

## An uneasy alliance? Tracing the relationships between cultural and feminist geographies

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**Abstract.** Even though the so-called cultural turn in geography coincided with the elaboration and “mainstreaming” of feminist geographies, these two intellectual trajectories are not easily aligned, and the relationships between them have at times been characterized by tension, particularly within the context of American geography. In this paper, I outline the history of these various tensions and uneasy alliances, suggest possible causes for these tensions, and discuss in what ways (or not) this uneasy alliance might matter in terms of the intellectual trajectories of both subfields.

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When Liz Bondi and I mulled over potential titles for the feminist geography journal (*Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*) about to be launched in 1992, the word culture was not at the forefront of our minds, but neither was it completely in the background (Bondi and Domosh, 2003). Both of us were engaged in research that was informed by cultural approaches in geography, and both of us, if I remember correctly, thought that adding the word culture to the title of the journal would connote an important inclusiveness to studies of gender and place. Yet we also felt uneasy about the word culture because of its resonances: it could be seen as limiting the range of issues we wanted the journal to address, i.e., putting an emphasis on the cultural at the expense of the economic or political, for example. The word also implied a realm less tangible and less serious than the realm connoted by feminism, a real-world struggle for autonomy and equality. In 1992, while the cultural turn was making its way through the various subfields of geography, the progressive implications of opening the boundaries between such categories as culture, economy and politics were not yet apparent.

Yet even now, 13 years later, with the many implications and impacts of the cultural turn in geography apparent, and with the term culture so omnipresent that jeremiads have been issued about its overuse (Barnett, 1998a, 1998b; Mitchell, 2000), feminism and culture don't always sit easily together in geography, with lingering suspicions on both

sides about the relevancy of the other. This is particularly surprising given the fact that analyses of culture are at the core of much feminist scholarship. As Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson (2003) have pointed out, one of the crucial insights and tenets of second-wave feminism was that culture, not nature/biology, was the key to understanding the differences between men and women, that, in their words, “the ways in which women are disadvantaged relative to men are not given in nature but are cultural in origin, maintained through the exercise of power, and can be modified through social and political means” (Bondi and Davidson, 2003:327). Yet, as I'll suggest here, the cultural turn in geography still does not resonate strongly within much of feminist geography, particularly though not exclusively within the American context.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I want to trace some of these tensions, particularly those emanating from the feminist side, not to fuel turf wars between subfields, but because I think that analyzing these tensions helps us understand the intellectual contours of the “cultural turn” in Anglophone geography – where it took hold and where it didn't and why. I hope my comments will serve to open discussion around these issues and not foreclose possibilities. This paper, then, is not meant as an exhaustive survey of the relationships between feminist and cultural approaches in geography (for such a survey, see Jacobs and Nash, 2003), but as an introduction to a possible discussion. Before I start, however, I believe it is important to point out that I position myself intellectually as both a feminist and a cultural geographer (heavily influenced by the cultural turn), so I have something personal at stake in discussing these issues. As such, I hope my comments below will not be taken as partisan, but instead as attempts to see from one side to the other and back.

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<sup>1</sup>Given the history of cultural geography within the United States, the cultural turn of the 1980s met with much greater resistance than in the UK, both from those who were defenders of the older cultural tradition, and those who associated it with that older tradition and therefore considered it superfluous and apolitical. As a result, and even today, what “counts” as cultural geography in the UK, including many feminist approaches, is oftentimes not considered as such within the United States.

At the risk of over-simplifying, let me start by suggesting that at the root of these tensions was a powerful perception, dating from the late 1980s, that the new cultural geography, as it was known, and the more general cultural turn in geography, were elitist intellectual pursuits practiced by white men without any direct interest in social justice. In other words, the tensions centered on a perception concerning the cultural turn's practitioners (white men), their object of study (elite cultural artifacts), and their underlying objectives (personal gain and pleasure at the expense of political goals). Where did these perceptions come from? As we've learned from historians of science (Livingstone, 2003), knowledge is constructed through particular practices in particular times and places, and some of these figures, places, and artifacts (books) come to be seen as emblematic of distinct ways of thinking. It seems to me that the perceptions I outlined above were based on several of these emblems.

Let me start with the practitioners. It is true that the geographers who initially took on board the ideas emanating from cultural studies and formulated the key position papers and books were white men (Cosgrove and Jackson, 1987; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1989; Jackson, 1989; Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Duncan and Ley, 1993), though it's important to remember that at the time this demographic profile characterized the entire discipline in general. I believe, however, that it wasn't just their whiteness or maleness that created such a strong impression, but a set of other shared characteristics. These men were all trained in British, or British-influenced Canadian, universities; they were all of a similar generation; they all seemed to be from the middle-classes. It's not difficult to understand, then, how they came to be perceived as a unified and homogenous group of elite white men, particularly by women.

This perception was further strengthened by what these "new" cultural geographers studied, both in terms of its absences and presences. For the most part, neither women nor gender were objects of study, nor were the working-classes. Exceptions to this emanated from those influenced by social geography's explicit concern with social justice (see, for example, Jackson, 1989; Ley, 1983). On the other hand, the subjects that were under analysis – Renaissance art, architecture and landscape, British landscape painting, urban landscapes as text – were subjects easily construed as elitist. For example, one of the most emblematic texts of this period, "The Iconography of Landscape" (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1989), contained essays dotted with references to artists, writers, architects and critics of the Western canon. There were important reasons for these choices: 1) the interest in the construction of modern subjectivities and the Western enlightenment that served as the cornerstone of the humanistic geographies of the 1970s (for example, see Ley and Samuels, 1978) from which some strands of the cultural turn developed; 2) a reaction to the "old" populist cultural geography of the Berkeley school that celebrated the folk and folk culture (for example, see Kniffen, 1965; Zelinsky, 1973); and 3) an interest in power and its cultural expressions and representations that was derived from cultural materialism (Williams,

1958, 1977). Understood within this context, we can certainly see that the choice of subjects was neither intentionally elitist nor a-political. In fact, there was very much a progressive politics embedded in this research, in that it 1) took human agency seriously; 2) understood culture as contested and contingent; and 3) analyzed how power operated culturally and therefore how it could be subverted. Nonetheless, compared to the subject being studied in feminist geography – the oppression of women – this came across as decidedly elitist and rather unimportant.

In addition, the methods and theories used in these studies further strengthened the elitist label. These theories and methods were based primarily on literary and art history criticism. Let me briefly consider two of the more important conceptual frameworks: landscape as text, and iconography. Interpreting landscape as one would a literary text – seeing it as a representation – was, at the time, a radical idea, since it called for analyses that opened out onto the complexity and contested nature of culture, rather than closing in on culture with a capital "c". It looked particularly to ideology and power as the key to understanding landscape as cultural representation (Duncan and Duncan, 1988; Duncan and Ley, 1993). Yet at its most pedestrian level, the notion of landscape as text was presented as a search for authorship, thereby limiting analysis to landscapes explicitly "authored" (designed, imagined, constructed). Given the history of Western architecture and planning, most of those "authors" were, and still are, men. In other words, the set of literary, deconstructive methods associated with the "landscape as text" idea focused attention on artifacts that came with a traceable, and most often patriarchal, genealogy, at the expense of everyday, vernacular, "unauthored" places and spaces.

Similarly, the use of iconography as a method of landscape interpretation was seen as limiting analysis to places that were explicitly designed, again putting emphasis on dominant not subaltern cultural actors. The iconographic approach also carried with it an emphasis on the visual since its methodology was derived primarily from the discipline of art history. This emphasis on the visual came under attack not only for its elitism – as scholars have pointed out, the visual as a form of representation has historically been used by and for dominant groups (Jay, 1994; Levin, 1993) – but also for its masculinism. Gillian Rose, in her influential book "Feminism and Geography" (1993), paid particular attention to this element of the cultural turn in geography, criticizing iconographic approaches for their unquestioned acceptance of and reliance upon the masculine gaze and the authority that enables it. Rose compounded this critique by suggesting that this non-recognition of authority that allows for interpretation also serves to repress the pleasure of looking – a pleasure that she argued was "deeply bound into the regulatory fictions of heterosexuality" (1993:101). Although Rose's arguments have been themselves subject to critique by cultural feminists such as Catherine Nash (1996), the mistrust of the new theories of landscape interpretation, of the visual and the textual, that Rose gave voice to lingered within the feminist

community.

So too did the suspicions about the duplicitous aims of the cultural turn in geography, and its purported success in dominating the field of human geography. These suspicions centered on the sense that elite men were gaining pleasure and power from the cultural turn – from engaging in the masculine gaze, asserting their authority under the guise of interpretation, and winning academic positions and power. More recently, critics have suggested that the success of the cultural turn has come at the expense of materialist approaches, and therefore presents a threat to progressive politics (Mitchell, 2000). Other critics point out that the cultural turn succeeded partly because of the economic dynamics of the publishing industry, an industry that makes money from the production and proliferation of the “new” and the fashionable, particularly when that new, like cultural studies, could be marketed beyond the narrow confines of the academy (Barnett and Low, 1996). These criticisms have been leveled not by the feminist geography community per se, but by the larger critical geography world. No doubt the economics of the publishing industry has impacts on academic publishing and power, and proponents of the cultural turn in geography benefited from the publishing frenzy of the 1990s. But so too did the proponents of feminist geography, since gender/sexuality studies formed a significant component of the cultural studies publishing business. So if the new cultural geography succeeded partly because of the publishing industry, so too did feminist geography. Nonetheless, doubts persist about the integrity of the academic success of the cultural turn in geography, but no one, as far as I can tell, has voiced a similar concern about the successes of feminist approaches.

So, where does this lead us? In what ways does it matter that the relationships between cultural and feminist approaches have been uneasy, at best? Well, at the most basic level, it does provide insights into the uneven travels of the cultural turn in geography – its methods and perspectives have been taken up in some areas but not in others. I know I’m oversimplifying when I say this, but for the most part, cultural approaches to feminist geography form a small part of the subfield. To be sure there are important exceptions to this – the postcolonial inspired work on gender, empire and landscape (Blunt, 1994, 2003; McEwan, 2000; Morin, 1999; Anderson, 1998), and work on subjectivity, identity and place (Podmore, 2001; Bondi, 1998; Probyn, 2003) – and overwhelming opportunity for exciting research at the edge of the two worlds, as Jane Jacobs and Catherine Nash (2003) have pointed out in a recent essay. Yet, particularly in the American context, feminist geography moved along an intellectual trajectory through the 1980s and 1990s quite separate from cultural approaches.<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, it favored the contemporary over the historical, inter-

views over archives, politics and economy over culture (for seminal works, see Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Katz and Monk, 1993; Jones et al., 1997; Rocheleau et al., 1996.) And these trends continue today. What I’m arguing, then, is that culture has not yet really “turned” in feminist geography for all the various reasons that I’ve outlined above: its elitist associations, a belief that cultural studies are superfluous and apolitical, a mistrust of the visual and textual, a suspicion of academic opportunism.

Looking at this from the other side, it seems that feminism has “turned” a bit more in cultural geography. The categories of gender and sexuality form major research areas within the subfield, and feminist inspired theories and perspectives have found their way into cultural geographies of landscape, identity, nation, and nature (see, for example, Duncan, 2002; Braun, 2002). But uneasy relationships persist, limiting the possibilities of what can be learned from each side. Let me suggest just one such possibility – a potentially fruitful methodological exchange concerning relationships between researchers and the researched. With a primary emphasis on interviews as method, feminist geography has run the risk of valorizing the experiences of its interviewees at the expense of analyzing and interpreting their socio-cultural context, while cultural geography with its emphasis on interpretation has run the risk of accepting without question the authority of the researcher/author. So, let me end this essay by taking a brief look at each of these issues.

Much of the original impetus behind the introduction of feminist approaches in geography was a concern over the invisibility of women – both as practitioners of geography, and as the objects of study. To remedy the fact that women’s bodies and voices were largely absent from studies of spatial patterns, landscapes, and places, feminist geographers actively sought to identify and include women’s lives and experiences. At first that identification took the form of mapping women’s lives (Seager and Olson, 1986; Mazey and Lee, 1983), and later was expanded to studies of, and theorizing about and through, the experiences of women as relayed primarily through interviews. Yet one of the results of this emphasis on making visible the marginalized experiences of women was an under-theorization of those experiences themselves, and of how they are relayed to researchers. In other words, following the ideas put forth by feminist historian Joan Scott (1992), I believe that a good deal of the work that feminist geographers completed in the 1990s assumed that the words recorded during interviews relayed essential truths about women’s lives. According to Scott, this is problematic because it fails to recognize that participants’ experiences are discursive events that are constantly being remade and reinterpreted since they are intricately imbricated in historical and social context.<sup>3</sup> The result of this essentializing of experience, this acceptance of what interviewees say as truth, is that the identity of subjects gets locked in time and

<sup>2</sup>This is partly due, I suspect, to the fact that American geography at the time, and in general, was much more inclined toward economic and political approaches than to cultural ones. But given the close relationship between cultural approaches and gender as a category of analysis, this struck me as particularly surprising.

<sup>3</sup>For a more detailed discussion of Scott’s critique, see Domosh, 2003.

place, and their “difference” is reinforced instead of interrogated. In other words, the experiences that people relate in interviews are produced through sets of contingent factors, all of which need to be interrogated if those experiences are to be understood. As Joan Scott states, “the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems” (Scott, 1992:25).

The goal of making women’s experiences visible, then, led in some cases to an under-theorization of the historical conditions and context that shaped the subjectivities of those being researched.<sup>4</sup> Emphasis instead was placed on understanding the discursive nature of the research process – on understanding in what ways the lines separating researcher and researched were fundamentally shaky, and in what ways the personal, emotional, and political situation of the researcher inevitably shaped what was being researched (Moss, 1995; Women and Geography Study Group, 1997; England 1994; Nast, 1994). Feminist geographers then were successful in deconstructing their knowledge claims of researchers, but less successful at doing so for those they researched. It is here that cultural methods and perspectives would be most useful, using various tools of interpretations as a means of interrogating the historical/cultural conditions that create difference.

On the other hand, cultural geographies and geographers have rarely, if ever, interrogated their own knowledge claims, nor explicitly addressed methodological issues. The few interrogations and interventions have emanated either from historical geography’s concern with the politics of the archive (Hanlon, 2001; Kurtz, 2001; Cameron, 2001; Gagen, 2001), or from social geography’s concern with interviews and surveys (Hay, 2000). For the most part, cultural geographers have focused their contextual and deconstructive analysis on their objects of study – cultural representations. As a result, they have created a transparent veil over their own subjectivity and truth claims, disguising their marked subjectivity. As Gillian Rose (1993) argued ten years ago, this denial of one’s own marked subjectivity enables the maintenance of a distanced position and the illusion of authority. Yet interpretative work is arguably the most fraught with questions of legitimacy and rigor; most needy, therefore of being subject to interrogation. Much could be learned from the pages of feminist research – about acknowledging the marked position of the researcher, understanding the cultural/social context of interpretation, and about the importance of situating knowledge and knowledge construction. Other exchanges too between feminist and cultural approaches could be most productive, as Jacobs and Nash (2003) have recently pointed out – for example in thinking about gender as a grammar and technology for understanding cultural difference across a range of social fields – and as is evident from scholarship in cultural feminist studies.

<sup>4</sup>Recent work on feminist methodologies has addressed some of these issues. See Moss, 2005; Dyck, 2002.

What I’ve tried to suggest in this essay is why, for the most part, these potentially fruitful alliances have not happened, particularly within the context of American geography, and why this might matter. For all their potential intellectual and political similarities, feminist and cultural geographies have remained fairly separate, somewhat to the detriment of each. Nonetheless I do think that important intellectual and political opportunities lie at the intersections and disjunctures of these two overlapping fields of inquiry – gender and culture. Perhaps, as Liz Bondi and myself (2003) have suggested, the choice of the title “Gender, Place and Culture” over ten years ago was a propitious one, but the intellectual potential promised by those three words is still waiting to be fully explored.

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