Feminist geography in the archive: practice and method

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Through the 1990s feminist geography and historical geography were in the process of 'discovering' one another, doing so with what I would characterize as a mixture of suspicion and excitement. As a result of this engagement, geography has witnessed a groundswell of scholarship at the interface of feminist and historical traditions.[1] Reflecting back on what it was to do graduate work at this time and in this vein, I am struck by how these two intellectual traditions enrich and complement one another, sometimes in unexpected ways. I am also struck by how each allows one to draw upon and engage the other in *new* ways, ultimately producing new understandings of the discipline as a whole. Geography of course has a long-standing tradition of field work. For historical geographers, our field is the archive. This paper offers reflections on this particular kind of field work from the perspective of feminist geography, in the hope of both encouraging and informing the use of historical sources by feminist geographers.

Coming of Age as a Feminist Historical Geographer

On the occasion of the 1992 meeting of the Canadian Association of Geographers in Vancouver, British Columbia, the Vancouver Sun newspaper ran an article highlighting some of the meetings' offerings. The article's principle message was: 'this is not the geography you learned in school', and illustrated the point through references to an assortment of papers on contemporary cultural themes, and to those which engaged social theory. Papers focusing on topics farthest from traditional understandings of geography figured prominently, and the piece made particular and incredulous reference to feminist geography. The article suggested a number of interpretations. On the one hand it portrayed geography as an exciting discipline that was on the move, but mixed in with this was also uncertainty. Maybe, the author seemed to suggest, it wasn't such a good thing that geography had changed so much over such a relatively short period. This was during the height of the 'culture wars' in North American academia over the ways in which post-structuralist concerns with subjectivity, identity and difference were re-shaping the classic subjects. In this context, was geography becoming splintered? Rarefied? Was it still relevant?

The early 1990s was a liminal time for feminist geography. For the newspaper article's author, the idea that a geographer could also be a feminist, and conduct feminist-oriented scholarship, was an open question (though at least it was registering as a possibility). To see one's chosen field held up for public scrutiny early in one's graduate career was jarring, and I remember being struck by the contrast between the article's portrayal of feminist geography as an academic aberration, and my own very real experience of it. What I liked most about feminist geography then (and now) was the supportive environment it nurtured toward innovative scholarship. In the context of uncertainty within some quarters of the discipline about how to respond to post-structuralism and the 'cultural turn', feminist geography embraced experimentation and intellectual exploration. I was coming of age as a graduate student as feminist geography was itself coming of age, and this was appealing. To me, feminist geography was one of the *most* relevant and politically salient areas of the discipline.

I was encouraged to do historical geography both out of a sense that what I wanted to study for my master's thesis —violence against women—was possibly too politically charged to study in the present, and also out of concern that I did not yet have adequate methodological training to take this topic on. Yet if uncertainty existed over what it meant

to be a feminist geographer, what it meant to be a feminist historical geographer was even less clear. Despite the exciting work being done at the intersection of feminist and historical geography in the 1990s (Blunt, 1994; Blunt & Rose, 1994; Domosh 1997; McEwan, 1994; Kay, 1997; Morin, 1998), there was still a sense that working with historical sources could inadvertently put one at a distance from questions of primary empirical and methodological concern to feminists; such as the social construction and effects of gender and other kinds of power relations, authorship, the politics of information and the situation of the researcher. Picking up on concerns coming out of anthropology and post-colonial studies, feminist geographers in the early 1990s were becoming increasingly interested in the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Concerns crystallized around issues of 'speaking for' others, and discussion focused on ways to make the research process, particularly the interview process, less extractive and more collaborative. Efforts to alter the research dynamic included attempts to giving something back to the community in which one worked, or allowing the community itself to set the research agenda, based on the model of Dutch science shops (Sclove, 1995).

In contrast to interviewing, or other kinds of field work, it may appear as though historical sources are 'there for the taking' in a relatively unproblematic way. Archives are public and free, and everything therein is organized and referenced (in theory). There is no obvious way of 'giving back' to the community; and concerns about responsibilities to ones subjects and the potential violence of speaking for others are mitigated. Does one even need to worry about such things when all your subjects are all dead? As I learned in the course of completing my Master's and Doctoral research, it turns out the answer is yes. Drawing on this experience, in what follows I hope to show that the practice of historical geography is powerfully shaped by issues of fundamental concern to feminist geography, and, where I can, offer suggestions for negotiating some of the challenges one can encounter in that lesser-known field, the archive.

Rending Feminist Geographies from the Archives

Approaching historical sources through the lens of feminist geography means attending to the importance of power. This includes being aware of how power structures identity, lived experience and social relations in spaces of the past; and also, following feminist historians Denise Riley (1988), Joan Scott (1988), Liz Stanley (1990) and Mariana Valverde (1990), how it structures information *about* the past. As Mona Domosh, Susan Ruddick, Miles Ogborn and others have argued, such a methodological stance allows us to recognize how our understandings of the past are mediated (Domosh, 1997; Ruddick. 1996; Ogborn,1999). This can entail both seeking out sources which shine light on the social construction of gender and other kinds of power relations in historical contexts, as well as seeking to understand the politics that structure what we can know of past worlds. Information politics can shape research in feminist historical geography in a number of ways. These include the need to find sources that reveal the workings of power; the difficulties in working with sources at the boundary of public knowledge; and the task of gaining access to non-public archives. Each of these issues can present challenges and, ultimately, a greater understanding both of past worlds; and how our knowledge of those worlds is shaped.

Sources

As with any historical investigation, feminist historical geography is shaped by the availability of sources and the intentions for which those sources were written. As is common when researching subjects with little social power or historical voice, one typically has to search through many different kinds of sources (such as the census, newspapers, magazines, trade journals, photographs, paintings and the like) for sometimes small bits of material.[2] To expand one's base of sources in studying subaltern historical subjects, it can be helpful to consider the mechanisms which generate data about those outside the power nexus. If one is interested in understanding the exercise of power and how it constitutes subjects, one useful approach can be to look for sources which document transgressions. Reflecting the will to control that which is understood as threatening through the process of cataloguing, documents pertaining to transgressions are useful both because they reveal the limits of acceptable behavior, and because they leave a paper

trail. Such sources can include documents from the juvenile and criminal justice and prison system, workplace reprimands, and even the newspaper, among others.

In the process of re-thinking their roles as interpreters of the past, historians, historical geographers and others who work with the past have come to acknowledge that historical documents are not objective windows to past truths, but are instead authored, motivated texts (Boyer, 1996; Cope, 1998). Historical documents reveal as much about the circumstances under which they were written as the reality they purport to describe. While we can use texts to gain information about the social construction of gender and sexual relations in and through spaces of the past, they were not written for this purpose, but rather for a myriad of others: to sell copy, bolster community, define and track deviance, enable managers to better control workers or generate profit, for example. Just as with information gathered through interviews, the stories these documents tell are partial, situated, and fragmentary. They may leave the questions about which we have the most curiosity maddeningly beyond view, and they may be contradictory. This does not preclude the use of such texts as historical documents, but it does require recognizing how questions of textual authority shape the kind of story one constructs.

The Bounds of Public Information

Not only can historical inquiry mean having to negotiate problems related to the paucity of documents pertaining to subaltern historical subjects, it can also lead to issues in accessing sources at the boundary of what is known or even what is knowable. Because historical sources themselves are so vast, one way in which access can be constrained is simply by lack of awareness that a given source exists. Such lacunae can even exist for experts in the field; and in both Master's and Doctoral work I have found documents that have surprised archivists or experts in the field. For example, I was told by one legal historian that finding documents on early twentieth- century rape cases would be like "trying to find a needle in a haystack". However, it turned out such cases constituted nearly 15% of all cases tried in the time period I was investigating (Boyer, 1996). This serves to illustrate the point that it can be worth looking for a source even without specific knowledge that it exists. In addition to constraints on what is known, there can be even more stringent constraints on what is know*able*. For example, in 1991 my research on the role of place in constructing narratives of guilt or innocence in early twentieth-century rape trials in British Columbia, Canada led me to the Crown briefs which are documents outlining the process by which the Crown (or state) prosecution built their arguments prior to trial (these documents are called Crown briefs).[3] Crown briefs for cases dealing with rape, sexual assault and sodomy from the early twentieth century had only been catalogued and made available to the public a few years prior to my working with them. To my knowledge, no one else had done research on these documents in British Columbia.

Over the course of my research I became aware that provincial legislation was in motion which, among other things, would result in closing the sources I was working with from public view.[4] In 1992, despite the protestations of a number of historians, the British Columbia Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act passed, and the primary sources I had used were effectively removed from public view. Various methods were considered for bringing Crown Briefs into compliance with the Act, including censoring them with black magic marker. In the end compliance was achieved by removing the case finding-guide from the Provincial Archive. In this compromise the data still exist, although without the finding guide there is no way to obtain the call number for a particular case in order to request it (unless one already has this information).

Thus the sources upon which my research was based turned out to be boundary objects in a contest both for what will be/is allowed in the public record, and what kind of histories and spaces can be known. Together with revealing the shifting terrain of what is considered 'public', the closing of these documents brought into consideration questions about my responsibility as a researcher to past subjects in telling stories about traumatic events in their lives[5]. Such questions are not easily resolved, since, unlike when one's research subjects are alive, one cannot ask the permission of those affected. Indeed, this event even raised questions about the *legal* responsibility of possessing information that has been removed from the public record. As these questions suggest, feminist historical

geography can be at the forefront of active debate about questions of speaking for or about others, and the politics of knowledge.

Non-public Archives

To expand one's base of sources one can also explore private archives. These include the archives of professional organizations, social clubs, schools and universities, medical institutions, corporations, and even religious institutions. Though not all private organizations preserve material, larger ones do and these can be fruitful venues to pursue. Being private and not public, however, private archives can pose challenges that public archives do not. Not only do private organizations have the right to make subjective decisions about what will be preserved, but also whether and in what ways outside researchers may utilize their holdings. Both determinations can reflect an organization's judgments about its best interests.

One way to gain access to sources in private archives is by establishing one's legitimacy as a researcher; either through noting one's affiliation with an academic institution and/or prior credentials, or by furnishing letters of reference from senior academics. However, determinations about access to private archives can sometimes be based on factors that have nothing to do with academic credentials, but rather, on how much of an insider (or outsider) to a given organization one is perceived to be, and thus how much of a possible threat. This process can be intensified if the organization to which one wants access has come under some kind of public scrutiny or criticism[6]. Depending on the organization, access can translate into an identity politics based on gender, religious affiliation, language, or other factors. As I learned from my own research experiences, not being of the group to whose archives you wish to gain access can sometimes be mitigated by selective or strategic self-presentation.

Doctoral research on the how the feminization of clerical work changed gender relations within the white-collar workplace and in the culture more generally led me to sources at both corporate archives (Canadian banks and insurance companies), and the archives of a Montreal convent that had run a secretarial school in the early twentieth century. Though gaining access to corporate archives was a relatively straightforward affair, gaining access to the convent archives was not, and I had known historians (one of them Jewish) who had been denied access. As a non-Catholic Anglophone, the access I gained to these archives may have been a matter of waiting until my French language skills had reached a certain level before making my request, it may have been the fact that I have a surname which in Quebec is interpreted as French, or it may have been my effort to present myself as a 'bonne fille' (good girl) when I showed up in person.

In addition to filtering who may draw on their documents, private archives can also filter documents themselves. In public archives documents are preserved systematically for the sake of the public record (even though what will be on that record can be contested, as noted earlier). Private organizations make no such claims to systemic preservation, but rather may preserve documents selectively so as to constitute organizational history in a certain way (that is to say, in a positive light). I have been casually told by an archivist at a corporate archive, for instance, that their sources had been 'purged' of documents that put the company in a negative light. In a variation of this I have also been told cautionary tales of 'bad' researchers who had somehow used sources from their archive to say what were perceived as negative things about the organization. Such examples highlight the tension between needing to tell one's story so as to reveal what is most salient, while at the same time doing so in such a way so as not to jeopardize one's access to sources, or the access of future researchers.

Conclusion

This paper has laid out some of the methodological challenges one can encounter in doing archival research. From having to reconcile the questions one has of the past with the kinds of sources one can find and are in the public record, to the need to present sensitive material in a way that that does justice and not further violence, to finding ways to gain entry to private archives, working with historical sources can sometimes require

negotiation. In return for such negotiation, however, such sources also yield special rewards: allowing entry – however partial – to worlds otherwise unknown or lost.

For anyone interested in questions of power, representation, and the politics of knowledge; there's plenty to study at the archive. As I hope to have shown, rather than being somehow sheltered from the methodological and theoretical concerns of feminist geography, historical inquiry presents a productive means for their exploration. In conclusion, I propose that the two traditions of feminist and historical geography continue to have much to offer one another, and engagements between them should be encouraged and nurtured. As historical geography can bring temporal depth and a different kind of texture to feminist geography; feminist geography can and should inform the study of past spaces and past worlds. Exploring the shared space between these two intellectual traditions can serve to stretch the discipline in new directions, and allow the next generation of feminist geographers to make something new, refreshing the discipline as a whole.

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[1] It is not the intention of this essay to catalogue this body of scholarship. For a bibliography of feminist historical geography see: http://www.usm.maine.edu/~lsavage/FHG.html (compiled by Karen Morin, Lawrence Berg and Lydia Savage).

[2] For historical geographies within the recent past one can also employ interviews, and, though less common it is also possible to find first-person narratives for deeper history. For an excellent example, see Alison Blunt, 1994.

[3] My research examined cases heard before the British Columbia Supreme Court between 1915 and 1925.

[4] Though the legislation was not specifically written to achieve this result.

[5] For discussions of this issue see Gordon, 1988 and Pleck, 1987

[6] The North American Catholic Church in the late 1990s is an example, as this institution has come under fire and public scrutiny for the sexual abuse of young people.