

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Feminist Historical Geographies

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**ABSTRACT:** The 16th International Conference of Historical Geographers (ICHG 2015) held in London provided an excellent opportunity to gather scholars whose work crosses the nexus of feminism-history-geography. We organized a day-long series of sessions at the conference in order to highlight the contributions of feminist theories and approaches to our understanding of historical geography and the contributions of archival and historical methods to our understanding of feminist geography.

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Not surprisingly, the papers offered within these broad categories were diverse, ranging from explorations of the importance of gender and sexuality in understanding nationalism, empire, and war, to assessments of the status of feminist historical geography in particular national and pedagogical contexts, to more theoretical discussions of the importance of feminist science studies to understanding historical geography. Janet Momsen, for example, focused on late nineteenth-century women emigrants to the Canadian West, while Christina Dando showed how the geographical literature and maps produced by American female missionaries contribute to a wider history of geography during the Progressive Era. Isla Forsyth interpreted performances of masculinity in British narratives from the Second World War, focusing on desert landscapes as a theatre of conflict and violence, and Eric Olund interrogated early twentieth century U.S. newspaper stories of the sex trade in order to better understand the Progressive Era. Tamami Fukuda offered an overview of the status of feminist historical geography in Japan, as did Swagata Basu and Gloria Kuzur within the context of India, while Ellen Hansen addressed pedagogical approaches for incorporating feminist historical geography in undergraduate classes. Jo Norcup uncovered the important role that Dawn Gill, building on her critique of school geography in

Britain, played in the making of radical Anglophone geography. And Abigail Neely used feminist science studies to better interpret women's oral histories in South Africa, particularly in regard to health.<sup>1</sup>

Four papers from the conference sessions are presented as articles in this special issue of *Historical Geography*. The overlapping of historical geography with the history of geography was evidenced throughout the conference and comes through as a significant theme of the papers presented here as well. Two of the essays uncover the important role that women played in the making of geographical knowledge in the early twentieth century. In "Mapping Terra Incognita': Women's Expeditionary Work and the Royal Geographical Society 1913-1939," Sarah Evans evaluates women's participation in RGS-supported expeditions from 1913, the year women were first regularly admitted as RGS Fellows, to 1939, discussing the ways in which class, gender, and normalized views of expertise figured into women's expeditionary participation rates. She also elucidates the overlapping familial, social, and educational networks through which they were most likely to gain entry to RGS expeditions. While some European women traveled to distant lands to collect geographical information, others found that information much closer to home. As Kirsten Greer explains in "She of the Lighthouse Nest': Gendering Historical Ecological Reconstructions in Northern Ontario," the so-called amateur scientist Louise de Kiriline Lawrence made significant scholarly contributions to ornithology and zoogeography through observations of her surroundings in remote Ontario.

Federico Ferretti's paper explicates the importance of women and gendered norms to the history of radical geography. In "A Reclus Feminist Geography: An Historical Evaluation of the Relationship Between Anarchism and Feminism in Later Nineteenth-Century France," Ferretti reconstructs the social networks and intellectual and political relationships fomented in Paris from the 1860s onward, revealing the mutual support and influence among feminist writers Louise Michel and André Léo and the anarchist geographers Elie and Elisée Reclus. The gendered impact of patriarchal and colonial constructs of nationality and land rights is the subject of "From Forced Relocation to Secure Belonging: Women Making Native Space in Quebec's Urban Areas." Caroline Desbiens and Carole Lévesque analyze the impact of Canada's 1876 Indian Act, which removed Aboriginal status and the right to live on a reserve from women who married non-Aboriginals, and the eventual development of Native friendship centers in Quebec cities in the 1970s as important supportive spaces for these women.

Fifteen years ago, at the 2001 International Historical Geography Conference, in Quebec City, approximately nine of the 230 presentations, about four percent, had an explicitly feminist orientation.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on the limited representation of feminist work in historical geography arenas at that time, we (although at that time missing Tamar) assessed the feminist geography landscape and found a more robust showing once the construct of feminist historical geography was expanded to include scholars in a variety of fields working with geographical, historical, and feminist approaches. Thus we argued that while feminist historical geography "rarely traveled under its own name," that nexus was alive and well in areas such as political ecology, labor geographies, historical geographies of difference, and the performance, representation and materiality of bodies.

In the end, the 2015 London ICHG was bigger and had more international participation than the 2001 conference in Quebec City. Yet the percentage of those presentations with an explicitly feminist orientation was five percent, hardly different from 2001. The issues we raised fifteen years ago, then, remain relevant. Feminist geography is still very much a present-ist subdiscipline, while historical geography tends not to be focused on women or gender, and has

yet to take up feminist methods or approaches. Yet that is not to say that feminist historical geography is stagnant or inconsequential. As the papers at the conference and the essays in this issue make clear, our understandings of the histories of geography, ecology, nationalism, war, empire, and geopolitics are not only incomplete without adequate explications of gendered norms, roles, and performances, they are incorrect. So too, we realize that feminist accounts of our past are incomplete unless they consider the intersectionality of all forms of difference. We put forward this special issue on feminist historical geographies, then, with the hope of inspiring more critical historical geographies in general; not only those that bring to light the centrality of women, gender, and sexuality to an understanding of our past, but also those that explore the intersectional ways that gender, race, class, and ethnicity work together and against each other in forging what we call the present.

#### NOTES

1. Janet Momsen, "Gender, Class and Ethnicity among Women Migrants in Western Canada in the Nineteenth Century"; Christina Dando, "'Needed Everywhere': American Missionary Women and the Practice of Geography in the Progressive Era"; Isla Forsyth, "Narrating War"; Eric N. Olund, "Maidens, Microbes and Money"; Tamami Fukuda, "Gender and Historical Geography in Japan: Current Conditions and Prospects"; Swagata Basu and Gloria Kuzur, "'Immanence Sans Transcendence': Poverty of Historicism in the Narratives of Feminist Geography in India"; Ellen R. Hansen, "Historical Geography and Geographical History: Teaching and Learning about Gender in Place and Time"; Jo Norcup, "The Emancipatory Geographies of Dawn Gill and the Journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education: Feminist Historiographies from the 1980s*"; and Abigail H. Neely, "Entangled Pasts and Presents." Papers presented at the 16th International Conference of Historical Geographers, London (5-10 July 2015).
2. Mona Domosh and Karen M. Morin, "Travels with Feminist Historical Geography," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 10: 3 (2003): 257-264.