

# Situating knowledges: positionality, reflexivities and other tactics

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the discussion, particularly prominent among feminist geographers, of reflexivity as a strategy for marking geographical knowledges as situated. It argues that, if the aim of feminist and other critical geographies is to acknowledge their partiality, then the particular form of reflexivity advocated needs careful consideration. Feminist geographers most often recommend a kind of reflexivity that aims, even if only ideally, at a full understanding of the researcher, the researched and the research context. The article begins with the author's failure at that kind of reflexivity, and that particular reflexivity is then discussed and described as 'transparent' in its ambitious claims to comprehensive knowledge. The article then goes on to explore critiques of transparent reflexivity, many of which have been made by feminist geographers themselves. The article concludes by suggesting that some recent discussions of the uncertainties of research practice offer another model of feminist reflexivity that may succeed more effectively in questioning the researcher's practice of knowledge production.

## I Introduction

This is an article written from a sense of failure.

I've been working on a research project that uses in-depth interviews as its main data source. I chose this method because I was interested in the situated knowledges of the group of people I interviewed. I understood their knowledge as situated – that is, as partial – partly because it seemed to me that they did, but also because I share those feminist, postcolonial and post-Marxist critiques which argue that all knowledge is produced in specific circumstances and that those circumstances shape it in some way. Since that argument applies to my own knowledges too, I knew I shouldn't and couldn't pretend to be an all-seeing and all-knowing researcher; I knew instead, from some of those same critiques, that I should situate myself and my interpretations of those interviews by reflexively examining my positionality. Linda McDowell (1992a: 409), for example, has written that 'we must recognize and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and *write this into our research practice*'. But I found this an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. Indeed, I think I found it impossible,

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 taken to argue that all knowledge is marked by its origins, and to insist that to deny this marking is to make false claims to universally applicable knowledge which subjugate other knowledges and their producers. Instead, both prefer knowledges that are limited, specific and partial; Haraway, for example, advocates knowledges that are produced by interpretive technologies between different actants: that are marked by their hybrid origins: that can therefore work with others. These are knowledges concerned with 'elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view' (Haraway, 1991: 190). They are situated across these specificities and differences and this critique can be directed as much at many feminist knowledges as towards the material processes of power and knowledge that maintain 'scientific and technological, late industrial, militarized, racist and male dominant societies' (Haraway 1991: 188). No feminist should produce knowledge that claims to have universal applicability to all women (or men). This argument was preceded by a critique of the way the feminisms of white straight women ignored the specificities of black and lesbian women; more recently, with the academic institutionalization of at least some feminisms, it is also an argument directed at academic women (still mostly straight and white, especially in geography) whose knowledges may exclude others.

Many feminist geographers are acutely sensitive to the intersection of power with academic knowledge, and several have marked on their own privileged relation to the women they have studied. This privilege is understood as entailing greater access both to material resources and to the power inherent in the production of knowledges about others. Audrey Kobayashi (1994: 76), for example, argues that all academic women are privileged to some degree since they have 'access to the middle-class luxuries, such as education and professional status, that are still relatively inaccessible for most women of all backgrounds'. In Melissa Gilbert's (1994: 91) research, this privilege involves 'material inequalities, perceived of as a difference in opportunities, separating myself from the women whom I was interviewing'. Gilbert (1994: 94) also comments on 'the fact that I have the final power of interpretation' at the conclusion of any piece of research, and for Sarah McLafferty (1995: 437) it is the interpretive act that is the key site of academic feminist power: 'except in rare cases, the researcher holds a "privileged" position – by deciding what questions to ask, directing the flow of discourse, interpreting interview and observational material, and deciding where and in what form it should be presented'. Lynn Staeheli and Victoria Lawson (1995: 332) make this latter argument in the context of research in the third world:

when Western feminists enter developing settings, they cannot escape the power relations that exist between those societies or between themselves as academics and their research subjects, even when they wish to do so. Western researchers are in a position of power by virtue of their ability to name the categories, control information about the research agenda, define interventions and come and go as research scientists.

Sarah Radcliffe (1994: 28) reiterates the point: 'in producing representations of (Third World) women, we are inextricably bound up with questions of authority, communication and representations, and the positions generated by such questions are inherently political'. This analysis of academic power has been summarized by McDowell (1992a: 413) in her remark that 'there are real dangers that are inherent in our own position within the powerful institutions of knowledge production'.

McDowell's use of the term 'position' is key here. Feminists of many kinds have elaborated their own role in the complex relations of power by exploring their 'position',

and frequently ascribe the politics of knowledge production to a geography of 'positionality'. Facets of the self – institutional privilege, for example, as well as aspects of social identity – are articulated as 'positions' in a multidimensional geography of power relations. Clare Madge (1993: 296) is typical in her argument that when situating knowledge it is crucial to consider 'the role of the (multiple) "self", showing how a researcher's positionality (in terms of race, nationality, age, gender, social and economic status, sexuality) may influence the "data" collected and thus the information that becomes coded as "knowledge"'. Haraway's work has been important in theorizing this notion of 'position'. According to her, 'positioning is ... the key practice grounding knowledge' (Haraway, 1991: 193), because 'position' indicates the kind of power that enabled a certain kind of knowledge. Knowledge thus positioned, or situated, can no longer claim universality.

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:

the eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power ... but of course that view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god-trick (Haraway, 1991: 188–89).

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.

As Haraway argues, situatedness is not given; it must be developed, its technologies revised and invented. For many feminist geographers, reflexivity is one of those situating technologies. However, Haraway stresses the need to think critically about such technologies. Referring to the visual, she says, '*how* to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the "highest" form of techno-scientific visualizations' (Haraway, 1991: 191), and several feminist geographers have made similar arguments in relation to the spaces implicit in many contemporary discussions of the way identifies refract knowledge (Pratt, 1992; Bondi, 1993; Smith and Katz, 1993; Rose, 1995). They suggest that understandings of the spaces in which positionality takes place is also a problematic project. I now want to consider one of the visualized spaces through which some feminist geography formulates reflexivity.

The imperative to situate the production of knowledge is being formulated by feminist geographers through a rhetoric of both space and vision. Doreen Mattingly and Karen Falconer-Al-Hindi (1995: 428–29) are typical in their statement that, in order to situate ourselves, it is necessary 'to make one's position vis a vis research *known* rather than invisible, and to *limit* one's conclusions rather than making grand claims about their universal applicability'. Thus overgeneralizing, universalizing claims can be countered by making one's position known, which involves making it visible and making the specificity of its perspective clear. The assumption that to know something means in some sense to see it is pervasive in feminist geographers' discussions. Feminists should 'make visible our own critical positioning within the structure of power' (McDowell,

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 'to shed light' on the research process, although this should not be seen as 'navel-gazing' (Farrow *et al.*, 1995a: 100). The relationship between the researcher and the researched should be 'made visible and open to debate' (Gilbert, 1994: 90). If 'we cannot know our world outside of our ability to name it', it follows that 'the language we use can both obscure and expose that which we subsequently "see" theoretically, empirically, and politically'; feminist work therefore aims 'to reduce illusion' by exposing 'unseen, gendered power relations' (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995: 323, 335). And if to situate is also to sight in this ludic way, then conversely, if something is, or is made, invisible, this is seen as a sign of mystifying power at work. For example, we should neither 'mask the "other"' (McDowell, 1994: 244) nor 'mask our own position and agency' (Katz, 1992: 499). Authority should not be taken as 'invisible' (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995: 329); the 'naturalizing tendencies that render certain social constructions opaque' should be challenged (Kobayashi, 1994: 77). Feminists should 'try and make more visible the mystery' that is the research process, and work is criticized if its author 'draws a veil over the implications of her own position' (McDowell, 1992a: 403, 407).

This particular description of reflexivity is formulated in terms of visibility, then, but also in terms of a particular spatiality. This reflexivity looks both 'inward' to the identity of the researcher, and 'outward' to her relation to her research and what is described as 'the wider world'. Pamela Moss (1995a) summarizes this double reflexive gaze and its spatial division between inside and outside. First, she says that 'by reflexivity I mean those introspective aspects of thought that are self-critical and self-consciously analytical'; secondly, she says that the researcher must also reflect on 'how her research is accepted into the scientific community and then becomes part of the known' (Moss, 1995a: 445). Moss's emphasis on the self-consciousness of inward reflexivity is echoed by several other discussions of reflexive positionality. Radcliffe (1994: 31) for example argues that western feminist geographers need 'to become self-conscious about the specificity of their own positions', while McDowell (1992a: 400) applauds 'greater self-consciousness about research methods'. Cindi Katz demands 'conscious awareness of the situatedness of our knowledge' (1992: 498), and advocates 'an analysis of position that if consciously appropriated can lead to, be part of, and inform collective oppositional practice' (1992: 505). The importance of making a position conscious leads Kim England (1994: 82) to describe reflexivity as a process of 'self-discovery', and she quotes Stanley and Wise (1993: 157) as saying that 'our consciousness is always the medium through which the research occurs'. This emphasis on the conscious analysis of situatedness suggests that the researcher's self is understood as transparently visible to analysis, since apparently nothing need remain hidden. Heidi Nast (1994: 214) echoes this understanding in her claim 'in all cases, we carefully choose and give meaning to our "spaces", our actions, our words, and our contexts'. The researcher-self that many feminist geographers give themselves to reflect on, then, seems at some level to be a transparently knowable agent whose motivations can be fully known (although I will go on to argue that this is not the only researcher-self produced by this body of work).

This transparent self then looks outward, to understand its place in the world, to chart its position in the arenas of knowledge production, to see its own place in the relations of power. This too is a particular reflexive process, in which 'the circumstances surrounding data collection and analysis are made explicit' (Dyck, 1993: 53–54). Once again, this task is rendered as gaze through a complex but knowable space. Katz (1994: 69) for example



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 that this fabric is the context of all research and that 'such contextualizations are essential if we are to carry out the kind of collaborative, global, and otherwise transgressive kinds of research that currently pepper feminist geographers' horizons' (Nast, 1994: 64).

These demands to understand reflexively the full context of a research project are vast, but other feminist geographers deploy two tactics that help them to analyse the terrain of power in which research takes place. I want to suggest that both these tactics work by turning extraordinarily complex power relations into a visible and clearly ordered space that can be surveyed by the researcher: power becomes seen as a sort of landscape. The first tactic is to understand power relations through the organizing device of scale. Several feminist geographers argue that their task is to connect what they understand as the microlevel of everyday experience to the macrolevel of power relations: what they offer is analysis that, through the local, accesses larger power relations. Staeheli and Lawson (1994: 100) argue that 'uncovering the knowledge that "mere folks" produce involves developing methods that connect everyday experiences with higher level patriarchal and political-economic forces'. In her justification of quantitative research methodologies, McLafferty (1995: 438) argues that 'counting ... can be used effectively to reveal the broad contours of difference'. Nast (1994: 58) also suggests that feminist researchers can understand 'historical and material realities [that] are beyond our personal and social reach', which means reflexively linking 'larger-scale political objectives to smaller-scale methodological strategies'. In these cases, it seems that feminist geographers structure the complexity of power by dividing it into macroscale and microscale. Geographical scale is used to bring analytical order to quotidian complexity (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995: 330–31). The second tactic used by some feminist geographers to survey the complexity of power is to use a distributional model of power. Moss (1995b: 88) speaks typically of 'uneven distributions of power'; there is 'an unequal distribution of power' which for feminists induces a 'struggle to distribute power more evenly' (Farrow *et al.*, 1995b: 71). For Kobayashi (1994: 77) this struggle entails 'decisions about how the power of representation will be dispersed'. England (1994: 82) summarizes the politics of this notion of power as a politics of 'shifting a lot of power over to the researched'. This tactic makes power into a question of distribution across a social terrain, and keeps power in some sense distinct from the researcher. Thus although, as Nast (1994: 58) suggests, the researcher 'holds' power, she can also give it away; power remains something separate from her. She is positioned in power rather than constituted by it; power becomes her 'context', which she can survey at a distance, with 'some level of detachment' in order to 'admit to the power we bring to bear as multiply-positioned authors of research projects' (Nast, 1994: 59). For some feminist geographers then, the scale and distribution are used to produce a landscape of power that is visible and knowable to the analyst.

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 *distances* 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



disembodied, god's-eye view from nowhere that such positioning was meant to refuse: 'Claims to objective truth that are substantiated by the knower's distance from the known must be called into question on the grounds that they replicate and reinforce the gendered construction of identity and power' (Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi, 1995: 430; see also Rose, 1993). Such a critique then compels the researcher to attempt to occupy the same place as the researched. Thus Moss (1995b: 84) tried 'being *inside* the process' of waged labour she was concerned to research, through 'a complete immersion' which would allow her to work 'from within'. But as she herself notes, this is an impossible position because she is not the same as her research subjects. Thus, in this reflexive landscape of power, the relationship between researcher and researched can only be mapped in one of two ways: either as a relationship of difference, articulated through an objectifying distance; or as a relationship of sameness, understood as the researcher and researched being in the same position. The contradiction is that the latter is impossible while the former is unacceptable. Situating knowledge through transparent reflexivity thus gives no space to understanding across difference.

This is an ironic 'position' for feminist geography to find itself in, since the point of situating knowledges is precisely to forge critical, situated understandings by thinking through difference and similarity. But I want to argue that it is precisely through this contradiction that possibilities for a more connective geographical knowledge are being si(gh)ted by feminist geographers themselves. As this landscape develops its inevitable stress faults, other formations of researcher–researched relations come into view. This is perhaps most evident in the discussions of 'betweenness' by England (1994), Katz (1994) and Nast (1994). They all describe their analytical position as 'between': between the 'field' and the 'not-field', between theory and practice, but also between researcher and researched. In their exploration of the relations among these – an exploration which, as Katz (1994) notes, in its form of relations *between* reinstates differences as distances – they none the less utilize a sense of 'betweenness' which also problematizes that distance. The difficulty in surveying the researcher–researched relationship as a landscape thus generates other ways of articulating the situatedness of researched knowledge: in this discussion of betweenness, for example, it produces a spatiality of displacement (Katz, 1994). The feminist task becomes less one of mapping difference – assuming a visible landscape of power with relations between positions ones of distance between distinctly separate agents – and more one of asking how difference is constituted, of tracing its destabilizing emergence during the research process itself.

Other emergent displacements occur in feminist geographers' discussions of research practice. Kobayashi (1994), for example, says that reflexivity must be a process of self-critique and, while arguing that feminist reflexivity entails resisting oppressive concepts of gender and race she notes that those same oppressive concepts may be 'naturalized within our own experiences' (Kobayashi, 1994: 78; see also Madge, 1993). This implies that reflexivity may be less a process of self-discovery than of self-construction. If the process of reflexivity changes what is being reflected upon, then there is no 'transparent' self waiting to be revealed. McDowell further complicates matters by pointing out that this shifting self is always articulated through specific social interactions. In an interaction that is part of a research project, she suggests that 'both the scholar and the respondent construct a particular version of themselves in interviews which is then re-interpreted and re-presented in different ways in future publications' (McDowell, 1992b: 214). Nast (1994: 60) similarly remarks that 'for a number of reasons, we do not attempt to make all things apparent to all people'. Given such reasons, McDowell qualifies the reflexive

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 displaced 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 more a decentred site of differences. Julie-Kathy Gibson-Graham (1994: 206) uses many of these arguments when she comments on her resistance to the assumption that she is 'a centred and knowing subject who is present to myself and can be spoken for'. Un-centred, un-certain, not entirely present, not fully representable: this is not a self that can be revealed by a process of self-reflection. As Gibson-Graham (1994) herself says, 'stuffed if I know'.

These uncertainties might be described as the failures of transparent reflexivity. But they also begin to suggest other ways of understanding the relationship between researcher and researched. The next section suggests that this 'failure' is producing other ways of situating the knowledge of the researcher.

#### IV Other ways of doing gender

Doing research, as Hester Parr (1996) has noted, is a messy business. Researchers are entangled in the research process in all sorts of ways, and the demand to situate knowledge is a demand to recognize that messiness. The imperative of transparent reflexivity assumes that messiness can be fully understood. The last section, though, suggested that such messiness may be beyond the kind of understanding invited by a sort of reflexivity that assumes a transparently knowable self separate from its transparently knowable context. The failure of that transparent reflexivity – its collapse under the strain of feminist insistence on 'theorizing difference *and* connection' (Staeheli and Lawson,

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 differences, tensions and conflicts are explored, not as problems, but as spaces of conceptual and indeed political opportunities and negotiations’ (Smith, 1996: 165). This is an argument which understands the imperative to situate less in terms of surveying positions in a landscape of power and more in terms of seeing a view of power as punctured by gaps precariously bridged. The authority of academic knowledge is put into question not by self-conscious positioning but by gaps that give space to, and are affected by, other knowledges.

This sense of what Haraway (1991: 191) calls ‘webbed connections’ recurs in much contemporary feminist geography (Katz, 1992; Larner, 1995; Rocheleau, 1995). As noted above, for Haraway, situated knowledge is negotiated between different knowledges, and that negotiation both resists the authority of the academic and recognizes the knowledges of both researcher and researched. Some feminist geography has discussed this process of negotiation, and suggested that one of its consequences is that neither the researcher nor the researched remains unchanged through the research encounter (cf. Kobayashi, 1994). Both negotiate their knowledges through it. Where this argument differs from those discussed in the previous section is in its suggestion that social identity is also made and remade through the research process. As McDowell (1992a) so neatly puts it, researching gender is ‘doing gender’. Through our relations – conversational, textual – with research subjects – people or other actants – and with colleagues, supervisors, gatekeepers, editors, publishers, seminar audiences, friends, and so on and so on, we make gender (and class, and race, and sexuality, at least). In this view, research is not seen as transparently, reflexively, mirroring selves and context, since ‘there is no prior reality or unified identity to gain access to or to be created by research’ (Gibson-Graham, 1994: 214). Instead, research is seen as constitutive (if not completely so), both of the researcher and of the other involved in the research process. Hence Gibson-Graham’s (1994: 220) comment that ‘I understand my discursive interventions as constitutive rather than reflective’. What we research is our relation with the researched (England, 1994: 86).

This vision of research as a process of constitutive negotiation depends on a very different understanding of identity and power from that underpinning discussions of transparent reflexivity. It is in large part influenced by feminist reworkings of some of Foucault's arguments, especially by Judith Butler's (1990) Foucauldian account of performativity; both Butler and Foucault are cited by Gibson-Graham (1994) in their discussion of 'post-modern feminist social research', for example. Butler's arguments are deeply hostile to models of human subjectivity as conscious agency. Instead, Butler insists that our sense of agency is an effect of discourses and not their source (thus it could be argued that transparent reflexivity produces gender and so on rather than revealing the elements of an identity). Our identities do not pre-exist our performances of them; and for Butler this means that identities are profoundly uncertain. Resolutely anti-essentialist, she argues that no identity is secure in and of itself; it may only be made temporarily more certain (and even this is not guaranteed) by being enacted. Such claims produce quite a different approach to situating knowledge than do the notions of agency and context that structure transparent reflexivity as a situating strategy. Following Butler, and Gibson-Graham, there is no clear landscape of social positions to be charted by an all-seeing analyst; neither is there a conscious agent, whether researcher or researched, simply waiting to be reflected in a research project. Instead, researcher, researched and research make each other; research and selves are 'interactive texts' (Miles and Crush, 1993; see also Katz, 1994). The separation of 'inward' and 'outward' reflexivity demanded by transparent reflexion vanishes in this view, along with its surveying gaze. Instead we glance uncertainly, and the fractured spaces we see – when, for example, like Smith (1996), we think of gaps between different knowledges – are also part of a fragmented self. As Gibson-Graham (1994: 219) say, 'I am a unique ensemble of contradictory and shifting subjectivities'. This understanding insists that we are made through our research as much as we make our own knowledge, and that this process is complex, uncertain and incomplete. Complex, because our position is a very particular mediation of class and gender and race and sexuality and so on; uncertain, because our performances of them always carry the risk of misperforming an assigned identity (Butler, 1990); and incomplete because it is only in their repetition that identities are sustained.

Thus the authority of the researcher can be problematized by rendering her agency as a performative effect of her relations with her researched others. She is situated, not by what she knows, but by what she uncertainly performs. However, this is not to suggest that as a 'decentred self' the researcher can somehow elude the dynamics of power. Indeed, in many ways this argument places the researcher even more firmly in the capillaries of power. Working with a Foucauldian understanding of power as saturating and productive rather than as unevenly distributed and repressive, Gibson-Graham (1994) acknowledge that their academic work must therefore be power ridden too (see also Gilbert, 1994). They aim to put this to radical use by working with other women to intervene in existing discursive structures by producing new understandings of 'woman'; knowing that it is impossible to escape power relations, they aim to reconfigure them. Radcliffe (1994: 29) makes a similar move in her demand that the authority of the academy be used for (what are, it is hoped) radical ends rather than abandoned.

While this ambition may appear to be just as overweening a project as that of transparent reflexivity, this understanding of power also suggests that academics are by no means wholly authoritative in relation to their work. As Foucault famously remarked, the author is 'dead' – no longer an active agent – because the author can no longer be seen as

the only source of a text's meaning. The academic text – of whatever kind, whether an interview or a dissertation – becomes part of a number of discourses which engage with it, revise, transform and reuse it. This analysis of power structures Gibson-Graham's (1994: 215–20) discussion of a particular research project. In their discussion, they note their own authority as both employers of other researchers and as interpreters of their material. However, this is far from a simple positioning. They note that as the project progressed, they were themselves positioned differently by the women they were working with, and that those other women's discourses engaged with theirs to produce a new discursive intervention. That is, Gibson-Graham assume that their own knowledge is one among many, all of which are powerful in that they are all productive. The analogies they use for these negotiations are 'conversation' and 'performance'; and as they comment, these suggest not revelation but 'creation and interaction' (Gibson-Graham, 1994: 220). Thus while Gibson-Graham acknowledge the material and discursive power of their academic performances, they also insist that their power was not absolute; and their authority can be seen as incomplete in a further sense, as part of a web of discursive interpretations where it may invite and be given a range of diverse meanings. 'Webbed connections' are not made by the researcher alone.

This latter aspect of research has been acknowledged by numerous feminist geographers, most usually through discussions of the audiences for research. There are several audiences for any one piece of research, and geographers have repeatedly remarked that they may all have very different interpretations of the research project, both from the researcher and from each other. As Larner (1995: 188) notes, audiences are both multiple and discrepant. Both Madge (1993) and Shaw (1995: 94) comment, on the basis of their own research, on the importance of the reactions of the research subjects to the researcher's performance. Nast (1994: 62) lists two more kinds of audience: as well as the researched, she mentions the researcher and the readers of written versions of the research. In my own experience, the transcriber of an interview may develop a very different understanding of an interview from the interviewer (although I'm not quite sure which of Nast's categories she falls into); and McDowell (1994) has pointed out that students react to research in particular ways too, often challenging the authority of the teacher, who may also be an author of the texts under discussion. (Again, it's unclear where this fits into Nast's categorization: another example perhaps of the impossibility of full knowledge of the circumstance of research.) All these discussions remark that what audiences may do with a piece of research is unknowable. As McDowell (1992a: 408) says, 'we may not know the implications of our [methodological] decisions' (see also Katz, 1994). The negotiations that are part of a research process are not fully knowable; the effects of an interview, a publication, a presentation, are impossible to predict. This impossibility does not absolve researchers from the obligation to work in an ethical manner (Haraway, 1991; Keith, 1992). It does suggest, however, that the researcher is not the only authority on academic knowledge and its effects.

This section has argued that the landscape of power produced by transparent reflexivity is not the only space through which the power of the academic to produce knowledge can be situated. There is also a much more fragmented space, webbed across gaps in understandings, saturated with power, but also, paradoxically, with uncertainty: a fragile and fluid net of connections and gulfs. Seen from this perspective, the research process is dangerous. It demands vigilance, a careful consideration of the research process: another kind of reflexivity, in fact, but one which can acknowledge that it may not be adequate since the risks of research are impossible to know.



## 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 discussions of doing feminist geographical research, and I have tried to argue that in these different kinds of uncertainty lie possibilities for other strategies for situating knowledges and for other kinds of reflexivity. In arguing this, I have tried to keep the political aim of situating academic knowledge in mind: to produce nongeneralizing knowledges that can learn from other kinds of knowledges. As I have argued, I do not think that transparent reflexivity contributes towards these aims, because of its particular understanding of agency and power. But then not many other feminist geographers appear thoroughly convinced of the success of that tactic either, and in their work are other ways of situating knowledge as partial.

I have already mentioned some of these other situating tactics. Some accounts of research focus on the processes of connection that happened during the research process and constituted both researcher and researched in a relation on which the research depended, whether that was a surprising connection (Gibson-Graham, 1994) or an absent one (England, 1994). Here, academic authority is displaced by the proliferation of knowledges or by the absence of other understandings. Smith's (1996) discussion of translation also suggests acknowledging the gaps in meaning opened up by the recognition of the diverse knowledges addressed by any research project, and this was the tactic I adopted in my research based on interviews with arts workers. I decided on that tactic for that project because I think I learnt it from my interviewees themselves. They were all arts workers with community arts projects, and when I set the project up I wanted to get them to talk to me about the meaning of the visual images their projects were producing. They refused. Very, very rarely did they talk with me about what a video or a tape-slide show 'meant'; indeed, they don't do that ever, I think. Instead, they talked of practice, process and the facticity of objects, and for very good critical reasons. They also talked of themselves in similarly performative ways. In writing about their work, I've tried to circle around that refusal of interpretation, tried to explain it without writing it out (Rose, 1997). I've tried to produce a gap in my own interpretive project that acknowledges the political importance of the gap in theirs. I'm not sure I succeeded, and I don't think I can or should be sure.

Other feminist geographers have advocated other kinds of 'gaps' or fractures in interpretive authority; both Lerner (1995: 187) and Miranda Miles and Jonathan Crush (1993: 86), for example, suggest that contradictions as well as uncertainties in research interpretations should be marked. Indeed, all the work discussed in this essay explores

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 – as we research it and as we write it – 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 – 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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