
To a reader unfamiliar with the more recent trends in feminist geography this book comes like a breath of fresh air let into the portals of the academia, because it ably translates the most complex feminist geographical interventions into the most accessibly written overview. Louise Johnson’s Placebound, with a contribution from Jackie Huggins and Jane Jacobs, is a thought-provoking introduction to the theory and practice of feminist geography informed by a wide spectrum of feminist academic discourses. It is the eleventh in a series titled “Meridians: Australian Geographical Perspectives,” initiated by the Institute of Australian Geographers “to meet the need for relatively short, low-cost texts written for university students” (vii).

But Placebound is more than just an accessible and clear introduction to feminist geography. It shows how critical contributions from liberal, socialist, radical, postmodern and postcolonial feminist geographers and theorists have stamped their claim on the discipline of Geography in much the same way as Women’s Studies cross-disciplinary perspectives have altered the nature and boundaries of traditional academic practices, most notably English and History. Feminist geographers are united in their dictum: “Places are gendered, that is, they acquire and evince certain characters because they are occupied by men or women” (1).

In the acknowledgements, Johnson remarks that the intellectual origins of Placebound lie with her experience of teaching an undergraduate course in Feminist Geography in New Zealand in the late 1980s “at a time when any such notion was unheard of in Australia.” It took a while for the influence of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s to inspire an Australian feminist politics which sees geographical space “not as a neutral container of social and bio-physical relations but as a medium which registers and expresses power and sexual difference” (2). Long-standing feminist theories that brought forward critical categories of gender and class have been challenged and supplanted by changes in direction in feminist geographical research that pointedly emphasise the politics of racial and ethnic difference in the studies of Australian environments. The book contextualises each feminist approach to geography by placing it in its historical situation with attention to the contingent that most historians would envy. This is, then, in so many ways, a cross-disciplinary study of interest to any feminist theorist, and not just a geographer.

Liberal feminist theory has enjoyed the longest presence in academic geography. Liberal feminist focus on individual rights and gender equality has led towards the studies “mapping” women’s numbers and status – as students, researchers and academics – in Geography, and has played a crucial role in attempts to establish equal opportunity and affirmative action strategies. Other
liberal feminist research has described the location of gender groups and the
different locations of women and men. Johnson applies this theory to construct
an index of women’s status in Victoria and Melbourne, ranking the female
spatial occupation according to income level, academic qualifications and type
of employment, forming a map of women’s spatial inequality. The question of
women’s (in)visibility has thus prompted revisions of gender-blind
geographical practice; however, the disadvantage of the liberal-feminist
approach is that it has often understood “women” as a homogenous group.

In contrast, socialist feminist focus on class positioning of and economic
inequalities among women informs Johnson’s own geographical studies, even
in her attempt at liberal feminist geography above. Socialist feminist
intervention seeks to link the relations of production and reproduction and
analyse women’s place in both paid and unpaid work. The case study of
Geelong’s manufacturing industry is identified as the site where relations of
production are systematically shaped through the sexual division of labour.
Johnson’s approach links production to social reproduction and patriarchal
economy as parts of an interlocking system, insisting that gender cannot be
understood detached from the notion of class.

While socialist feminist geography has contributed the important class
analysis, the concept of a patriarchal economy has remained undeveloped.
Patriarchy was admitted to scholarship as a fundamental feminist concept
during the heady days of Women’s Liberation, accentuating the significance of the
radical feminist perspectives within the women’s movement. For radical
feminists, epiphenomenal women’s status in a patriarchy is their vulnerability
against male violence. Radical feminist geography focuses on such spatial
arrangements which result in women’s confinement to the home and enforced
avoidance of “dangerous” spaces in the “cities of fear.” As the patriarchal order
also maintains women’s oppression through the notions of compulsory
heterosexuality and traditional family, its geography is divided into the “gay”
inner-city decadence and the nuclear-family oriented suburbia. According to
Johnson, gays and lesbians have made themselves at home in Australian inner-
city areas, purchased property and invested in the local economic development.
However, Johnson does not delve deeply into the persistence of the nuclear
family norm. Recently, inner-city gentrification has seen the “bourgeoisisation”
of these previously degraded spaces, whereby “character” houses are purchased
and renovated by double-income nuclear families, resulting in the meteoric rise
in real estate values from South Yarra to Victoria Park.

Inner-city gentrification is but one symptom of the global economic changes evident since the 1960s. The rise and rise of the post-industrial New
World Economic Order signaled the arrival of advanced, late capitalist
oppression that threw a critical light on the legacies of modernist ideals of
progress and the possibility of Truth. In line with Marx, “all that is solid melts
into air.” The global changes provoked global challenges encompassed in the
most serious epistemological rupture bound by the label of “postmodernism.”
The shift in analytic focus is evident in the postmodern feminist geographical approach to the “masculinisation” and “feminisation” of consumption patterns in the postmodern order, as well as the gendering of quintessentially postmodern spaces exemplified by the Sydney’s Westfield Parramatta shopping complex.

Postmodernism has also led to the awareness of identities that are constructed through the experience of race or ethnicity. The postcolonial approach exposes the politics of the discipline: like any other traditional framework of knowledge, geography has been an imperialistic tool guiding “explorers” and “discoverers” through colonisation. Thus, the most appealing – and the most challenging – aspect of postcolonial intervention is that it involves altering geography in general, including feminist geography” to reflect on the contingent nature of all knowledge and the relationships between knowledge and power (166). Arguing for academic recognition of subject-positioning, the perspective questions the politics of a white Australian woman writing or speaking about the experience of indigenous women. The conversation between Huggins, an eminent Aboriginal historian, and Jacobs, an Anglo-Celtic feminist geographer, demonstrates the differences in understanding of spatial histories located in the Kooramindanjie Place among the Carnarvon Gorges of Queensland. Huggins encapsulates the discrepancies between the different subject positions, both partial, one more hegemonic than the other:

There are different experiences of the world and different bases of experience. Whites must not ignore this by taking advantage of their privileged speaking positions to construct a sociological, external version which may pass for an Aboriginal “reality.” One may not rewrite the other’s world or impose upon it a conceptual framework which derives from one’s own (170).

Appropriately, the book ends outlining the future of Australian feminist geography. Most admirably, it places the concept and ongoing historical process of colonisation at the centre of feminist inquiry. It also contains a useful glossary and further reading list. I heartily recommend it to anyone interested in feminist theory and practice.

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If you look at the history of the sociology of education, you will find, in a bottom drawer, a forgotten sub-section that dealt with so-called “disruptive”