varied considerably across subfields within the discipline and from country to country; the socialist–feminist intellectual link was much stronger in the UK than in the USA, for example, and remains so today. Clearly feminist geography draws on radical intellectual traditions in the discipline; nevertheless, as feminist geography matured it *also* served as a corrective – and to some extent as a rebuke – to its radical counterparts which, at least into the 1990s, remained as stubbornly androcentric as mainstream geography (and in some instances just as openly hostile to feminist approaches). The contested relationship between Marxism and feminism continues to shape epistemology and intellectual debates within both subfields.

From its earliest inception, a defining characteristic of feminist geography was its intellectual cross-fertilization and multidisciplinary; this remains one of its strengths today. In comparison to other cognate social science fields, geography as a discipline was slower in developing and embracing feminist scholarship; this delayed engagement meant that the critical work already under way in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, political philosophy, and economics was available to the early cohort of geographers who were pioneering feminist geography. Economist Esther Boserup’s *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970) and Barbara Rogers’s *The Domestication of Women* (1979), for example, were

instrumental in the emergence of the “women and development” subfield in geography. Early geographical analyses of women’s perceptions of and relationships to new landscapes drew heavily from then-extant feminist research in historical disciplines, including key works such as Annette Kolodny’s *Lay of the Land* (1975). Similarly, feminist geographical urban and built-environment research was infused by historical, sociological, and architectural work (including, prominently, now-classics such as Jane Jacobs’s (1961) *Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Dolores Hayden’s (1984) *Redesigning the American Dream*). Carol Pateman’s *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) helped inspire feminist geographers interested in gendered divisions between public and private, the state and democracy.

The exuberance and vitality of women’s movements outside the academy during the 1970s also strongly influenced the emergence of feminist geography. The women’s liberation movement demanded accountability, visibility, equality. Within feminist geography, this translated first into a project to “add women” to the field, both as producers of knowledge and as subjects of analysis (for discussion see Monk and Hanson, 1982; Mayer, 1989). Starting from the newly legitimated interest in the lives of “real women,” the earliest feminist geographical work focused on mapping (literally and metaphorically) the spatial constraints facing women (for examples see Davies and Fowler, 1971; Hayford, 1974; Tivers, 1977; Ardener, 1981; Seager and Olson, 1986; Seager, 2003; for reviews see Bowlby et al., 1981; Zelinsky et al., 1982). The work of making – and keeping – women’s lives visible is far from complete, and such projects remain at the heart of feminist geography.

The efflorescence of feminist geography in the 1980s laid the foundation for many of the subfields and interests that define the contemporary field (for excellent overviews see McDowell, 1992a, b; Domosh, 1999; Longhurst, 2002). In tandem with ground-breaking research on the material realities of women’s lives, feminist geographers in the 1980s adopted and introduced theoretical constructs about the role of gender as an instrumental force and as a category of explanation in geographical processes. Extending work of the previous decade, feminist geographers sought to document and bring into geographical inquiry the analytical significance of gendered spatial divisions between public and private, particularly as they shape work (paid and unpaid), and urban processes (for examples see Christopherson, 1983; Rossini, 1983; Mackenzie, 1986; Nelson, 1986; Pratt and Hanson, 1988). Relatedly, feminist geographers turned to an examination of the spatial and gendered dimensions of industrial restructuring, and in the process challenged gendered assumptions within Marxist geography (see Massey, 1984; Murgatroyd et al., 1985). Other scholars sought to make visible women’s roles as actors in built and natural landscapes (for discussion see Monk, 1984).

The reverberation of research agendas in the 1980s is still being felt today: feminist geographical work in that decade on ecology and social constructions of nature (see, for example, Fitzsimmons, 1989) are at the heart of contemporary work in feminist political ecology. An expanding literature on “women and development” and women’s work in the Global South (see, for example, Momsen and Townsend 1987; Chant and Brydon 1989; Carney and Watts 1990) laid the foundation for a robust subfield, one that today infuses much of the feminist work on globalization and transnational processes. Finally, early feminist forays into political geography (such as Drake and Horton 1983; Peake 1986) led to a 1990 special issue of

*Political Geography* that charted emerging feminist agendas that are still under debate today (Kofman and Peake 1990; see Kofman, chapter 34 in this volume). Key theoretical insights from this period might be summarized by phrases that are now part of our ordinary geographical conventional wisdom: “space is gendered”; “place doesn’t just reflect gender, it produces it”; “sexuality is constructed in place and spatially.”

By the 1990s, feminist geographers were actively contributing to broader feminist debates that questioned both the unity/singularity of knowledge *and* the very subject of “woman” that once occupied the central position in feminist thought. While issues such as reproductive rights or the epidemic of violence against women might suggest a unifying gendered experience – perhaps validating a sense of a common “sisterhood” – textured (and textual) analysis of women’s experiences acted out in particular lives and particular places reveals deep cleavages in the notion of what it means to be gendered as a woman. Writers such as bell hooks (1984) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) powerfully argued that feminist thinking implicitly and explicitly centered a white, First World and middle-class female subject, downplaying (or ignoring) power relations and differences between women (see also the collection edited by Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981).

This critique within feminism by women of color and Third World women dovetailed with emerging epistemological debates to transform the nature of feminist thinking. Taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge as singular (represented as a quest for the “grand narrative”) and “science” as a neutral, disembodied endeavor gave way to feminist reconsiderations of knowledge as situated and embodied – produced by concrete subjects and shaped specific histories and geographies (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991; for discussion in *Geography*, see Bondi 1990a, b; Rose 1993). As a result of these philosophical and political debates, “the body” and “the subject” theorized in feminist thinking became more nuanced and explicitly located within various geographic and historical contexts beyond the horizon of white, middle-class and Western spaces.

Emphasis on the politics of knowledge and the intersectionality of multiple oppressions and identities invigorated feminist geography by providing a wide array of new theoretical and methodological tools for feminist geographical work. Developments in critical race theory, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and queer theory led feminist geographers to develop more nuanced approaches to identity, power, and difference. These perspectives destabilized sexual and gender categories, shifted understandings of space and place, and led to new methodological approaches and understandings in the field.<sup>1</sup> These debates were not merely theoretical: this period witnessed a growing number of students and scholars from diverse geographic and social backgrounds contributing to, and enriching, feminist geography. Just as (usually white) women in geography demanded a seat at the academic table in the 1970s, women from a multiplicity of racialized, sexualized, classed, and transnational experiences have been exploding the canon of feminist geography. Notwithstanding these important advances, diversifying the professional ranks of geography remains a crucial and ongoing project (see Al Hindi, 2000).

Theoretical perspectives and epistemological critiques increasingly visible by the early to mid-1990s not only strengthened feminist geography “internally,” but

deepened the contribution of feminist geographers to geographic thought and analysis more broadly. On one hand, during the past fifteen years a distinct set of research agendas has emerged “within” and in close relation to feminist geography. Examples include a rich literature on the spatialized performance of sexuality, gender, and race as well as spaces of embodiment (Bell et al., 1994; Binnie 1997; Nast and Pile, 1998; Skelton, 1998; Mahtani, 2002; in this volume see Dirsuweit, Longhurst, Mohammad, and Puar), on the geographies of masculinity (Morrell, 1998; Myers, 2002; Bye, 2003; for review see Longhurst, 2002; in this volume see Hannah), and on geographies of (dis)ability, illness, and health (Asthana, 1996; Moss and Dyck, 1996; Butler and Parr 1999; Dyck et al., 2001; in this volume see Agot). These contributions do not exclusively “belong” to feminist geography; instead they represent work that cross-cuts feminist geography and more recently formed geographical literatures that closely engage queer theory, critical race studies, and the social construction of (dis)ability.

On the other hand, feminist geographers have continued to bring new and important perspectives to a variety of “traditional” subfields in geography. While a comprehensive review is beyond the scope of this introduction, examples of contributions by feminist geographers to various fields during the past decade include: economic and labor geography (McDowell and Court, 1994; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Stiell and England, 1997; Freidberg, 2001; in this volume see chapters by England and Lawson, Eraydin and Erendil, Hanson and Blake, Samarasinghe); political geography (Staeheli, 1996; Secor, 2001; in this volume see Domosh, Hyndman, Elder, Hays-Mitchell); urban geography (Gilbert, 1997; Bondi, 1998; in this volume see Boyer, Fenster, Hubbard, Kamiya, Koskela, Preston and Ustundag); cultural geography (Katz and Monk, 1993; Anderson, 1996; Jacobs and Nash, 2003); critical development geography (Ulluwishewa, 1992; Momsen and Kinnaird, 1993; Radcliffe, 1996; in this volume see Agot, Cravey, Elias and Carney, Hays-Mitchell, Nagar and Swarr, Raju); environmental geography (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Okono, 1999; Gururani, 2002; in this volume see Di Chiro, Emel and Urbanik, Rocheleau, Wickramasinghe, Wolch and Zhang); geographies of migration (Tyner, 1994; Wright et al., 2002; Yeoh and Willis, 2002; in this volume see Pratt, Silvey, Yeoh); and geographic information science (see Kwan, 2002; in this volume see Gilbert and Masucci, and McLafferty).

Just as work of the 1970s arose in tandem with the women’s movement, current debates and topics in feminist geography are profoundly influenced by social movements and geo-historical dynamics. In particular, feminist geography is currently being shaped by (and responding to) contemporary globalization processes and neoliberal discourses, including but not limited to distinct political, economic, and cultural connections that are transnational and translocal. These influences are relevant to a range of the work showcased in this volume because contemporary global/local connections, processes, and movements are profoundly gendered, whether in the context of labor on the global assembly line (see the chapter by Cravey), markets (see chapters by Elder, Elias and Carney, Eraydin and Erendil, Puar), global health policy and risk (see the chapter by Agot), transnational politics and social movements (see chapters by Di Chiro, Nagar and Swarr, Raju), the globalization of low-wage service work (see chapters by England and Lawson, Pratt), local/global performances of identity (see chapters by Dirsuweit, Puar), regional and

transnational migration flows (see chapters by Preston and Ustundag, Mohammad, Silvey), “anti-terrorism” discourses and uneven manifestations of state violence (see chapters by Hannah, Hays-Mitchell, Hyndman), or the astonishing acceleration of the global sex trafficking (see the chapter by Samarashinghe). We mention these not to straitjacket every contribution in terms of the ubiquitous “global,” but to point out a thread of analysis that connects many chapters in this volume, as well as feminist geography more broadly.

Finally, over the past ten to fifteen years close attention to the politics of knowledge production and epistemology in feminist theory has inspired careful explorations of methodology by feminist geographers (see, for example, Katz, 1992; Kobayashi, 1994; Lawson, 1995; in this volume see Moss). These debates represent the cutting edge of methodological thinking and practice in the discipline of geography: questions of positionality, power, and embodied knowledge production permeate discussions of methodology within various fields of geographic thought.

Given the diversity of questions, approaches, and methodologies in feminist geography, the contours of which we only touch upon above, it is unsurprising that the work of feminist geographers is becoming more visible than ever in feminist thinking and social theory broadly defined. Examples of this are numerous. Feminist political ecology, cited above, has reshaped thinking about women, development and environment throughout the social sciences, in policy circles, and among grassroots development organizations. Work on the spatialized performance of identity and power, also cited above, complements textual approaches to performativity in the humanities. Finally, feminist geographers’ nuanced theorizations of place and scale are shaping broader feminist and social theoretical debates about identity, transnationality, and globalization (see, for example, Massey, 1993, 1999; Katz, 2001; Nagar et al., 2002; in this volume see Yeoh).

Given the complexity of the field, it is difficult to generalize about approaches and ongoing conversations within contemporary feminist geography. In our view, nevertheless, four themes of feminist geography emerge and re-emerge to distinguish it as an area of study.

First, feminist geography is closely allied with diverse political movements and commitments; this invigorates it as an arena of analysis and broadens its appeal both within and outside the academy. Feminism is defined by explicit political commitments (against oppressions, or to making visible the workings of social power), and feminist geography is unapologetically marked by this agenda. Some traditionalists suggest that this delegitimizes feminist geography as an *academic* enterprise; feminists argue that the myth of “objective neutrality” has been debunked long ago and that it is only the explicitness of its ideological commitments that distinguishes feminist from mainstream social science.

Second, it is an innately interdisciplinary subfield. This too reflects a politicized intellectual stance as much as it reflects the historical emergence of the field. As feminist geography grew from its early materially grounded and radical roots, it has engaged a feminist re-reading of key theoretical approaches throughout the discipline – in political and cultural geography, in urban and environmental research, in economic and migration literatures, and in methodological engagements. In the process, feminist geographers drew inspiration from, and contributed to, work in fields far beyond the domain of conventional social sciences – particularly engaging with poststructural, psychoanalytic, critical race, postcolonial, and queer theory.

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