
Complex locations: historiography, feminism and difference

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Introduction

Historiographies are always theoretically fraught and considering women as subjects and objects in geography is no exception. This chapter explores the value of the concept of difference in feminist readings of the historiography of geography. It is argued that this is particularly helpful when considering the 'place' of the women working in geography prior to 1970s Second Wave feminism. It may appear that choosing to focus on women *per se* smacks of Second Wave feminist universalisation of women, but this is not an argument for hagiographic recovery of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century geographical heroines, but rather for an awareness of a largely invisible group and the nuances their work brings to our understanding of 'geography' and the internal workings of the geographical community and its discourses. Given the relative invisibility of women in received histories of the subject, there is a strategic need to assert gendered subjectivity in order to focus on women as a group in an attempt to address their absence from the historiography of geography. However, in doing so one must be conscious of the tension between this approach and recognising the socially constructed nature of gender and subjectivity. This chapter discusses theoretical and methodological approaches to frame analysis of women's geographical work and goes on to sketch a selection of women geographers working in the field of British geography 1850-1970.

Complex locations: feminist theories, contextual history, difference, inclusion/exclusion.

Whilst the prevailing feminist discourse of the 1970s represented an image of a universal sisterhood which needed to recognise itself and unite in order to counter discrimination, by the mid-1990s the nature of feminist theory and practice was increasingly fractured. This was partly as a product of feminism being caught in a tension between its modernist roots and critiques of modernism, and partly resulting from the awareness of the differences or 'horizontal hostilities' (Pratt & Hanson 1994) between women - largely resulting from post modern and post-colonial feminist critique. The salience of gender as an analytical category and basis for common interests has been fiercely debated within and beyond geography undermining earlier confidence in *the* feminist project and necessitating the recognition of a number of *feminisms* (see WGSJ 1997).

However, postmodern epistemology can have disempowering relativist tendencies and the celebration of difference can obscure relations of power (Bondi 1990) including the trans-historical hierarchy of white male privilege that has informed the creation of western intellectual tradition (Bordo 1990). But as Haraway (1991) noted, it has been difficult for feminist theory to hold race, sex/gender, class (and other bases for difference), together, despite the best intentions (what Gedalof (1996) describes as the inability to count to four) - hence a particular need to be sensitive to post-colonial theory.

These theoretical and political negotiations have led feminists to raise a number of questions, such as how to combine post-modern incredulity of meta-narratives with the social-critical power of feminism/s? (Fraser and Nicholson 1990); how to refuse separation, but insist on non-identity? (McDowell 1993). In turn this leads to the question as to whether it is possible within a feminist historiography to blend strategic gendered subjectivity in methodology: i.e. focus on women, within an analytical framework that acknowledges difference in its complexity?

Perhaps an obvious question is to ask why a specifically *feminist* perspective is necessary in an age of such awareness of difference, certainly Stoddart (1991), in response to Domosh's (1991a) ground-breaking call for a feminist historiography of geography, argued that whilst there were women geographers who merited the attention of historians of the subject, a feminist perspective was divisive and unnecessary because 'they looked after themselves, their careers and their scholarship perfectly well without such [feminist] assistance' (1991: 485). The fact that the women geographers Stoddart himself identifies as meriting attention (Mary Somerville, American geographer Ellen Semple, Marion Newbiggin, Hilda Ormsby and Eva Taylor), with the exception of the first two, are all missing or reduced to fleeting references in existing histories of geography seems to suggest otherwise. Also as Valerie Lee (1995: 205) has argued of African-American feminist criticism: 'We cannot leave such an important task solely in the hands of theoretical schools which de-centre their [our] contributions'. This point was also exemplified in the debate between Mona Domosh and David Stoddart, which focused on the claims of nineteenth century women travellers to be considered as 'geographers'. Whilst Domosh argued that women such as travel-writer Isabella Bird contributed to geographical knowledge, Stoddart argued that they could not be seen as geographers because they took no measurements, failing to see that defining geography epistemologically as a science of measurement was precisely what Domosh was challenging. However, it should also be pointed out that Bird's later writings (notably *The Yangtze Valley and Beyond ...* (1899)) *did* include measurements, photographs and economic data in addition to social, cultural and topographical descriptions, i.e. more conventionally defined geographical data. It is not surprising that these stylistic/methodological changes occurred after Bird was able to benefit from access to training courses at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) after her admission as a fellow (one of the contentious cohort of 22 women admitted 1892-3): it is easier to conform to a prevailing discourse when given access to the necessary techniques and methodology of that discourse (Maddrell 2004c). Bird (see Figure 1) was honoured as an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and was the first woman to give a full paper at a meeting of the RGS in 1897 (a poorly attended meeting and dinner (Barr 1985)); her paper on western China was published the following year in *The Geographical Journal*.



Figure 1: Isabella Bird

As Fox Keller (1982) has argued of scientific practice, women should both gain access to what has been denied them and at the same time legitimate areas of scientific culture previously rejected as feminine. Feminist work challenges masculine categories and values as well as identifying ways in which space has been central to both masculinist power and

feminist resistance (Blunt and Rose 1994). This includes the spaces of geographical institutions, educational establishments, textual space in the world of publishing and critics, but also the space or 'territory' encompassed by our disciplinary tradition as seen in histories of geography (Rose 1995).

It would be easy to argue that the current geographical discourse, including the 'cultural turn' and social, political and economic geographies of a wide variety of spheres including work, home, leisure and identity render a focus on the gendered construction of knowledge as outdated and unnecessary. However, to take such a position would, at least, be to fall prey to presentism and neglect the contextual experience of geographers working in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, for whom gender was one of the most significant categories in terms of their access to education and employment as well as being context to the production and reception of their work. It is important to remember the particular gendered social mores which combined with those of class and race in the nineteenth- and first half of the twentieth- century, resulting in institutional and symbolic discrimination by gender. For example, to name but a few contextual constraints in Britain: the general admission of women to the Royal Geographical Society was only permitted in 1913; the majority of women (and many working class men) only gained suffrage in 1931; whilst women could take degrees at London University from the 1890s and it would be another fifty years before women could take degrees at all British universities; and into the 1950s social convention dictated that women were expected to give up paid employment upon marriage. These contextual factors mitigated against the ready placing of women as academics in the public arena – especially when coinciding with the struggle for the emerging discipline of geography to gain full degree status and independent departmental recognition within British universities 1900-40.

Contextual material is vital when considering the place of women in the historiography of geography, but contextual history (recognised as a 'flagship of convenience' (Livingstone 1992)) is theoretically insufficient for interrogating the complexities of their place/s. It is necessary to focus on these women *as women*, in order to constitute an inclusionary historiography, but at the same time in analysing the place or location of those women, it is necessary to combine feminist with materialist, postmodern and post-colonial forms of analysis in order to begin to understand the complexity of their individual differentiated location/s and the character of the work they produced. This inevitably means combining theoretical approaches in a pragmatic discourse, with tailored methods and multiple categories, a web of alliances. i.e. starting with them as women but going on to recognise their differences, the specificity of the 'politics of [their] location' (Rich, cited by Blunt and Rose 1994:7), multiple, fragmentary locations (Mohanty 1987, *ibid.*), resulting in 'less essentialist and more critical readings of the geography they produced' (McEwan 1998).

Engaging with women's self-representation across varied and fragmentary archives affords us as detailed as possible, but nonetheless partial, picture and with these individual biographies - what Rosi Braidotti (1994) called the specificity of the lived, female bodily experience, within terms of masculine modes of thought, practice and values - , a picture/montage/ collage begins to emerge of differentiated but nonetheless collective experience. As Braidotti has suggested, this is a unity based on recognition of complexity, not a universalised image of sisterhood. There were many differences between these women, and whilst this does not exclude 'rhizomatic connections' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988:7, cited by Pratt and Hanson 1994), where there are connections between women, hidden or otherwise, their own differences and connections to practices and discourses will be contested from other subject positions (Gedalof 1996), not least in placing their work in the context of their 'invisible' markers of white western thought. All this gives a hint of new and challenging perspectives on women in geography and geography as a whole.

Rose has argued that looking at histories of geography 'it seems that, even if we can no longer be certain exactly what geography was in the past, in virtually all histories of geographical knowledges one apparently incontrovertible fact remains: geography, whatever it was, was almost always done by men' (Rose 1995:414). This is indeed the impression given by the historical canon of British geography, however a more complex underlying picture emerges with more detailed analysis of publications, obituaries, institutional and departmental records. For example, in the early twentieth century the majority of emerging British university geography departments appointed women lecturers in their early years, the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* was edited by women 1902-38 and approximately 15% of the original members of the Institute of British Geographers

founded in 1933 were women (see Steel 1984 appendix C). Whilst Barnett (1998) has suggested it is not possible to retrieve subordinated voices from imperial archives because they are not there to be emancipated, this is not the case of women in early professional geography in Britain. Critical feminist approaches to histories of geography may be well rehearsed (McEwan 1998; e.g. Domosh (1991a, 1991b); Rose (1993); Blunt and Rose (1994) and although the place of women has been addressed in some institutional accounts (e.g. Bell and McEwan (1996)) and studies of women travellers (e.g. Blunt (1994) and McEwan (1994, 1998), Morin (1998)) a great deal more work is needed to substantiate their part within the subject and to provide an overview of the work of women geographers, whether academics, educationalists, travellers and/or authors, which is currently absent from our understanding of the development of geography. It remains strategically expedient within the historiography of geography to continue to focus on gender and its (qualified) essentialised categories as long as women as subjects are largely absent from our understanding of the development of modern geography and whilst gender continues to be marginalised as an epistemological consideration in histories of the subject. Whilst the erasure of women producers of knowledge (and their forms of knowledge) can engender a sense of heroic achievement for some women perceiving themselves as 'firsts', there is a potent danger that such erasure can engender in others feelings of 'not belonging' (Rose 1995).

A selection of pre 1970s British women geographers

It is an acknowledged dilemma as to where to 'place' women made visible in geography's past, within or outside existing discourses of historical inheritance? Whilst the first has the danger of incorporating women in a masculinised tradition, the second has the danger of perpetuating the 'otherness' of women from a male standard, resulting in a need for a 'third space' beyond such dichotomies (Rose 1995, McEwan 1998). Perhaps the geographical term of 'environment' is useful here with its connotations of both potentially close and loose inter-relatedness, complementarity and diversity. Perhaps a book such as this is an ideal 'environment' in which to foster such explorations (to appropriate another traditional geographical term) of women's past geographical work. This chapter does not afford the space for detailed biographical studies, but I would like to highlight a few career details of a selection of British women producers and teachers of geographical knowledge in order to provide a sketch map of their presence, a precursor to more detailed work. By definition, what follows is selective and the bulk of the women sketched below worked in British universities and/or geographical institutions across Britain and have been chosen because they most obviously counter the impression of early professional geography as a solely masculine endeavour as well as offering some geographical spread. Professional writers, editors and educationalists have also been included to give some flavour (though far from the full breadth) of the variety of women producing geographical knowledge at this time. These women are largely drawn from a broadly homogenous group of the white educated middle classes, but nonetheless include the self-taught and lower middle class school teachers (an implicit reason for some of the social elite in the royal Geographical Society not wishing to admit women as fellows in the 1890s), the formally and self-employed, those married and single. Although the work of Isabella Bird was alluded to above, the work of women travellers has not been considered here for reasons of space.

Mary Somerville (Figure 2), who receives brief mention in British disciplinary histories (especially those drawing on geographical society sources, including Mill (1930), Freeman (1961, 1980) and Livingstone (1992)), was an esteemed scientific writer and gained recognition within the geographical community for her *Physical Geography* (1848), hailed as the first British book of that title (although Rosita Zornlin had previously published a text entitled *Recreations in Physical Geography* in 1840). Her book was a critical success (Baker 1848), would go into six editions and has been described as the only academic advance in geography at a time when the RGS was preoccupied with exploration and colonial expansion (Freeman 1980). Somerville, who became known as the 'Queen of Science' was awarded numerous honours (Neely 2001, Sanderson 1974) including a diploma from the American Geographical and Statistical Society in 1857 and belatedly, at Sir Roderick Murchison's behest, the RGS Patron's medal in 1869 (also awarded to Lady Franklin), but was not able to become a fellow of the society, despite Murchison's arguments for women's admission (Maddrell 2004e).

Catherine Raisin, having graduated with an honours degree in geology from University College, London, was appointed as demonstrator in botany at Bedford Women's College in 1886. She went on to gain her D.Sc. in 1898, going on to become the first woman head of department when appointed as Head of Geology 1890, taking on the responsibility for the geography department 1916-20. Raisin was also to become vice-principal of the college and was elected a Fellow of University College in 1902 (Bentley 1991). She was to be followed at Bedford College geography department by numerous other women academics such as Blanche Hosgood, Dora Smee and mathematical geographer Eunice Timberlake (Vollans 1990) (all original members of the Institute of British Geographers (IBG) in 1933), and later Monica Cole.



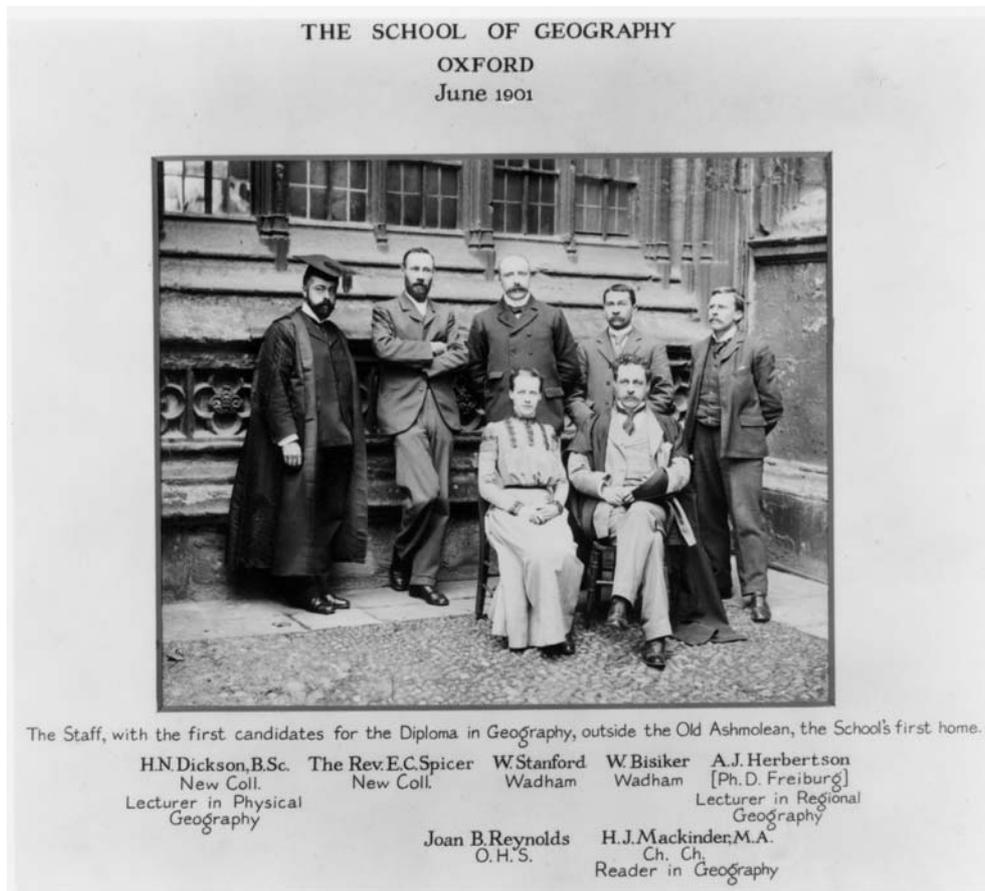
Figure 2: Mary Somerville

Marion Newbigin (Figure 3) studied natural sciences at University College, Aberystwyth and Edinburgh's extra-mural School of Medicine for Women, gaining external degrees from London University: a B.Sc. in 1893 and D.Sc. in 1898. After working on the *Challenger* project in Edinburgh, on James Geikie's recommendation she was appointed editor of the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* (SGM) 1902- 34 and is credited with making it a leading geographical journal. Although she had no permanent university post as lecturer, she was a visiting lecturer at Bedford College for fifteen years, temporary Head of Department at Glasgow University during the First World War, a university examiner and an important gatekeeper for geography, encouraging and helping the best students to publish in the *SGM*. (Freeman 1976; Maddrell 1997, 2004d). Newbigin was herself a prodigious producer of geographical knowledge, with more than twenty publications to her name, both texts and academic papers. After her untimely death Newbigin was succeeded by Harriet Wanklyn (1935-6) and Miss L.R.Latham (1937) as assistant editors of the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*. Wanklyn (later Steers) returned to Cambridge geography department in the late 1930s where she had been an undergraduate, specialising in regional work on Eastern Europe and latterly was a fellow of Wolfson College (Mead 1990). Jean Mitchell similarly returned to Cambridge to become a Research Fellow in 1931, becoming a University Lecturer in Geography 1944-68 (Adrian 1990).



In 1902 Joan Reynolds was one of the cohort of four students to receive the first qualification in geography in British higher education (see Figure 4) and Nora MacMunn was appointed Demonstrator in Geography at Oxford University from 1907 onwards. Reynolds, MacMunn and F.D. Herbertson all published papers in *The Geographical Teacher* and school texts independently and/or with male colleagues from Oxford (Herbertson published with her husband A.J. Herbertson, Oxford Reader in Geography). A large proportion of students and teachers on emerging university geography courses in the early twentieth century were school teachers; school texts were also a useful source of income for both male and female academics and a textual form considered socially acceptable for women to undertake at this time (Maddrell 1998; also see Monk 2004). Joan Reynolds and Dorothy Herbertson were among the first women to 'achieve national prominence as a distinctly geographical educator[s]' (Walford 2001: 94).

Left figure 3: Marion Newbiggin. Below figure 4: Joan Reynolds



her career culminating in her appointment as Reader in Geography in 1931 after she achieved her D.Sc. for her regional work on France (Harrison Church 1981). Ormsby was also the first woman council member of the Institute of British Geographers (1936-8) (Maddrell 2004a). Eva Taylor (Figure 5) was appointed lecturer in geography at Birkbeck College (University of London) in 1921 (after part time teaching in London colleges) becoming professor of geography in 1930, the first woman to be appointed to a chair in geography in Britain (Freeman 1976). Reflecting her research interest in Stuart and Tudor exploration and navigation, Taylor was a leading figure in the Hakluyt Society, as well as sitting on the more applied Barlow Commission reporting on the state of British industry and associated population issues during the inter-war years.

Gladys Wright was Lecturer in Geography at Aberystwyth University College from 1908 (going on to become assistant editor of *The Geographical Review* in the USA from 1915 onwards). Edith Ward was Lecturer in Geography at Liverpool between 1908-12. Florence Clark Miller was appointed lecturer in geography at the University College of Southampton in 1921, going on to become Head of Department in 1949 (Bird 1968). Alice Garnett (Figure 6) was appointed as assistant lecturer to the geography department at Sheffield in 1924, and went on to become professor of geography in 1962, (first woman) president of the Institute of British Geographers in 1966, (first woman) president of the Geographical Association in 1968 (having been honorary secretary 1947-1967) and was Vice President of the Royal Geographical Society 1969-71 (see Maddrell 2004b). It should also be noted that in addition to playing a vital role staffing geography degree teaching during the war years 1914-18 and 1939-45, women such as Ormsby, Garnett and Timberlake also undertook war work for the Intelligence services.



Figure 5: Eva Taylor



Figure 6: Alice Garnett

The complexity of the positionality and subjectivity of women travellers such as Mary Kingsley has been well documented (Mills (1991), Blunt (1994) McEwan (1998) and Kearns (1998)). The same is true of women producing geographical work within the geographical and educational establishment. There is a risk in outlining these women's careers that their participation in the geographical arena appears transparent, coherent and on equal terms with their male counterparts. The reality is more complex, for example Marion Newbigin was both at the heart of a geographical institution at the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and a producer of geographical knowledge, whilst simultaneously relatively marginalised from the geographical establishment of the Royal Geographical Society (Maddrell 1997). Many of these women noted above were relatively isolated from other women working in the same field and not necessarily succeeded by other women; they were not necessarily friends and allies, some positively disliking each other! Either of choice or necessity, they may not have identified themselves as a group by dint of their gender but retrospectively we can acknowledge their presence in the geographical world

and begin to explore the substance of what they brought to that world. A call to consider 'ordinary' geographers (Livingstone 1992) and the ordinary or everyday practice of geography (Lorimer and Spedding 2002, Lorimer 2003), encourages us to consider the place of those other than 'heroic celebrity' geographers, to go beyond the work of those recorded in celebratory accounts of the subject, the institutional anniversary or retirement testimonial. More detailed biographical studies of these women's lives suggest there is much to explore both 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary'.

Conclusion

Why have the largely 'unknown' but significant number of women contributing to the field of geography (including the selection above) been neglected in our histories? Is this a masculinist conspiracy of exclusion? or a sin of omission rather than commission? (Domosh 1991a); was the work of women geographers marginal at the time of production or no longer of interest to contemporary discussions? There is an interesting parallel between the relative absence of women geographers and the historical representation of women poets in the 1930's, which provides the beginnings of an answer to these questions: 'women were as involved in the process of producing poetry as women today seem to be, and that the poets are not obscure, but have been obscured by literary histories' (Jane Dowson 1995: 296). These were not closet but public and paid writers, however, whilst socially accepted, their work was not the subject of *critical engagement* and as a consequence, not written up in histories. Histories themselves can also produce intergenerational threads of continuity, which simultaneously perpetuates certain figures to the exclusion of others – and this can be seen not only in the case of men (Rose's (1995) line of patriarchal descent) but also in the reiteration of the same few women briefly mentioned in histories. Within mainstream histories of geography there is a clear repeat pattern of the limited number of women considered meriting inclusion: Mary Somerville (Mill 1830; Baker 1948; Freeman 1961, 1980; Livingstone 1992), Marion Newbigin (Freeman 1961, 1976; Dickinson 1969, 1976; Livingstone 1992), Eva Taylor (Dickinson 1976; Freeman 1976; Griffith Taylor 1957; Livingstone 1992), with the American Ellen Semple Churchill making similar repeat appearances. It is notable that this list focuses on a selection of the institutionally and academically recognised women geographers (and with the addition of Hilda Ormsby - who gets fleeting references along with Dorothy Herbertson - matches Stoddart's (1991) list – also note Freeman's pivotal role in recording the work of these women geographers in his histories of the subject). As I have suggested above, these women clearly do merit mention - and more detailed study at that - but limiting research to them alone accepts the predetermined criteria of institutional and/or academic incorporation which selected them to the exclusion of others. Women academic geographers are a worthy beginning to a wider study of women as producers of geographical knowledge. Geographical educationalists contributed enormously to the establishment and promotion of geography as a discipline and merit further study. Similarly, in contrast to their nineteenth century counterparts, the work of early twentieth century women travellers, although feted in literary circles, remains under-researched within the history of geography.

Interrogating the geographical work of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women could shed new light on prevailing intellectual and methodological discourses of their time, for example the regional approach to geography (the dominant discourse of the first half of the twentieth century but deeply unfashionable in the second half). Making visible the geographical work of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century raises difficult theoretical questions not only about the politics of their location and where we place them in more inclusionary histories of the discipline. The presence of these women also problematises representation of geography at this time as a masculin/ist endeavour and preserve. If they were conditionally accepted/ incorporated into the discipline, do we deny their agency or accept the constraints on their agency? It also complexifies our perceptions of some of the so called 'founding fathers' of modern geography, men like Mackinder, Herbertson, Roxby, Fleure and Rudmose Brown who appointed the first generation women to university posts and Sir Roderick Murchison who raised the issue of women's membership of the RGS and was instrumental in the award of the RGS medal to Mary Somerville. (see Stafford 1989). Each individual account (more detailed than is possible here) has its own story of negotiation of exclusion/ inclusion which in turn allows us to see a picture of 'women using agency, not as some abstract or undefined expression of autonomy, but in specific instances of creative resistance, self-promoting complicity and wilful discursive self-formulation' (Woollacott 1998: 338).

A great deal more work is needed in order to make visible and substantiate the geographical work of the surprisingly large number of women producing geographical knowledge prior to Second Wave feminism – with an understanding of their work and lives we can reach a more nuanced understanding of the shape/texture and nature of the ‘territory’ (in Rose’s (1995) terms) of the geographical community and its output – including the complex processes of inclusion and exclusion. No doubt some women will remain as spectral traces in our more encompassing histories, evidenced only by a single school text, lecture timetable or dissertation, but for others there are rich archives to be mined (as Monk (2004) has shown in the case of American women geographers) and their combined lives and work will produce a tapestry which is testimony to their presence - a past some will wish to identify with and claim as their own, others will want to choose from selectively and others still repudiate, allowing both them and us our differences, but it will represent at least a belated peopling of the geographical world with women and an erasure of that sense that women are late arrivals in that world.

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