
Introduction to Special Issue “Theorizing Space and Gender in the 21st Century”

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Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.

—Judith Butler

In this quote from *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler suggests a link between gender and space. Rather than the manifestation of an unchanging and cohesive essence, Butler claims, gender identity is unfixed, provisional, and fragile. Arguing that the repeated public “performance” of gender reinforces gender identity, she situates gender in external space, in both individual performative acts and the physical environment. When the body publicly articulates the social relationships of a certain time and place, the space in which the articulation occurs becomes the site of cultural inscription. Butler’s quote thus denotes how concerns of time and space, particularly the relationship of time and space to the physical performance of gender, converge in contemporary gender studies.

Effectively, the junctions of space and gender have gradually moved more and more into the feminist critical purview, including the relation between gender and movement and the gendered public/ private binary, to convey how space itself can become a form of control, of limitation of women’s mobility—but also a site of women’s actualization, of breaking out of gender constraints, and of achieving power. In order to resist existing gender paradigms and envision alternatives to patriarchal oppression, feminists, however, repeatedly find themselves facing the constructivist dilemma: If gender and identity are culturally constructed and discursively controlled, from where does agency arise? Feminist spatial readings propose that space itself can offer resistance to gender hierarchies. A critical focus on the nexus between gendered space and spatially constructed gender identities might offer a promising approach for alternative gender configurations. The understanding of space as multiple, shifting, heterogeneous, situational, and contested may help subvert the oppressor-oppressed paradigm, the opposition between those with power to shape knowledge and spatial practice and those who suffer them. Focusing on theorizing space and gender, the present issue provides an outlook on ways in which contemporary critics view the junctions between space and gender in the twenty-first century.

Finding its conceptual origins in the 1960s, the “spatial turn” in geography

and other spatial social sciences marked a radical critical move away from concerns of time to space.¹ As globalization, modern information technology, and faster and more affordable transportation transformed communication and economic structures worldwide, they also affected the ways in which we live in space and perceive it. Thus, Fredric Jameson maintains, “our daily life, our psychic experiences, our cultural languages are dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time” (qtd. in Tally 40). Space hence moved into the foreground of critical discussion. Philosophically, contemporary geocritics are largely indebted to postmodernism’s and poststructuralism’s examinations of the spatial distribution of power and knowledge in social space. They suggest that space is never neutral but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the dominant power structures and forms of knowledge. In other words, even if a manifestation of the “real” world, space is both created and articulated through cultural discourse, including gender discourse. Thus, we cannot grasp space outside a socially mediated perspective.

Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja are among those recognized as leading the spatial turn. Though stressing the discursive and ideological nature in which all spatial perception and representation are trapped, they are aware that this reading of space seemingly does not offer any hope for resistance to dominant cultural paradigms nor give incentive to liberating counter-narratives. And yet, they glimpse possibilities of resistance in the very quality that also circumscribes the spatio-social script: the constructedness of space. In a 1967 lecture published in French in 1984 and in English in 1986 as “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault proposes a fundamentally new reading of space. Foucault’s heterotopias break down spatial hierarchies and binaries and thus subvert the forms of knowledge and meaning that underpin the dominant power structure. Even as heterotopias are spaces set apart from everyday life, they are, unlike utopias, also a part of the everyday and defined by their relations with other spaces. These “other spaces,” (e.g., prisons, retirement homes, cemeteries, theaters, cinemas, and even gardens) “suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect,” Foucault writes (24-26). Because they are also linked to “slices in time” (e.g., museums, libraries, and festivals), the dimension of time remains relevant in heterotopias (Foucault 26). Significantly, heterotopias assert the value of difference and embody an escape from oppression and tyranny.

Lefebvre and Soja, in turn, perceive space as consisting of three dimensions: the perceived space, representations of space, and representational spaces, according to French Marxist philosopher Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*, 1974). Whereas the observable, material, and measurable, “perceived space,” Lefebvre argues,

describes a society's patterns of "spatial practice" as they are linked, for example, to capitalism with its daily routines, "representations of space" denote how spatial discourse (e.g., through maps and plans) foists order and stability upon space through the control over knowledge and signs (38). The "representational space" lies between these polar opposites. It offers a site for resistance through the imagination which seeks to destabilize the dominant spatial discourse's codes and symbolism, thereby appropriating and changing the meaning of space (Lefebvre 39). Like Lefebvre's spatial "triad," Soja's "thirthing-as-Othering" challenges spatial binaries and recognizes the radical potential that lies in "difference." In *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) and *Thirdspace* (1996), postmodern urban planner and geographer Soja conceptually updates Lefebvre's spatial theory by revisiting all dialectics and remapping cultural spaces, voicing alterity, and advocating multiplicity. The radically open Thirdspace challenges notions of homogeneity, equality, and permanence and celebrates difference, contradiction, and change. Soja explains,

In what I will call a critical strategy of "thirthing-as-Othering," I try to open up our spatial imaginaries to ways of thinking and acting politically that respond to all binarisms, to any attempt to confine thought and political action to only two alternatives, by interjecting an-Other set of choices. In this critical thirthing, the original binary choice is not dismissed entirely but is subjected to a creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives. (Soja 5)

Thus capturing the counter-hegemonic potential of Foucault's heterotopias and Lefebvre's representational space, Thirdspace describes an open both/and option that destabilizes the binaries that sustain an oppressive and exploitative social organization, including the oppression of women.

Feminists have contributed significantly to spatial studies with investigations of the relationships between patriarchy and perceptions, conceptions, and uses of both public and private space. Analyzing how patriarchal power is distributed not only in time but also in space, feminist geocritics seek ways to resist the dominant gender-space paradigm. Because both gender and space, as social constructs, not only share common traits but are also used to reinforce each other, feminist spatial critique initially focused on patriarchal spatialization, specifically the binarisms and power hierarchies that are manifest in and strengthened through human interactions with space. They examined, for example, the ways in which domestic and public spaces are gendered, enabling agency for one gender while limiting it for the other. Dolores Hayden's work on American domestic, suburban, and urban life moved urban and suburban planning's patriarchal subtext into the

critical consciousness. Stressing that indeed all spaces are gendered, Doreen Massey indicates that the gendering of space further boosts gender constructions: “From the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (Massey 179). Gillian Rose observes that the very discipline of geography is androcentric, as is the discourse of spatiality, so that consideration is frequently given to spaces that are perceived as men’s (Rose 2). Therefore, some sought avenues to rescript gendered and racialized spaces: Hayden, for example, developed activist projects to commemorate and celebrate the history and encourage the social empowerment of not only women but also ethnic communities through the preservation of cultural history in urban landscapes.²

Informed by postmodern philosophy, feminist geocritics today add to these observations a reading of space as multiple, shifting, and characterized by “difference.” They emphasize that time and space are integral and that spaces are linked to other spaces. Space is dynamic and simultaneous, just as gendered identity is multiple and in flux. Shifting, “from an equality to a difference model,” in Soja’s words, feminist geocriticism further focuses on the nexus between real and imagined, moving “from an emphasis on material spatial forms to a more real-and-imagined urban spatiality” (110). Thus, Rose’s “radical difference” model eludes polarization and represents a strategy of resistance (Rose 150). In metaphorically occupying the center and the margins simultaneously, in acknowledging polarization but adding another dimension, Rose discovers in a “paradoxical geography” a means to resist the dominant patriarchal geography. In this space, difference is accepted and not expunged (Rose 155). Rather than invert the patriarchal social order, feminist spatiality seeks to subvert it, to discover an open both/and option that sidesteps the center-margin oppositionality.

Perhaps nowhere is the tendency to gender space as evident as in colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial spaces. European explorations prompted the creation of a new cartography to impose order on a confusing new world. But resulting maps were also used to promote further exploration and settlement. Apparently scientific and fact-based, these maps were highly selective in what they represented—in short, they were ideological: “During the Renaissance,” Ania Loomba explains, “the new artwork and the new geography together promised the ‘new’ land to European men as if it were a woman; not to mention the women of the new land who were regarded as literally up for grabs” (69). The female body became the symbol of this conquest.³ As feminists and particularly

ecofeminists have shown, the conceptual linking of native women and colonized spaces has often served to justify the oppression and exploitation of both.⁴ The correspondence of ecological and sexual exploitation is symptomatic not only of women's and nature's marginal positions in modern, patriarchal imperialism but also of the intricate ways in which gender and space are interwoven in colonial and postcolonial societies: Western dualistic worldviews, polarizing men and women, colonizers and colonized, the "first world" and the "third world," and humans and nature, complicate postcolonial social hierarchies and create often conflicting gendered and racialized spatial discourses. Colonial boundaries and later the borders of postcolonial nation-states add another dimension to an already complex social construct by encouraging hybridity, exile, migration, and diaspora. The ensuing cross-cultural and transnational networks challenge national boundaries and demonstrate that, rather than homogeneous and self-contained, spaces are defined by their parallel and interdependent relationships to other spaces. Postcolonial feminist geocritics thus ask not only about the intersections between colonialism and patriarchy but also about the range of cultural, racial, and locational characteristics of space and how these overlap and may possibly also weaken the prevailing space-gender determinism. Postcolonial feminist readings of space as multiple, fluctuating, heterogeneous, and adaptive resist the dominant spatial and gender script and, in turn, may offer alternative spatial practice.

The following articles creatively bring together considerations of space and gender in postcolonial and American ethnic literature. Taking a range of critical approaches, including trauma studies, poststructuralism, and globalization theory, the authors focus on such diverse issues as the body as a site of conquest, trauma and silence, transnational identities, and neocolonial oppression to uncover possibilities of women's and children's agency in a postcolonial and neocolonial context. Yet, what the essays convey first and foremost is that the individual still lives and operates in the here and now—in spaces that are limited and limiting and which, though defined by cultural discourse, affect the characters in very real—sometimes corporeal—ways. The four essays offer a vision of hope for change and empowering alternatives to dominant patriarchal discourse, and space plays a role in providing counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge. The writers offer a fresh perspective on both canonical and recent literature. Theoretically informed and compellingly argued, each essay contributes considerably to current literary criticism by exploring the manifold junctions between constructions of space and gender. Because of the writers' breadth of theoretical approaches and attentive and insightful readings of their literature, I believe that this issue will be of great value in both classroom and scholarship.

In “Space as the Representation of Cultural Conflict and Gender Relations in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*,” Heba Makram Sharobeem engagingly demonstrates how Adichie’s deployment of space suggests both its social constructedness and its multiplicity and in some cases even a utopian promise. In the three stories, Sharobeem examines the ways in which patriarchal and cultural oppression—both legacies of colonialism—operate side by side. Sharobeem refers to Foucault’s “heterotopias” and Lefebvre’s ideas in *The Production of Space* to focus on the hybrid, border, and marginal spaces in which the collection’s postcolonial female characters find themselves and from which only a few may emerge, albeit with great difficulty, to articulate their subjectivity, thereby symbolizing the potential to subvert the dominant patriarchal power structure.

Christina Lam, in “Trauma and Testimony: Embodied Memory in Loida Maritza Perez’s *Geographies of Home*,” similarly analyzes oppressive patriarchal spaces but shifts her attention to the intersections of personal and cultural, the body and the body politic, or the trauma of “state-sanctioned violence” inscribed onto the female body. Where violence is not confined to specific spaces and instead transcends physical, cultural, and psychological boundaries, Lam compellingly argues, trauma becomes all-encompassing. In order to begin to heal, the female characters must break the silence and “witness” as a form of engaged listening and expression of communal suffering.

Turning to the ways in which the trauma of conquest continues to shape the Native American experience, Pamela Rader, in “‘. . . just crushing silence like the inside of a drum before the stick drops’: *Zwischenraum* as a Site for Productive Silences in Louise Erdrich’s *The Painted Drum*,” discusses *Zwischenraum* as a necessary moment of reflection that leads to narrative production. Rader persuasively argues that *Zwischenraum* articulates an instance of in-between experience and narration that defines as much a spatial as a psychological transition where silence itself becomes material and immaterial at once. As a foundation for creativity, it represents a way of connecting to others, especially for the novel’s heroine who overcomes her psychic isolation and achieves a sense of belonging.

In “Narrow Escapes: Gendered Adolescent Resistance to Intergenerational Neo/Colonial Violence in Time and Space,” Marie Lovrod focuses on adolescent characters’ attempts to resist capitalist exploitation in the works of Harriet Jacobs, Doris Pilkington and Nugi Garimara, and Uwem Akpan. Globalization in these texts, Lovrod shows, leads to the separation of disenfranchised children from loved ones and community. The children are violently abused for the sake of monetary gain while little thought is given to the lasting effects. Challenging the common developmental pattern of the *Bildungsroman* genre, Lovrod highlights the various,

and often resourceful, strategies the young protagonists employ to resist patriarchal and colonial order. The selection of texts constructively adds to discussions of gender and space in a world shaped by neocolonial transnational networks.

The figurative “shrinking” of the world in the past decades, engendering new kinds of interaction with and readings of space—often several spaces at once (including virtual space)—has changed our understanding of space, the social production of space, and spatial practice. As a result, space has moved more and more into the critical dialogue while gender studies, in tandem with globalization theory and a growing postcolonial literary canon and scholarship, are increasingly more multifaceted. When combined, gender and spatial studies can inspire fresh and exciting readings of space and gender and sometimes offer alternate spatial and gender figurations. The theorization of space and gender, then, helps articulate new insights for the twenty-first century.

Notes

¹ Robert T. Tally Jr. defines the spatial turn as follows: “The increased attention to matters of space, place and mapping in literary and cultural studies, as well as in social theory, philosophy, and other disciplinary fields, since roughly the 1960s. The spatial turn has been analysed and sometimes promoted by Denis Cosgrove, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, and Edward Soja, among many others” (159).

² Hayden encouraged community-centered movements aiming to preserve local history and celebrate ethnic diversity. See <http://www.doloreshayden.com/>. See Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975* (1976), *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods and Cities* (1982), *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (1984), *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (1995), *Building Suburbia: Building Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (2003), and *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (2004).

³ Loomba cites the example of Sir Walter Raleigh who described Guiana is a place that “hath her maidenhead yet” (70). Referring to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, she explains that native women’s bodies symbolize the “promise and fear of the colonial land” (128).

⁴ See, for example, Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land*, which explores how representations of the land as both “mother” and “virgin” generated fantasies about the American wilderness and affected its treatment and settlement.

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