

# Review Essay

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## SOLO FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY: A LESSON IN SPACE<sup>†</sup>

Jennifer Hyndman\*

**Gillian Rose**, *Feminism & Geography*; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 205 pages, \$18.95, £9.95.

Gillian Rose's *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* is a welcome tome on the bookshelves of geographers in the 1990s. Such a work is long overdue and argues persuasively against the transparency of space, though it is not without its problems. Rose employs psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory as the main pillars of her work. The multiplicity and philosophical irreconcilability of feminisms warn us that any text which goes further than a mere overview of feminist positions will generate controversy. Rose's book does just this.

Rose presents what I call "solo feminist geography," by which I mean two things. First, her book is written for geographers, not feminists, even though these groups are not mutually exclusive. She prefers to construct her own brand of feminist geography, rather than build upon or engage in the work of other feminist geographers. Second, she constructs an emancipatory space for *individuals*, an unspecified space which resists closure but at the same time points more towards solitude than to a feminist politic.

Rose's analysis does not interrogate the categories or relations of gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, or sexual preference, nor is there much idea of change or struggle in the book. Instead, she draws her tools from Fox Keller's feminist critique of science and other psychoanalytic theory to refute the nature/culture distinction and to challenge the feminine

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\* Dept. of Geography, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2 Canada

coding of space by the white, bourgeois masculine gaze. Rose then builds a case for her "paradoxical space" using poststructuralist theory.

The title of the book is either a modest understatement or incomplete. Rose is less concerned with feminist positioning or strategy within geography than with the problem of the masculine "master subject." ". . . This is not a book about the geography of gender, but about the gender of geography . . ." (p. 5). Her emphasis is on masculinism rather than women, and her mode of interrogating masculinist practices in geography points to a larger omission in the main title, which might read more accurately *Feminism, Poststructuralism, and Geography*. Rose uses psychoanalytic theory and a poststructuralist strand of feminism to create the concept of "paradoxical space." She relies heavily on the poststructuralist feminism of de Lauretis (1987), and ironically demonstrates little interest in current feminist geographies. Unlike de Lauretis, who suggests that the body is a site upon which power relations are inscribed, Rose pays most attention to the feminine coding of space.

### Limited Geographies

What is paradoxical space, and how do we get there? After her introduction, Rose offers a chapter each on Hagerstrand's time-geography, as an example of *social-scientific* masculinism, and humanistic geography, as a type of *aesthetic* masculinism. *Place* is understood by humanistic geographers in terms of maternal Woman – nurturing, natural, but forever lost. In stark contrast, the discourse of time-geography depends on a transparent *space*, which refers only to the public space of Western hegemonic "masculinities" (p. 62). The choice of time-geography is an obscure one which is never explained, and her reading of it is an alarmingly absolutist one. The feminist ambivalence in geography she convincingly argues for in an earlier work (Rose, 1991) is much less discernible in this book.

These chapters present two very white, masculinist geographies which promulgate a singular "politics of blame," rather than a politics which more accurately acknowledges complicities, ambiguities, and complex interrelationships within geography and among scholars – feminist or otherwise. The potentially masculinist assumptions of geographers outside of these two domains – the still rare breed of poststructuralists and postmodernists, for instance – remain unchallenged.

On a more positive note, Rose's discussion of the meanings attached to "home," in the third chapter, is a compelling one. In a section entitled "Place as Woman," the author argues that "evacuated of any meaning on her own terms, Womanly icons represent the values of others, including their sense of belonging to a place" (p. 59), agreeing with Cockburn that ". . . woman is, for Left as for Right, *metaphorical material*" (cited in Rose, p. 58). Humanist work idealizes place as home and signifies a feminiza-

tion of place. Rose cleverly construes humanist geographies as symptoms of Orientalist others and lost mothers. In so doing, she incidentally highlights the current cross-disciplinary interest in the meanings, metaphors, and constructions of "home" among feminists and postcolonial critics. At the end of the book, Rose also cites bell hooks' politics of home as a potential space of resistance (p. 156).

Surprisingly, Rose highlights the appeal of radical feminist works: "For me, the most wonderful parts of these books are the places in which they succeed in imagining a space in which women might really be free" (p. 79), a remark which is incompatible with her own genealogical approach. It assumes a world outside of power, a position untenable for poststructuralists and one which raises questions about subjectivity and identity politics not discussed in Rose's book. Thus begins the elusive search for the meaning of paradoxical space.

Chapter Four, "The Geographical Imagination: Knowledge and Critique," is the most original chapter of the book. Rose chooses as her departure point the work of Fox Keller who stresses the importance of autonomy to human subjectivity in feminist critiques of science. The dualistic thinking of science articulated by Keller is adapted and applied to geography by Rose who opens up an interesting discussion of its implications for subjectivity as well as its reproduction of the Same/Other set of binary oppositions. Even more could be made of the compelling arguments introduced by Rose in this chapter, particularly Haraway's commentary on the construction of Nature and politics of representation. Rose is clear that "what is needed is a displacement of the dualism of Same and Other" (p. 83), but she does not fully engage in the plural and contradictory positions of social constructionist feminists and feminists who insist on the body as a site of struggle which she writes about elsewhere (Rose, 1991). Psychoanalytic theory poses some inherent dangers for feminist politics, a point forcefully made by feminist philosopher, Nancy Fraser (1992). Fraser contends that practical feminist models should treat discourse as "sets of multiple and historically specific institutionalized social practices" (1992: 177); her point is that social groups are formed through struggles over social discourse. Within geography, for example, hegemonic relations *among* humanist, Marxist, feminist, and time geographies illustrate contest and struggle for disciplinary dominance. "By reducing discourse to a 'symbolic system', the structuralist model evacuates social agency, social conflict, and social practice" (Fraser, 1992: 181). Nonetheless, Rose does make explicit the overarching epistemic construction of a feminized field through a masculinist purview in geography.

Less convincing is Rose's criticism of fieldwork in geography:

"I suggest that fieldwork is an example of geographical masculinities in action. Fieldwork is a performance which enacts

some of the discipline's underlying masculinist assumptions about its knowledge of the world" (p. 65).

Two things strike me as curious. First, many feminist and other geographers engage in fieldwork precisely to critique, deconstruct, and reconstruct a more responsible, if partial, account of what is happening in the world (Haraway, 1991; Katz, 1991; Mani, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 1991; Pratt, 1993). "The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point. Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision. . . ." (Haraway, 1991: 154). Feminist fieldwork, in many cases, aims to trouble singular visions of place and space. Second, in constantly drawing the relation of master-subject to feminine landscape, Rose reproduces the very duality she so whole-heartedly criticizes throughout chapters four and five: that of Nature/Culture. She falls prey to the very danger she notes:

"Playing with the opposition between Nature and Culture is to play a dangerous game, and many feminists have criticized . . . their sisters, arguing that they only reinforce masculinist knowledge" (p. 80).

The critique of Nature/Culture<sup>1</sup> is old news in feminist theory and politics; today it has been displaced by questions which interrogate such dichotomies and suggest they might be contiguous on the one hand (Haraway, 1991) or multiple (not just dual) on the other (Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1990).

For Rose, poststructuralist theory is feminist, and fieldwork is masculinist. Fieldwork presumes that space is transparent and knowable; the fieldworker employs a masculine gaze and is a voyeur of the landscapes and places he takes pleasure in visiting. My rendition of Rose's argument is oversimplified here, but her own is too facile. Her dismissal of fieldwork is inconsistent with two claims she makes earlier in her book: first, that she is concerned with the "everyday," the "arena through which patriarchy is (re)created and contested" (p. 17), analysis of which is based on women working the field; and second, that "both men and women are caught in a complex series of (historically and geographically specific) discursive positions, relations, and practices" (p. 10). Despite these reservations, Rose's project is clearly centered around problematizing and renegotiating the masculinism of geography.

The master-subject tours selected landscapes in the fifth chapter, a chapter which will engage geographers who read landscape as text. Rose makes her point more than once: "geographers try to repress their pleasure in landscape by stabilizing their interpretations as real" (p. 108). She

demonstrates her resistance to the fixity of such interpretation through sketches which depict the seductive qualities of the “unknowable feminine” in cultural geography (p. 109). The main theme of Chapter Five is that the masculine gaze inscribes a territorial logic on the feminine landscape. I will leave Chapter Six for the moment, as it is a non-sequitur to the development of Rose’s ideas and only interrupts the reader’s journey into paradoxical space.

Paradoxical space is elusive and multiple in meaning. This is the principal appeal of Chapter Seven: it inspires imagination, on the one hand, and leaves the reader wanting to *know* more, on the other. According to Rose, paradoxical space is both a strategy of critical mobility and a spatial imaginary; “social space can no longer be imagined simply in terms of a territory of gender” (p. 151). The paradox of occupying simultaneously positions of the center and the margin is posed, though Rose hesitates to endorse particular subjectivities. Rose is indebted to Teresa de Lauretis for many of her ideas, and this seems particularly true of the general definition of paradoxical space. De Lauretis (1987: 26) writes that

“the movement in and out of gender as ideological representation, which I propose characterizes the subject of feminism, is a movement back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centered frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable. It is a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses. . . .”

“These two kinds of spaces are neither in opposition to one another nor strung along a chain of signification, but they coexist concurrently and in contradiction. . . . to inhabit both kind of spaces at once is to live the contradiction which, I have suggested, is the condition of feminism here and now. . . .”

For feminist geographers, contradiction is compounded by their locations within the discipline: “As academics, feminists are both inside and outside ‘the project’. . . . It is difficult to simultaneously be seeking validation from and critiquing the academy” (McDowell, 1992: 59).

More theoretically, paradoxical space is where one can critique geographical knowledge and ultimately produce geographical knowledge which is not contaminated by the master subject. Unfortunately, Rose does not specify how this can be done, or which subject – if any – will displace the master subject. She says only that feminists must go beyond territorial logic. As it stands, they are “*prisoners* of knowledge as its objects, and *exiles* knowing that they are not what the master subject

assumes. Prisoners and exiles: the first appearance of what I am calling paradoxical space" (p. 150). These subject positions hardly seem feminist, nor very emancipatory, despite Rose's competing claims. Both prisoners and exiles are individuals and outsiders, highlighting the potentially lonely experience of paradoxical space, but also the possible reading of this as a very individual, "solo" kind of feminism.

### **Masculinity and Modernity**

Rose leaves paradoxical space remarkably unspecified in words, but she does present an imaginative cartography. Following de Lauretis, Rose explains that "spaces that would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map – centre and margin, inside and outside – are occupied simultaneously" (p. 140). This notion of mapping is not entirely new; Gellner (1983: 139–140) has provocatively employed a similar cartography in a discussion of modernity and nationalism:

"Consider the history of the national principle; or consider two ethnographic maps, one drawn up before the age of nationalism, and the other after the principle of nationalism has done much of its work. The first map resembles a painting by Kokoschka. The riot of diverse points of colour is such that no clear pattern can be discerned in any detail. . . . Look now instead at the ethnographic and political map of an area of the modern world. It resembles not Kokoschka, but, say, Modigliani. There is very little shading; neat flat surfaces are clearly separated from each other, it is generally plain where one begins and another ends, and there is little if any ambiguity or overlap."

Gellner, however, is depicting maps of historically specific places, one of which is premodern and one which is geometrically modern. Gellner's example of mutually exclusive space is witnessed in a modern painting. I would argue that Rose conflates a critique of gendered practices in modern geography with a critique of "masculinist" geographies. In her book Rose cites Griselda Pollock's reading of female impressionist painters, Mary Cassat and Berthe Morisot, as evidence of disturbing and renegotiating the master gaze. She does not, however, situate them as painters in a period of social change and flux that is irrefutably modernist. Pollock (1988: 50) is critical of the manner in which modernist art history celebrates a selective tradition and normalizes a particular, gendered set of practices. The dominance of these practices is expressed in canonized art which, in the nineteenth century, excluded the works of women painters despite their influence. Pollock's work also echoes de Lauretis

in the sense that "feminist art history has a double project. The historical recovery of data about women producers of art coexists with and is only critically possible through a concomitant deconstruction of the discourses and practices of art history itself" (Pollock, 1988: 55).

Would the idea of geography as *modern* suit Rose's critique just as well as masculinism? The sexual politics of Keller's account start at a time when the modern constellation of power relations could be said to be emerging in Europe. The argument can be made that masculinism is a much less geographically and historically responsible concept than modernism, given difference particular to place and time. When Rose says that "geographers are invisible to themselves," one could attribute this to the Archimedean vantage point and centered subject of modernity (Haraway, 1992) as much as Rose attributes it to "persistent refusal to problematize its pleasure" (p. 107). Compared to masculinism, the gendered practices of modernity and modernism are more geographically and historically circumscribed as European. Geography, as a discipline, has had historically variable relationships of complicity, collaboration, and contest with respect to humanist, imperialist, neo-colonialist and masculinist violence.

### Feminist Others

A serious problem with this book is Rose's exclusion of "Third World" authors and spaces from her analysis. Given the important postcolonial feminist work of critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trinh Minh-ha, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, as well as the colonial and imperialist antecedents of geographical knowledge, this absence is conspicuous. In a volume edited by Blunt & Rose (1994), postcolonial feminisms are discussed within contexts of imperialism, and maps are analyzed as tools of colonization. These are, however, insufficient grounds to ignore the substantive issues of specificity, process, and materiality raised by these authors. Spivak, for example, is concerned precisely with forms of neo-colonialism in the contemporary academy. She shares with Homi Bhabha the conviction that "imperialism was not only a territorial and economic but inevitably also a subject-constituting project" (Spivak cited in Young, 1990: 159). Spivak (1990: 391) succinctly comments that "it is not possible for a lone individual to question her disciplinary boundaries without collective effort."

Both Robert Young and Chandra Talpade Mohanty corroborate Spivak's main argument.

"It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. A basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the

female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes a high feminist norm" (Young, 1990: 162).

"Let me suggest some disconcerting similarities between the typically authorizing signature of such Western feminist writing on women in the third world, and the authorizing signature of the project of humanism in general – humanism as a Western ideological and political project which involves the necessary recuperation of the 'East' and 'Woman' as Others" (Mohanty, 1991: 73).

Mohanty and Rose might concur in their respective criticisms of humanist theory, but Rose has in a sense "othered" the "East" and women living there through her silence.

In a footnote Rose does acknowledge that a consequence of her emphasis on *masculinism* is the undone feminist work around the geography of "Third World" women. "Instead of recovering 'race' as an aspect of the lives of women, I try to address the importance of whiteness to masculinist discourse" (p. 163). These are not mutually exclusive projects, and I remain unconvinced that "whiteness" is examined outside of its relation to masculinism. The lack of sustained and integrated postcolonial feminist criticism is one of the fundamental "limits of geographical knowledge" within much of the discipline, so Rose is not alone. She does, however, stage yet another white Western feminism, this time in geography.

A second and related omission is the question of feminism and postmodernism. How, when feminists in almost every imaginable discipline are debating the tensions and affinities of feminism and postmodernism, can Rose exclude these from her own book? In feminist geography, McDowell (1992) has illustrated this uneasy relationship by juxtaposing what she calls "feminist critical studies" with "postmodernist anthropogeography." She notes the extent to which anthropology has been caught up in an imperialist project. Bondi (1990: 161) makes the point that "geographers might do well to consider the ramifications of selective deafness. Further, if feminists are to do more than recycle existing critiques, the relationship between feminism and postmodernism must be explored."

Rose's book is generally smooth in its transitions and coherent in its development of ideas – old and new. The exception to this is Chapter Six, "Spatial Divisions and Other Spaces" which should have followed the introduction. "This chapter represents feminist geography as an ambivalent discourse straddling both the need to represent women and the need to speak differences among them" (p. 116). It reads as an afterthought and its lack of depth suggests that it is more of a platitude than a position. Rose provides a cursory overview of selected feminist geography from what I see as a paradoxical position. Although clearly outside the project of Marxism and its feminist critiques, Rose dutifully chronicles some of

the salient arguments of the last decade in what is possibly an act of sisterly solidarity or an archival project. The work of no fewer than thirty-three authors is listed, as Rose focuses on empirical topics in feminist geography and handily covers several continents in twenty-three pages. What is unsettling is that this brevity sacrifices the legitimacy of feminist geography, on the one hand, and an important tool of feminist work – critique – on the other. The significance and complexity of debates among feminists are seriously undermined. By privileging time-geography and humanist masculinities over Marxist and other analysis, feminist geographers in this chapter are ironically presented as “Other” in relation to Rose’s own argument.

### Solo Feminism

In her introduction, Rose acknowledges the work of both Linda McDowell and Liz Bondi in feminist geography. However, I remain unconvinced that Rose builds upon that work or provides a historical context for the emergence of the present masculinist conundrum in geography. McDowell argues that “feminists . . . are not interested in merely respecting differences between women in the way which characterizes postmodern discourses but in overturning and restructuring the relations of power that currently structure differences” (1992: 69). On a similar note, Bondi (1990) is concerned with “the gender coding of knowledge” and the “question of difference,” as well as the uses and abuses of postmodernism within feminist geography. She contextualizes the problem of postmodernism in feminism and in geography by alluding to David Harvey’s work on time-space compression. The crisis of accumulation created in this late twentieth century period of intensified time-space compression, she argues, is accompanied also by a crisis in representation attributable to the same source. This explanation was proven problematic in places for feminists and geographers, and elsewhere Rose has responded vigorously to Harvey’s work. Here she is surprisingly silent.

My point is that the work done by feminist geographers over the past decade creates a context for the consumption of Rose’s own book. Yet, Rose does not engage in many of these still raging debates which are so central to her own thesis. A connection, for example, between Rose’s book and the more recently published articles about feminist interventions in fieldwork in *The Professional Geographer* (vol. 46:1, 1994) is elusive. In the final chapter Rose rightly points out that the subject of feminism insists that spaces are extremely complex: “Its multidimensionality refers to complicated and never self-evident matrix of historical, social, sexual, racial and class positions which women occupy, and its geography is one strung out between paradoxical sites.” (p. 155)

Nonetheless, in the same chapter she tacks on the important work of

two feminists outside geography, bell hooks and Minnie Bruce Pratt, authors whose identity politics seem incongruous with Rose's major theoretical tenets. hooks grew up as a woman of color in a poor, segregated community in the southern United States. She speaks from her experience and contends that marginality is a site of resistance from which one engages in the political intervention of "talking back" to the oppressive authorities of the dominant culture (hooks, 1990). Rose agrees that "speaking the margin . . . requires its own paradoxical space, where theorizing is grounded in a felt sense of history and geography" (p. 156), but it is ironic<sup>2</sup> that she inserts this critical discussion of "difference" at the end of the book, without adequately theorizing or making it central to her own argument.

Having said all this, Rose's book is certainly worth reading more than once. It offers an original feminist critique to those interested in the iconography of landscape, and while it pays insufficient attention to feminist works inside and outside the discipline, Rose's tantalizing, albeit unspecified, concept of paradoxical space will likely provoke the geographical imaginations of its readers. Paradoxical space, unlike the absolutely knowable spaces of masculinist geographies, is contradictory, overlapping, and ambivalent; it forges constructive openings and debates for both feminists and geographers. *Feminism and Geography* outlines a theoretical space for feminist geography; what must come next is a political sensibility – textual or otherwise – which could occur in paradoxical space, something more efficacious and subversive than prisoner or exile.

If fieldwork is masculinist, and geographers are repressed by the primacy of the masculinist gaze, there is still – according to Rose – paradoxical space. The questions remain, how does one get there, who can go, and what politics does it promise?

## Notes

1. The date of the cover photograph, 1983, suggest that the debate was one of the 1980s, rather than the 1990s. Equally, the black and whiteness of the photo is a poetic allegory for the Rose's line of argument, especially on the subject of fieldwork.
2. Kathy Ferguson (1993) points out that irony is a particularly appropriate concept for feminists and feminisms because it reflects the doubleness of their project: "Feminist theory entails both problematizing and embracing subjectness" (p. 15).

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