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The spatialities of intersectional thinking: fashioning feminist geographic futures

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

In this article, we highlight the inherent spatialities of intersectionality and its pivotal importance for feminist geographic thought. Intersectionality was, at its inception, already a deeply spatial theoretical concept, process and epistemology, particularly when read through careful and serious engagement with Black Feminist Thought and the writings of radical women of color. We do so here, revisiting Cooper, Crenshaw, Collins and other key scholars to demonstrate that the interlocking violence of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism have always constituted a spatial formation. Drawing on feminist geographic thought from the 1990s onwards, we highlight the influence of intersectional thinking on our discipline particularly concerning how racial, gendered and classed power operates in place and through space. These pieces have inspired and driven our work, and we extend them here, recognizing newer scholarship that extends and enriches feminist geography through a postcolonial intersectionality. We close by arguing that intersectional thinking is indispensable to feminist geography. Working in solidarity, across and through the interrogation of difference, with agreement and discord, we encourage a deeper feminist geographic engagement with intersectional thinkers, contributing to more critical (and hopeful) futures for our scholarship.

In a 1990s article published by the \textit{Professional Geographer}, feminist geographer Rickie Sanders (1990, 228) argues that, despite feminist geography's central concern with inequality and social justice, its engagement with critical analyses is limited and problematic. While Sanders acknowledges advances made in the subfield, both in supporting women and making space for feminist intellectual thought, she argues that its efforts to 'challenge the basic assumptions of the
discipline’ have largely failed. Poignantly, for Sanders, feminist geography’s narrow integration of poor women and women of color and, in connection, the lack of ‘explicit recognition of the interrelations between race, class and gender’ truncates its aims (1990, 229).

Almost thirty years later, we contribute to this ongoing and reinvigorated discussion of feminist geography’s engagement with the concept of intersectionality. We contend that intersectionality was, at its inception, already a deeply spatial theoretical concept, process and epistemology, particularly when read through careful and serious engagement with Black Feminist Thought. In short, the interlocking violence of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism constitute a spatial formation. Thus we, like Sanders, maintain that feminist geographers are well-served to consider intersectionality in their scholarly work and activism. Although, as Sanders laments, past efforts were limited; in this piece we celebrate feminist geography’s entanglements with intersectionality since the 1990s. We do so to encourage deeper feminist geographic engagement with intersectional thought, contributing to more critical (and hopeful) futures for our scholarship.

We begin by briefly revisiting some of the path breaking intersectional scholarship developed within black feminist thought and the writings of radical women of color. Here we demonstrate the spatialities inherent in intersectional thinking and its grounded theorization of power in space, place and across scale. From here, we highlight early feminist geographic engagements with intersectionality. While few in number, we celebrate insights from this work. In particular, we signal two ways contemporary feminist geographic scholarship attends to and discloses intersectional spatialities: first by placing, unsettling and decentering whiteness (as a hegemonic power formation), interrogating how norms of racial privilege rely on and are spatially reproduced; and second, by making visible multiple subjectivities and forms of power. Intersectionality continues to represent a contested space of intellectual struggle within feminist geography. Still, in our closing we strive for solidarity, viewing this as a generative practice to invite and build on spatially sophisticated intersectional analyses.

Laying the grounds

Intersectional analyses in feminist geography draw upon a rich collective of thinkers embodied in the scholarship of Black Feminist Thought and radical women of color (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Collins 2000; Cooper [1892] 1988; hooks 1984; Lorde 1984; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Spillers 1989). For these scholars power is spatially contingent. For example, Crenshaw’s formative (1993) analysis of women’s shelters in Los Angeles’ minority communities connected and co-implicated ineffective federal immigration policy, mass incarceration, and racialized unemployment with the intimacies of violence in the lives of immigrant women and women of color. This project demanded a conceptual and geographic bridging of the scales of the body, home and state. Poignantly, the diverse and simultaneously cohesive
body of black feminist thinkers, like Crenshaw, refuses a liberal and additive theorization of power and justice, in part because of the way intersectional theorizations of power are spatialized (hooks 1984). These scholars trace the ways in which structural oppressions within legal, immigrant, carceral or capitalist systems are maintained, reproduced, and expressed through particular places (for example the prison, factory, or domestic violence shelters) and how structural oppression is differentially experienced within these sites (Collins 2000; Davis 1971). Black feminist thinking thus offers novel understandings of how domination and oppression displace African American women from particular places while simultaneously naturalizing them in others, leaving little doubt that ‘problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure […]’. The entire framework…must be rethought and recast’ (Crenshaw 1989, 140; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015). Writing more recently, scholars argue that intersectionality serves as ‘analytic sensibility’ (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). An analysis is not simply intersectional by employing the term, rather it ‘is the adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power […]’, making the point that it is ‘what intersectionality does, rather than what intersectionality is’ (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 795). This emphasis on process and the enactment of social relations again signals the centrality of space and its relevance for feminist geography.

While most feminist geographers are familiar with the 1980s groundings of intersectional thought, the do-ing of intersectionality has a far longer history (Collins 2015; May 2015). Indeed, well before the 1980s, intersectional thinkers have long challenged the belief of a seemingly unprejudiced tradition of positivism. Anna Julia Cooper writes ‘no finite mind can grasp and give out the whole circle of truth’ (Cooper [1892] 1988, 183) as ‘truth means merely the re-presentation of the sensations and experiences of our personal environment’ ([1892] 1988, 177). This part of the intersectional project also holds deeply spatial imperatives. Here not only is Cooper insistent that knowledge production is embedded in location, but also time, as she maintains that ‘[n]o life is bound up within the period of its conscience existence, no personality dates its origin from its birthday’ ([1892] 1988, 234). Her reflections complicate the temporal and geographic fixities of power; making her contribution, and the feminist scholarship that draws on her insights, cogently epistemological. Central here is the critical interrogation of positivism’s largely unmarked foundation in empire, a tracing of its specific historical and geographic roots. Echoing Cooper’s epistemological lessons, feminist geographers Kobayashi and Peake (1994) write against the way race and gender are commonly misunderstood and naturalized as ‘oppositional categories’. They write, ‘we are concerned with the ways in which contemporary society is permeated by vestiges of thought categories, particularly those associated with the “Enlightenment” that impose logic and rationality in nominalist and dualistic terms’ (1994, 226). The messing of dichotomous categories also builds upon Collins’ insistence that
categorization occurs in conjunction with the belief that either/or categories must be ranked. The search for certainty of this sort requires that one side of a dichotomy be privileged while its other is denigrated. Privilege becomes defined in relation to its other. (1990, 225)

Deconstructing binaries in this way illuminates how ‘the intellectual heritage of the Enlightenment is one that involves placing the world within an ideological order, creating environments according to socially constructed and naturalized categories’ (Kobayashi and Peake 1994, 227; our emphasis). While feminists more generally build on the notion that knowledge is situated (Haraway 1988), space also informs our imaginations (Yuval-Davis 2012, 50), a move that allows for more critical interrogation of epistemologies, single axis analyses, and the myths of objectivity.

**Intersectional sensibilities in feminist geography**

The spatiality of intersectional thinking is cogently articulated in feminist geographic writings since the 1990s (Kobayashi and Peake 1994; McDowell 1991; Radcliffe and Westwood 1996). While few in number, and in spite of the rare explicit use of the term intersectionality, some of this scholarship gestures an important shift in the ways feminist geographers recognize the mutual constitution of race, gender and space. For instance, centering the project of empire in particular, Jarosz’ analysis of the orientalist production of Africa and Africans via the mythic ‘Dark Continent’ (1992) illuminates the multiple power formations embedded in development thinking, both past and present. She traces the weaving together of racialized, gendered and sexualized language in colonial and contemporary times, discourse that extends from the language of ‘virginal’ African lands readily braced for colonial penetration to stereotypes of lustful, predatory, HIV-infected urban spaces punctuated by female prostitutes. Jarosz unveils the persistence of these narratives, their reliance on interlocking racial-gendered tropes, and the ways these tropes work to erase the structural violence of colonial and postcolonial Africa: those of stagnating rural agrarian economies, resultant out-migration, and urban unemployment that lead women into sex work in the first place (113).

Intersectional thinking is also embedded within rich feminist geographic work on immigration, citizenship and space. Standing out is Ruddick’s (1996) powerful analysis of the Just Desserts murder in Toronto. In this piece, she examines the racist depictions and assumptions generated from crime reporting among Toronto newspapers. These journalistic tales rely upon the reification of differences between the victim (Greek-Canadian) and perpetrators (landed immigrants from Jamaica). Punctuated by black feminist insights from hooks, Collins, Lorde and anti-colonist theorist Fanon, among others, Ruddick discloses how this reification maps onto racialized discussions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ immigrant communities and their differential (racial)-criminalizations. Ruddick demonstrates how news reporting re-entrenches a common image of black men as ‘menaces to society’
playing upon the gendered and racialized nature of the assault – wherein a young, black, unknown male marauder killed a young white woman – and resonated with the gendered and racialized trope of the dangerous black male who threatens the integrity of the white community through sexual or physical violence to its women. (1996, 142)

Deploying a politics of scale, she discloses how localized violence is deployed in nationalist narratives, drawing into the also deeply gendered and racialized debates around immigration and rights to citizenship (Ruddick 1996).

This attention to the racialized gendering of immigrant bodies, and the bridging of intimate and nation-state scales, is also central in Stiell and England’s (1997) research on domestic labor. In two connected pieces, ‘relational systems of difference’ (England and Stiell 1997; Stiell and England 1997, 356), in particular those of gender, class, ‘race’/ethnicity, immigration/citizenship status, and language, are centered. They examine how these markers of difference work together to produce stereotypes that drive and are driven by Toronto’s domestic labor system. Colonially rooted and deeply ingrained gendered and racialized stereotypes of sensibility, docility, laziness and hedonism underline the powerful imaginary of the ‘European nanny’ and the ‘Filipina domestic’. In turn, these stereotypes shape assumptions about the material realities of domestic labor differently experienced by Filipina, Jamaican, and German women. Such differences unfold assumptions around the appropriate kinds of labour for particular workers and the conditions, precarity, and value of that labour. Their deeply spatial work connects the scales of the home and nation-state in the maintenance and reproduction of domestic-visa programs, and the home-space itself, through the work of racist gendered stereotypes.

Our last example highlights Gilbert’s critique of the discursive production of the ‘urban underclass’ and the ‘welfare queen’ (1997, 1998). Intersectional thinking is at work here as she attends to the racialization of gender and class, the classed gendering of race, and their connected work in producing marginalized urban subjects and spaces. Highlighting the spatialities of intersectionality, she argues that ‘[a] particular conceptualization of space contributes to how we construct and represent difference. Racist accounts of poverty are partially made possible by the process of racialization of African Americans through our bounding of the ghetto’ (1997, 32). Gilbert’s work adopts an explicitly anti-essentialist, anti-racist feminist approach to urban poverty and disenfranchisement. Integrating, for example, gendered constraints on economic opportunities, the division of family labor with racial segregation, and institutional racisms in the labor market, she offers a complex and spatially rooted analysis of urban marginalization in places like Worcester, Massachusetts. Simultaneously visible, are the particularly racialized-gendered efforts of coping and resistance, in her words ‘open[ing] up the possibility of seeing power in places and people who have been previously seen as powerless’ (1999, 107, see also Pulido 1997).

Notwithstanding these significant intersectional contributions to feminist geography, by the end of the 1990s gender power remained the primary analytical framing of injustice throughout the subfield. This trend prompted Mahtani’s frank
intervention: ‘although geographers are well versed in emphasizing the now well-
 worn mantra that race is a social construction, I believe we have yet to fully unravel
the complex ways that racialization is socially constructed within particular places’
(2001, 300). Mahtani’s path breaking work is not just important for how we think,
but how we act. Her research with feminist geography participants unsettles the
taken for grantedness of whiteness in geography, illuminating how its power in
our discipline produces similar erasures around race within feminist geography
itself; in body and in mind (Mahtani 2006).

Still, we sense (and are profoundly hopeful) yet another shift is imminent. This
is signaled by a growing refusal amongst feminist geographers to erase race, to
take seriously an intersectional project to decenter whiteness, and to recognize
multiple forms of power. The insistence of intersectional thinking to emend bina-
rries (and their spatially-rooted naturalizations) works against elisions. For example,
in her excavation of the ‘forgotten histories’ of black Britons within the Victorian
Archives, feminist-historical geographer Bressey (2002) writes that imperial, racial-
ized and gendered powers were factors in deciding the fates of those housed with
Barnardo’s, a philanthropic organization for London’s homeless and poor children.
Bressey discloses the presence of black women in these spaces to disrupt the nar-
rative of Britain as historically (and naturally) white. Disrupting common historical
narratives to disclose their silences is also a theme in Domosh’s work on American
imperialism. Attentive to the interlocking ways race and gender work in colo-
served to legitimate American imperialism and commercial expansion, with the
United States as a masculine producer and the rest of the world, particularly the
colonized world, as the feminine consumer. This racism was, however, ‘flexible’
in that, while racial and gendered forms of civilization were rendered possible
through consumption, U.S. narratives of superiority as the ‘naturally’ dominant
commercial power were strictly maintained.

Unveiling what domination buries, and where, is also key to McKittrick’s Demonic
Grounds. Through the entanglement of black studies and human geography,
McKittrick weaves the works of black feminist thinkers as a way to, ‘engage with
a narrative that locates and draws on black history and black subjects in order to
make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic’ (2006, x,
our emphasis). Focusing on multiple forms of domination, McKittrick reveals how
the sale of black women’s bodies and their struggle for freedom are profoundly
spatial processes, as

geographic domination is worked out through reading and managing their specific
racial-sexual bodies. This management effectively, but not completely, displaces black
geographic knowledge by assuming that black femininity is altogether knowable,
unknowing, and expendable; she is seemingly in place by being out of place. (2006, xv)

Indeed. Intersectionality is a spatial concept. This fact is confirmed not only
by the powerful and instructive way feminist geographers employ intersection-
ality, but because the ubiquity of spatial metaphors embedded in Black Feminist
Thought make it pointless to deny: ‘peripheries’, ‘ideological confinement’, ‘the margin’, ‘crossroads’ and who can forget Audre Lorde’s ‘The Master’s House’ (Combahee River Collective 1977; hooks 1984; Lorde 1984; McKittrick 2006). It is the margin that is a descriptor for women’s politics that simultaneously marks place and takes place (McKittrick 2006, 55).

Beyond the United States: postcolonial intersectionality

There is a misconception that intersectionality is a framework only assigned for understanding the lives of black women, and in particular, African American women in the United States (Bliss 2016). Yet, intersectionality as a sensibility and way of knowing travels (Mollett 2017; Mollett and Faria 2013). In part, its application is globally relevant as racial violence, segregation and white supremacy operate in place-specific ways everywhere. Set in the context of international development, both colonial histories and contemporary global relations demand that we pay attention to race and by extension caste and ethnicity too. As such, we have extended and complicated the spatiality of intersectional theory through a consideration of the power of colonial past-presents in and through the Global South with a concept we call ‘postcolonial intersectionality’:

a concept that moves beyond US based racial and gender hierarchies to acknowledge the way patriarchy and racialized processes (including whiteness) are consistently bound up in national and international development practice. This approach compels us to talk about the power of race and not just the difference of race. (Mollett and Faria 2013, 117)

Using this framework to understand how privilege and oppression shape the lives and land tenure securities of Miskito women, we build from and join other feminist geographers (Asher 2009; Jarosz 1992; Katz 1992; Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Sundberg 2004). Together we take seriously the aim of intersectionality to de-center whiteness, to understand the imbued spaces of violence in development, and to see the production of space through multiple power formations. Such work disrupts myths of racial democracy and equality among communities in Latin America, denials of racism in Europe, and reiterates the saliency of caste in South Asia (Bastia 2014; Curiel 2007; Delicado 2017; Mohanty 2013; Nightingale 2011; Radcliffe 2015). For example, aligning with postcolonial intersectionality, Kalpana Wilson (2015) historicizes population control policies and the paradox of development’s ‘Girl Effect’ campaigns (see also Sasser 2014). For Wilson, the ‘embodied experiences of the political economy of disposability’ … ‘and [racialized] neo Malthusian population control policies can only be understood through approaches which problematize the notion of women as a homogenous category’ (Wilson 2015, 826). Together this scholarship demonstrates that intersectionality is a framework for understanding multiplicity as a way to interrogate ‘political and structural inequalities, not simply categories of identity’ (Cho, Crenshaw, and
Intersectionality indeed travels, but is always temporally and spatially contingent.

**Intersectional struggles for space in feminist geography**

In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick argues that black feminism as black feminist politics ‘can also be understood as a struggle over space and place, within the academy, in theory and activism and across women’s literatures’ (2006, xxviii). This struggle unfolds within feminist geographic scholarship and formal and informal discussions. Indeed, there is growing engagement with intersectionality and postcolonial intersectionality alike. Notwithstanding, some feminist geographers contemplate, and often advocate for, the removal of race from intersectional approaches, ‘appropriating’ the term for other ends. For example, during a double panel session on the topic of gender, environment and intersectionality, held at the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers in San Francisco, only two of twelve panelists acknowledged the origins of the term as a legacy of black feminist thought. In both presentations and discussions, some participants did not just actively erase race, but argued that the two participants who based their comments in black feminist thinking, were doing ‘classic’ intersectionality (backward) and that ‘there was nothing wrong with “appropriating” the term for other [modern] uses’. Unfortunately, there was little reflection regarding the blatant epistemic violence at work in these two sessions.

This move to erase race is troubling. Eliding race from intersectional thinking reflects a process that Mulinari refers to as ‘doing…whiteness as usual’, whereby ‘hegemonic feminist knowledge production traffics anti-racist feminist scholarship across borders, domesticating women-of-color epistemology in ways that either erase or assimilate it into a Eurocentric feminist globality’ (c.f Mohanty 2013, 981). For us, this is spatial struggle. We are not simply arguing for attention to the mutual construction of race and gender and/or race, gender and sexuality (Faria and Mollett 2016; Mollett 2017; Mollett and Faria 2013). Rather we reject any dulling of radical critique, particularly where the primacy of gender elides race/sexuality. An ‘intersectional’ framing that fails to decenter whiteness and/or heteronormativity, and its operations through patriarchy, also fails to attend, name, contest and make visible oppressive forms of power. How then, is what remains intersectional at all?

Despite tensions, there are spaces of existing solidarity among feminist geographers and across various subfields. Indeed, the use of intersectionality amongst sexuality scholars to complicate structural discrimination demonstrates a shared priority on power, an imperative to interrogate heterosexual norms, rather than simply identity (Hopkins and Noble 2009). Furthermore, calls for ontological reflection underpinning indigenous geographies may also bind feminist geographic projects across subfields. Just as we feminist geographers are concerned with the misappropriation of intersectionality, indigenous geographies scholars problematize the
way indigenous ontologies working to disrupt hegemonic knowledges, ‘can be easily neutralized as a triviality, a case study or a trinket, as powerful institutions work as self-legitimating systems which uphold broader dynamics of neo-colonial power’ (Hunt 2014, 30). Such solidarity requires a mutual respect and recognition of the historical and lived specificities and differences as scholars, and to the temporal and spatial entanglements, such as settler colonialism, that shape our communities. Black geographies too has deepened not just critical race feminism and racial-sexuality studies within feminist geography, but has also extended and opened new ways of thinking about enduring spatialities i.e. the plantation. Such work offers novel insights on masculinity, race and sexuality and the extension of carceral spaces beyond the prison within minority households and neighbourhoods (Bailey and Shabazz 2013; Eaves 2016; Gilmore 2007; Massaro 2017). What’s more, critical feminist and black geographies scholars, seemingly writing from the margins, refuse to be silenced and are making their activist voices heard inside and outside feminist geography (Falola and Ohueri 2017; Hawthorne and Meché 2016).

These multiple challenges to the coloniality of our discipline, scholarship and the world around us strengthen prospects for a lasting feminist geographic solidarity across these particular subfields. Not just because, for many of us, our work is situated in more than one subfield. But also, because our collective, however disparate, historical experiences shape contemporary spatial struggle inside and outside academia. Engaging our differences in solidarity projects, rather than diluting them around vague notions of social justice may re-define grounds for collaboration. If this sounds too naïve then we suggest rethinking what solidarity in feminist geography should look like, and read this against what it in fact currently does, and who in fact benefits in practice. We as scholars question the expectation that common epiphanies, seamless accord and/or acquiescence define solidarity. We ponder why consensus is the only measure for solidarity action, a claim that draws epistemological logic from liberal measures of progress and linearity. Rather, is it so impossible that solidarity be defined by dialogue AND heated debate, compromise AND impasse, engagement AND disengagement, participation AND refrain? While solidarity requires space for debate, perhaps rather than forging ways that flatten our differences, we spend more time understanding and rigorously interrogating how we continue to reproduce those differences among and between us. Rethinking solidarity in the vein of intersectional justice demands we, ‘grappl[e] with critique and discomfort. The willingness, however, to engage criticism and commit to moving past shock, guilt, and defensiveness [could be] genuinely productive’ (Falola and Ohueri 2017, 726, our emphasis).

**Feminist geographic futures**

In many ways, intersectional feminist geographies continue to make space in our discipline, however slow the gains. Moreover, while an analysis of the spatialities of intersectional power has long been imperative, its need is keenly apparent in
this moment of ascendant white masculinist nationalist supremacy. In the face of these aggressions, both old and new, we must not be tempted to lean (once again) on ‘the myth of universal womanhood’ as black feminist thought cogently warns (hooks 1984; Sanders 1990, 229). Rather, working in solidarity, across and through the interrogation of difference, with agreement and discord, we are better positioned to understand this particular manifestation of racial-gendered-sexual violence, to trace its genealogies in colonial-pasts, and to spatialize our resistance to such violence in the present, on behalf of our feminist geographic futures. It is in these spaces that, not only our contradictions, but our complex commonalities as human beings, are indelibly laid bare.

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Caroline Faria is a feminist political and cultural geographer working on gender and nationalism. In particular, her research has focused on the US-based South Sudanese diaspora and the
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