

Situating knowledges: positionality, re-reflexivities and other tactics

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Abstract: This article addresses the discussion, particularly prominent among feminist geograph-

and this is the failure from which this essay springs. The event that brought my difficulty home to me was a joke made by one of my interviewees. We were sitting in the café of an arts centre talking about his work, with my tape recorder sitting on the table between us. He's Scottish and working class. As a friend of his, another worker at the centre, walked past us, he laughed and said, 'look, I'm being interviewed for Radio 4'. She laughed and so did I, and the interview ± a long and very helpful one for me ± continued. But that joke has bothered me ever since; or, rather, my uncertainty about what it meant has bothered me. Was it just a reference to the tape recorder? Was it to do with his self-consciousness at being interviewed? But Radio 4 is a national station of the British Broadcasting Corporation, which means in effect it's English, so was his joke a reference to the middle-class Englishness of my accent? If so, was the joke a sign of our different 'positions'? But does he like Radio 4's Englishness? And how do any of these possibilities relate to how the interview went? I don't know the answer to these questions, and this, I felt, was my failure. Indeed, now I think about it, I can't even be sure he said 'Radio 4' and not 'Radio Forth', which is a regional commercial station, which would raise some but not all the same questions, and some more besides. Or not. I don't know what the joke indicates about our position, let alone how to write it into my research (for a similarly uncertain encounter, see Gilbert, 1994: 93).

But it's a failure that has prompted me to consider the criteria for success. Reflexivity has been discussed by several sorts of geographers in recent years (see for just a few examples, Pile, 1991; Merrifield, 1995; Thrift, 1996). But it is fair to say that the need to be reflexive has been most thoroughly explicated by feminist geographers, and the first section of this article examines their arguments. This article focuses on these feminist discussions because it seems to me that, in their extensiveness, they implicitly offer rather different forms of reflexivity that have rather different effects. Reflexivity in general is being advocated by these writers as a strategy for situating knowledges: that is, as a means of avoiding the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge. Thus understood, 'situating' is a crucial goal for all critical geographies. Yet, at the same time as they defend reflexivity, many feminist geographers acknowledge the difficulty of actually doing it. This article concentrates on the anxieties and ambivalences that surround reflexivity, positionality and situated knowledges in this work. I want to argue that these discussions by feminist geographers insist on the need for reflexively situated knowledges, but also suggest the limits of some sorts of reflexivity as a means to achieving that end. Indeed, the second section of the article suggests that one particular kind of reflexivity advocated by much feminist geography may be impossible to achieve, for reasons feminist geographers themselves have explored. But although attempts at this particular sort of reflexivity are bound to end in 'failure', I want to argue in the third section of the article that the form of this apparent 'failure' is producing further, different radical strategies for situating feminist geographical knowledges. In doing so, I want to demonstrate that, like its theories and subject-matters, the reflexive methodologies of feminist geographies are becoming richly diverse.

II Surveying the landscape of reflexivity

Situating the production of geographical knowledges is a central theme of many recent discussions of feminist research methodologies in the discipline. The need to situate knowledge is based on the argument that the sort of knowledge made depends on who

its makers are. In order to elaborate this need, feminist geographers most often cite the work of Donna Haraway (1991) and Sandra Harding (1991). Haraway and Harding are

In its use of terms like 'position' and 'situated', Haraway's analysis is spatialized. But she also develops her understanding of situated knowledge by using what she describes as visual metaphors. She characterizes oppressive knowledges that present themselves as universal, for example, as knowledges that claim to see everything from nowhere. Writing about feminist critiques of 'the instruments of visualization in multinationalist, postmodernist culture', she says:

In contrast to the god-trick of claiming to see the whole world while remaining distanced from it, subjugated and critical knowledges work from their situatedness to produce partial perspectives on the world. They see the world from specific locations, embodied and particular, and never innocent; siting is intimately involved in sighting.

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1992a: 413). We need to ensure that 'the real constraints under which all forms of communication occur are made clear' (Nast, 1994: 61). The task of situating knowledge is

situates 'the kaleidoscope' of her own ethnographic work by contextualizing it in a range of power relations thus:

The fields of power that connect the field researcher and participants, the participants to one another, scholars in the field, and research participants and audiences as historical subjects who confront various but specifiable conditions of oppression, deserve critical scrutiny in the conduct of field research. Such scrutiny raises questions such as 'where are one's fields'; 'what are the displacements'; and 'how does the work deploy and confront power ± whose power, where, and under what conditions?'.

If Katz is demanding a full contextualization of fieldwork, Nast makes a similar demand in relation to written research. She suggests that 'a written text is merely a point amidst a continuous fabric of other texts that includes all communicative forms through which researcher, researched, and institutional frameworks are relationally defined', and then says

This visible landscape of power, external to the researcher, transparently visible and spatially organized through scale and distribution, is a product of a particular kind of reflexivity, what I will call 'transparent reflexivity'. It depends on certain notions of agency (as conscious) and power (as context), and assumes that both are knowable. As a discourse, it produces feminist geographers who claim to know how power works, but who are also themselves powerful, able to see and know both themselves and the world in which they work. In a sense, this is precisely the point of Haraway's situated knowledges. Such knowledges are preferable, says Haraway (1991: 190±91), because they are more objective; 'there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful'. Also, as several feminist geographers comment, in certain circumstances it is extremely important to offer an assertive claim to truthful knowledge (McDowell, 1992b; Nast, 1994; McLafferty, 1995). Moreover, these notions of agency and 'context', or structure, are very familiar ones in geography (Pile, 1993; Thrift, 1996), and their deployment may enhance the credibility of feminist arguments for situating the discipline's knowledges.

In another sense, though, these analytical claims are little different from the god-trick Haraway ± and many feminist geographers ± have critiqued so thoroughly. Feminist geographers have certainly situated their analytical gaze, and are now staring hard from locations in the material histories of inequality. But this positioning is still producing some very thorough demands for knowledge. I have already cited the contextualizing project advocated (although, perhaps indicatively, not practised) by Nast (1994) and Katz (1994); the questions that project creates seem to me to be extraordinarily difficult to answer. The knowledge demanded by Katz's questions ± 'where are one's fields'; 'what are the displacements'; and 'how does the work deploy and confront power ± whose power, where, and under what conditions?' ± is massive. Indeed, the answers are so massive, the questions are so presumptuous about the reflective, analytical power of the researcher, that I want to say that they should be simply unanswerable: we should not imagine we can answer them. For if we do, we may be performing nothing more than a goddess-trick uncomfortably similar to the god-trick.

To end this section, though, I want to suggest that, in any case, like the god-trick, the goddess-trick is an illusion; and many feminist geographers acknowledge this even as, perhaps for the reasons just mentioned, they advocate it. Consider, for example, the many, many questions asked by McDowell (1992a; 1994) in her discussions of doing feminist research. McDowell's seemingly endless list of queries about the power relations embedded in research practice is the logical corollary of Nast's and Katz's demands for full contextual knowledge. Yet although McDowell (1992a: 408) demands their 'resolution' and wants answers, the sheer proliferation of questions suggests that no number of answers will be satisfactory; indeed McDowell offers none. While this absence is partly a consequence of her recognition of the particularity of any one research project's context, it might also be understood as a sign of the impossibility of such a quest to know fully both self and context. The next section considers the impossibility of the demand for transparently reflexive positionality in more detail.

III Failure

Of course, I am not alone in suggesting that the search for positionality through transparent reflexivity is bound to fail. Many of its advocates say the same thing (not least

among them McDowell, Nast and Katz), and several reasons have been offered as to why this is the case. Some feminist geographers have suggested that the difficulty of reflexivity is due to our current lack of understanding. Thus Erica Schoenberger (1992: 217) writes about the effect her gender might have on her interviews with company directors that 'I am not sure precisely what difference it makes, and I am not sure how I would know'. But she then suggests that what is needed is more analytical work: 'the task, then, is not to do away with these things, but to learn from them' (Schoenberger, 1992: 218). For Schoenberger, the difficulty seems to be that feminists have not yet learnt how the mutual constitution of their gender, class, race, sexuality and so on, affects their production of knowledge. In this she is correct; there are very few analytical tools available to help feminists in this task, especially, I think, in terms of understanding the impact, and reproduction, of whiteness on white feminists' work (see Sanders, 1990). One response to this absence is to theorize 'situatedness' more carefully, and Wendy Larner (1995), for example, has begun to do this by complicating the relationship between 'place' and the knowledges produced there. However, this argument seems to retain the conviction that, with more personal and collective reflection and theorization, transparent reflexivity can adequately situate knowledge. Many other feminist geographers are less convinced that this is the case.

In the discussion that follows here, I focus on arguments made by feminist geographers that problematize transparent reflexivity more fundamentally. I want to begin by suggesting that the visualized space through which feminist geographers are discussing the situatedness of their geographical knowledges is contradictory; it fails, if you like. The reflexive gaze at a landscape of power is not sustainable, and this is because of its assumptions about agency and context. The previous section suggested that discussions of transparent reflexivity assume that the researcher is positioned in a landscape of power. It is the articulation of relations between the researcher and others across this landscape that makes the landscape shatter along its fault-lines. The contradiction is this. Reflecting on their respective positions, a researcher situates both herself and her research subjects in the same landscape of power, which is the context of the research project in question. However, the researched must be placed in a different position from the researcher since they are separate and different from her. Differences between researcher and researched are imagined as distance in this landscape of power. Thus Staeheli and Lawson (1994: 99) comment that when a researcher 'identifies directly with the researched, the issue of difference and distance from the researched is less central' (and this comment, in its prioritization of the researcher's identification, once again makes the researcher the knowing analyst of this landscape). The researched are more central or more marginal, higher or lower, than the researcher, because they have more or less power; perhaps they are insiders while the researcher is an outsider (Dyck, 1993; Miles and Crush, 1993; Kobayashi, 1994). The researcher may move about this landscape (Moss, 1995b), the landscape contours may change (Kobayashi, 1994), but difference is still understood as distance. This distance is the effect of the material and/or analytic power of the researcher: Moss (1995b: 82) suggests that 'the socio-political distance' between the researcher and the 'researched' is a result of 'economic, social, cultural and political marginalization processes', while Nast (1994: 59) attributes it to the analytical process. In either case, it makes feeling connected to the researched a political and ethical error. As McLafferty (1995: 438) comments on her relations with her research data, 'I must constantly remind myself that connectedness is false'. And it is this understanding of distance that produces the contradiction, for distance is also seen as epitomizing that

openness she has elsewhere advocated; 'I am not arguing that as researchers we necessarily have an obligation to declare our own positions' (McDowell, 1992b: 214). The shifting self, it seems, is also rather opaque.

Even when thinking of the researcher as distinctly different from the researched, then, some feminist geographers have dis-placed the distance of difference and its transparency. This displacement is more marked in moments when the relational character of identity is emphasized. Then, positioning is not understood in terms of a conscious agent who encounters their context, including other agents, through a landscape surrounding them. Instead, it is implied that the identity to be situated does not exist in isolation but only through mutually constitutive social relations, and it is the implications of this relational understanding of position that make the vision of a transparently knowable self and world impossible. Many feminist geographers argue that identities are extraordinarily complex, not only because gender, class, race and sexuality, to name just a few axes of social identity, mediate each other, but also because each of those elements is relational. That is, a sense of self depends on a sense of being different from someone else. Identity is theorized as based on difference from others but not on separation from others. The result, as Katz (1992: 504) says, is that 'difference' and 'identity' subvert one another' so that 'none of us are all knowing subjectivities'. In this argument, we depend for our sense of self precisely on an otherness we can never fully know. Moreover, as Madge (1993) suggests, some understandings of that relationality emphasize the role that fantasies about the researched as 'other' may play in the research process. Madge draws on the work of a number of postcolonial theorists to suggest that the relation between researchers working in the third world and their research subjects may be structured by (among other things) boundaries constructed by psychic processes such as fetishism and paranoia; as Pile (1993) notes, such processes, dependent as they are on the unconscious, are not possible to access fully. In these relational arguments, then, the self becomes less a coherent agent and

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1995: 325, my emphasis) ± does not indicate the failure of the project to situate knowledge reflexively, however. It is important to remember that the aim of situating academic knowledge is to produce non-overgeneralizing knowledges that learn from other kinds of knowledges, and that remains the crucial goal. What it does indicate, however, is the need to think beyond the polarities of fusion or distance offered by transparent reflexivity, and to consider the possibilities of other sorts of reflexive research practice. It indicates the need for researchers to position themselves in spaces other than that I have been describing as a landscape of power.

Once again, feminist geographers have already made this point. Several have suggested that the situatedness of the researcher can be articulated through other ways of seeing and spatializing knowledge. Fiona Smith (1996), for example, offers a different space in her discussion of translation. She begins by emphasizing that 'translations' from local knowledges to academic knowledges are deeply regulated by power relations (see also Madge, 1993). But she then notes the impossibility of complete translation between two different sorts of languages, and suggests that this can be used to challenge the apparently transparent lucidity of the researcher's own work. 'Hybrid spaces of research between the "home" language and the "foreign" language can open new spaces of insight, of meaning which dis-place, de-centre the researcher's assumption that their own language is clear in its meaning' (Smith, 1996: 163). Smith argues that it is such uncertainties ± and not the revelations of transparent reflexivity ± that should be written into research in order to reject the god-trick: 'as a writing strategy it demands that

This vision of research as a process of constitutive negotiation depends on a very

the only source of a text's meaning. The academic text ± of whatever kind, whether an

V Conclusions

Where does this leave the project of situating knowledges? Like all the other feminist geographers whose work I have discussed here, I want to work towards a critical politics of power/knowledge production. Like them, I think that power and knowledge are inextricably connected. Like them, I therefore worry that my work may exclude or erase, I worry about its effects. All I'm suggesting in this article is that feminist geographers should keep these worries, and work with them. After all, as Haraway (1991: 195) says, situated feminisms are about 'interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood'.

I have suggested that these uncertainties are precisely what transparent kinds of reflexivity cannot articulate; assuming that self and context are, even if in principle only, transparently understandable seems to me to be demanding an analytical certainty that is as insidious as the universalizing certainty that so many feminists have critiqued. So I have chosen in this article to focus on the uncertainty that is pervasive in so many

the uncertainties of feminist research. As tactics for introducing elements of uncertainty into academic, feminist, geographical knowledges, none of these suggestions demand elaborate textual play (although this may seem appropriate for some sorts of work), for, as Katz (1992) argues, relying on textual style alone is not going to decrease the authority of the author. And this leads to my final point. If our work $\pm$ as we research it and as we write it $\pm$ is not in our control because it is always interpreted in a wide range of diverse arenas, suggesting textual strategies to control its interpretation is rather pointless $\pm$ or, rather, beside the point. This is not to suggest that a feminist researcher should abandon all efforts to produce what she hopes will be understood as feminist work, but it is to suggest that how a research project is understood is not entirely a consequence of the relation between researcher and researched. To assume otherwise is, once again, to resist the proliferation of power/knowledges by asserting the unassailable authority of academic analysis.

We cannot know everything, nor can we survey power as if we can fully understand, control or redistribute it. What we may be able to do is something rather more modest but, perhaps, rather more radical: to inscribe into our research practices some absences and fallibilities while recognizing that the significance of this does not rest entirely in our own hands.

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Mattingly, D. and Falconer-Al-Hindi, K. 1995: