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Thinking ‘differently’ about a feminist critical geography of development

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Abstract

This paper makes a case for grounding the global in feminist, anti-racist, and post-colonial scholarship in order to foreground questions of race, colonialism, and history in critical geographies of development. I argue that the process of ‘doing development’ involves the imposition of power; hence, geographers’ critical engagements with development need to consider the intersectionality of gender, race, and ethnicity that comprises identities of the subjects of development and of those who ‘do development’. This consideration would entail questioning the homogeneity of ‘Third World women’ as a singular category in need of development and recognising the normativity of women from the global North who, so far, have been the ‘doers’ or the key actors in global interventions.

Keywords *identity politics; postcolonial feminism; critical feminist geography; intersectionality; power relations in development*

Who is global?

In this paper, I argue that debates about identity politics by postcolonial and Black feminist scholars are integrally linked to critical geography of development. The process of ‘doing development’ implies the imposition of power; hence, geographers’ critical engagements with development need to consider the intersectionality of gender, race, and ethnicity that comprises identities—not only of the subjects of development but also of those who ‘do development’. To put it simply, it is important to remember that some people are able to do development because they can: they feel that they have the power to do so because of their knowledge, authority, and expertise.

Let me illustrate my argument with an example. Almost every year, during or after the semester when I teach the Gender and Development course at the Australian National University, in Canberra, Australia, I entertain requests from students, usually born and brought up in a country of the global North, for contacts in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, or some other such ‘stinking, hot, dusty, and poor country’, so that they can go there and help women. The idea they have is noble; their outrage is genuine. The intent to do something for those poor women living ‘out there’, ‘in those countries’, is also sincere. However, subsumed in this desire to help are normative views that women from the global North are the ‘doers’—the key actors in global interventions in far-away locations.

I am not alone in receiving such requests. Gulzar Charania of the University of Toronto, whose origin is similar to mine, receives comparable requests from her Canadian students. She describes her experience as follows:

> I was a teaching assistant in an undergraduate university course where the focus was on encouraging students to engage with social justice and equity issues from the perspectives of anti-racist, feminist, and social justice scholars, writers, and activists. After a number of weeks of focusing on colonialism and imperialism and looking specifically at the effects of

> structural adjustment in the South and privatization in the North, a White female student approached me with a great deal of outrage and enthusiasm. Having learned more about the state of the world, she was clearly distressed and wanted to know where in the global South she could go to do something. I asked her why she wanted to go anywhere. She replied that she wanted to do something to help. (Charania, 2011, p.352)

Charania explained that to the young student the South is where learning about the global or working for social justice takes place, and 'going there' becomes the primary means to resolve global structural inequities. This binary is based on particular imaginings of race, class, gender, and Northern status that constitute those able to intervene. It is also a development centred on Anglo-Americans' demonstrated interventions in the margins. In other words, 'racialised Northern women fit into the picture of the global' (Charania, 2011, p.352), in which 'others' become the subjects of intervention. Such an imagining conceptualises development (and development pedagogy) as requiring the intervention or movement of people, in various capacities from the global North to the global South. Ingrained within this view—among Western feminists of Third World women as nothing more than victims and hence subjects of development—is a classic example of postcolonial critiques by feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty (1988). Seen from this perspective, such a prevailing view represents the 'ongoing mistrust and exclusivity' between postcolonial feminist approaches and development (Sharp & Briggs, 2006, p.7).

This paper is about the normalised presence and civilising agency of (mostly) White Western women in the space of development. It also considers a legacy in feminist and postcolonial thought that tends to exclude and silence race (Maynard, 1994) and that Davis (2008) describes as painful. I argue that as feminist critical geographers of development, we need to think through notions of the South as the site where learning about the global or working for social justice takes place. The work of collectively and historically thinking through notions of what it means to be responsible for each other in the context of the global will expand the space in which we can explore the politics of identity in developmental work. Once we are able to recognise ourselves in the complex mosaic of identities, we will be able to build coalitions based on mutual understandings of difference.

Development: no longer the 'god trick'

Clearly, the global individual enters the 'field' of development with certain assets or endowments such as expertise and a broader view, or even the 'whiteness of faces and Britishness of passports' (Moore, 1998, p.58). As an industry, development largely comprises aid agencies, government ministries, and non-government organisations, and it is dominated by the 'highly mechanical work' of these actors (White, 2006, p.56). The routine work of development, Sarah White argues, includes serving poor women 'in the field' (p.58), while drawing heavily on expert knowledge institutionalised in the machinery of development itself. She notes that the ensuing dichotomous schema of sexual difference makes race invisible in the 'gender lens', as it is based on gender-and-development theory that magnifies gender at the cost of racial difference (p.60). Hence, cultural imperialism is ingrained in the uncritical transfer of western analytical models to other countries (p.59).

Alternative and broader views of development advocate praxis-based moral discourse (Crocker, 2008; Madhok, 2015; Sheppard *et al.*, 2009), or development work that has something to do with the 'structure [of] access to resources' (Jolly, 2011, p.21). By focusing on more self-reflexive volunteering that allows space for continuous critical reviews of power relations involved in transnational developmental work, and by consciously avoiding 'voluntourism', development could be reconfigured from its purely top-down and conative approach into one in which development is not far away from essential altruism (Trau, 2015). However, Nancy Cook (2011, p.342) cautions that unless such interactions draw upon postcolonial theory for heightened cross-cultural understanding, these movements and transcultural power relations may undermine activist projects and foster resentment. Cook's (2011) work is firmly rooted in postcolonial feminist theory, and her view differs from that held by White (2006) in that the former explores the ambivalent, contingent, multiple, and shifting discourses of power. This critique, nevertheless, is even more charged in Cook's (2007) study of the socially uncomfortable lives of women development workers in the remote Gilgit area of Pakistan. There, Cook (2007, p.5) shows how, in trying to improve the lives of women of the area, women development workers live alienated lives within a 'Western microcosm':

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> Despite the heat and inquisitive local onlookers, when the music started, the women rushed onto the dance floor in a crush. If their energy had waned towards the end of the evening, it was revived by the first few bars of the Bee Gee's disco hit *Stayin alive*. Lyn, who was singing at the top of her lungs while she danced with me, shouted over the music, 'The song is interesting for your research. It should be our theme song really. That's just what we're trying to do. Western women are just trying to stay alive in this place'. The development worker was alluding to the difficulties most White Western women experience in constructing comfortable lives and identities, where expatriate parties serve as a way of coping with stresses and uncertainties.

Cook's (2007) views resonate with those held by Barbara Heron, who studied Canadian women development workers in Africa. Indeed, Heron (2007, p.153) contends that understanding the self is the clue to the 'politics of accountability', a precursor for engagement that she invokes for some of the 'experts' before they embark. It also resonates with Andrea Cornwall's (2007, p.150) observations—based on her ethnographic fieldwork in a small southern Nigerian town—that 'Western feminist visions' and prevalent understandings of the nature and scope of 'gender relations' in gender and development narratives occlude other gendered power relationships.

Critical feminists can shift the preoccupations that developmental experts have, moving the gaze from class as the primary marker of privilege to consideration of the broader structures of power and inequality, since the everyday realities of race do create tensions at the heart of theory and practice. Pointing out these intertwined workings of social difference, Floya Anthias (1998, p.505) comments that structures of marginalisation intersect to produce inequality. As feminist geographers, we might consider how we want to engage with these structures in our thinking about the critical geography of development, and we might ask ourselves how we could construct the categories of difference and identity involving other attribution and self-attribution, or labelling and self-identity, and then construct social relations in terms of the differential positioning. As geographers, we describe in detail the settings within which our research is conducted, but seldom situate ourselves socially or geographically. Notwithstanding, our gender, race, class, and geographical location shape the research. The challenge then is adeptly to write ourselves into our studies to produce knowledge that is situated (Sundberg, 2003, p.26).

It is possible to envision a critical geography that does not necessarily erase race from its refined understanding of development. A useful concept here is intersectionality, which can help us to gain insights into the identity politics within gender work in development. The term was coined originally by Kimberley Crenshaw (1989) and addresses the fact that the experiences and struggles of women of colour fall between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse. As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992, p.143) point out, 'the Black women encounter combined race and sex discrimination' and their experiences cannot be understood under the broad, distinct, and White-referential categories of 'woman' and 'Black'. Thinking through this conceptual approach, Kathy Davis (2008, p.68) writes the following: 'Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.' This concept has since been adopted and extended by feminist scholars from varied disciplines to acknowledge the difference and diversity among women (Frankenberg, 1993; Mukhopadhyay *et al.*, 2007; Prewitt, 2013; Smedley, 2007).

Looking through the lens of intersectionality, we can bring together two important strands of feminist scholarship in critical geography. First, we should strive to understand the effects of race, class, and gender on women's identities, experiences, and struggles for empowerment (particularly the marginalisation of poor women and women of colour). Second, as critical geographers of development, we can explore how race, class, and gender are intertwined and mutually constitutive—how they interact in the social and material realities of women's lives to produce and transform relations of power. In doing so, we generate a better understanding of how race is gendered and how gender is racialised by illuminating the areas of theoretical erasures. Such an achievement will befit feminists who put forth by far the strongest critique of positivist epistemology and the so-called objectivity of western industrial scientific approach by pointing out that the following 'No research inquiry … exists outside the realms of ideology and politics … and research [is] produced in a world already interpreted by people, including ourselves, who live their lives in it'

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(England, 2005, p.287). By adopting these two stands of feminist scholarship, we will be able to shed some 'deadening habits of thought' (Ram, 1999, p.213) and deal with the structural and collective ways in which 'difference' and positionality have been constructed in development geography.

Dealing with difference seems to have been made easy by the proliferating numbers of handbooks about collaboration and participation. Within the din and bustle created by these works and ideas, it remains unclear how the power differences are actually to be negotiated. For geographers based in Australian universities, an implicit and unconscious expression of their identities—even after decades of a formal end to the official policy—remains whiteness, posing a challenge to deep collaborations across racial borders and hierarchies. They lay a natural claim to the label of global development workers who visit the set field, endowed with privileges, as professionals.

The good news is that elsewhere, feminist movements are trying to collapse these boundaries and nurture a critical feminist geography of development. To succeed, Richa Nagar (2015, p.2) suggests that we need to consider 'muddying the waters [to] confront and embrace the messiness of solidarity and responsibility'. Such collaborative solidarity work and feminist praxis can also reinvigorate and inform development research. That way, we are able to become what she describes as 'co-authors' of feminisms that span across types of scholarship and feminist praxis. Leaving segregated conversations that reinforce problematic divisions would allow us to interrogate and unlearn the analytical frameworks that emanate from privilege. Those engaged in critical feminist praxis, Nagar (2015, p.5) notes, can co-author mutually constitutive and interdependence in knowledge-making and alliance work. Collaboration as an intellectual and political tool bridges the gap between the emergence and growth of transnational feminisms on the one hand and ongoing debates over questions of voice, authority, and identity (Swarr *et al.*, 2010, p.2).

In lieu of a conclusion

A critical geography illuminated by feminist praxis would avoid the conceptual traps of essentialism, the universality of 'Third World' women's oppression, and a binary presentation of difference. Instead, a finely grained and nuanced understanding of critical feminist geography of development would draw upon the energy emanating from feminist and anti-racist thought and place the complexity of identities at the forefront of analysis and practical action. A sound starting point would be to examine our selves as pedagogues and challenge the apolitical notion that education is a neutral activity. Zoe Samudzi (2016) argues that we need to destabilise the language from 'diversity' to 'decolonisation' in the academia and not just 'include' marginalised identities without decentring the dominant narratives. Sarah Ahmed (2012) also critiques the idea of diversity as the solution of institutional whiteness. Indeed, a depoliticised diversity agenda can be a hindrance to recognising the identity politics hiding within development. The development stories need to be told by those who experience them, not by proxy or by others; a new generation of scholars is now needed to decolonise Australian geographical approaches to critical developmental studies. Members of Jafari Allen's and Ryan Jobson's (2016) 'decolonising generation' in anthropology—the cohort of Black, coloured, allied anti-racist, feminist, and political economy scholars who have critiqued the representations of Third World peoples (and women)—have yet to make substantial inroads into Australian geography. This generation troubled the conceptual and methodological precepts of other field-based social sciences (such as anthropology) by repeatedly questioning this 'signature' method. Such formative discussions on knowledge production remain largely unremarked in Australian geographies of development that tends to deal with race and racialisation of others, not internally. Attention to nurturing such a generation who might bring different agendas will animate debates on the role of Australian geography in evolving a more critical geography of development that can question white supremacy. Such critical epistemologies and pedagogies would challenge the dominant structures, establish dialogues, and ultimately create a transformative consciousness.

To cite gender and development expert Andrea Cornwall (2003, p.1337), a feminist critical geography makes 'more of difference' to enable the marginal voices to be raised and heard and to reflect on inherent and structural power inequities in the very act of development. Quoting Kandiyoti's observations on 'the blinkering and distortion that may result from the importation of Western feminist concerns and units of analysis into gender and development writing', Cornwall (2003, p.1338) also suggests that we might consider 'turning agnostic over the value of 'gender' if it obscures the diversity of social life

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and the contexts within which social categories have meaning'. Indeed, such richer ways of thinking about individuals, agency, and the inequalities, in which they live and operate, would offer radical potential to the critical development agenda for geographers. A critical scrutiny of ourselves in the world would require us to refine our feminist language so that we speak, as suggested by Cecile Jackson (2006), the interdisciplinary language of feminism and are guided by values that allow us to transcend our disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, in her research on the Asia-Pacific region, Barbara Rugendyke (2005) strongly advocates for such a transdisciplinary move on the part of Australian geographers.

Pushing this line of argument further, I end this paper by returning to the propositions offered about our radical purpose in a critically engaged feminist geography of development that deals with inequities and injustices. Focusing on this point, Charania (2011, p.365) calls on us to consider 'the global as a theoretical and political concept and place it within specific material and historical relations'. To put it in our context, a critical feminist geography of development would consider the multiple vectors of race, class, gender, and Northern status along which global subjects are imagined and constituted. Viewed through this prism, the inequities inherent in branding racialised Northern women as 'experts'—holders of development knowledge and able to intervene to bring about social justice—become more transparent. Such a politicised view would allow our students to reconceptualise developmental scholarship and practices not as 'going out there' to do development but as a process of building solidarity and collaborative relationships. Finally, for us, such a politicised and critical approach to development would help us to ground the global in feminist, anti-racist, and post-colonial scholarship in order to foreground questions of race, colonialism, and history instead of sweeping these concerns under the carpet.

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