Gender Place and Culture Rapid Response Article

Generative Spaces: Intimacy, Activism and Teaching Feminist Geographies

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Abstract

In this article, we examine responses to the March on Washington from the vantage point of Durham University, Durham, UK. As members of a course titled 'Feminist Geographies of Intimacy,' we viewed the March on Washington as a prudent and timely event with which to think 'on' and 'with' intimacy and also to consider on a more personal level the significance of the March to our own feminism/s, feminist geographies and everyday lives. This piece is a collaborative effort written together by two instructors and eight students. We reflected on how we encountered 'the March' in the classroom in order to consider the varied locations and forms of protest; the range of issues that were fought for or fought against; the role of humour and other emotions when expressing dissent and/or solidarity; and the exclusion and inclusion of bodies which did or did not protest. The March for us, therefore, became a 'generative space' in that it provided a pedagogic tool with which to explore geographies of intimacy.

Keywords

March on Washington, Feminist Geographies, Intimacy, Pedagogy, Generative

4,729 Words

Insert <<Figure One: Room 007 15th February 2017, Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham, UK.>>

Feeling Invigorated

Rachel Colls

On January 21st 2017 the Women's March on Washington took place in Washington DC (USA) and in various worldwide (real life and online) settings, enrolling over 5 million people globally in activism. I avidly watched and followed the march(es) from Gateshead, UK as they took place on television, social media, the radio, in newspapers. I felt energised by the dissent and celebration represented through banners, music, voice and affected by the sheer physicality of the presence of bodies 'being political' . My own protest. Walking down the street, holding hands with my daughter and shouting 'I am marching for women'. For me, 'the March' was an opportunity to rise from the malaise I had been feeling since Donald Trump's election win; from my dismay at the ways that women, bodies of colour, fat people had been enrolled into a presidential campaign which aligned hate with 'freedom' and

‘progress’. My facebook post status for this day read: “Invigorated and moved by the sheer force of feminism on my newsfeed. May this continue. ❤❤❤❤❤ #fight”.

On January 25th 2017 I began teaching a new third year undergraduate module entitled Feminist Geographies of Intimacy with my colleague Kate Coddington in the Geography Department, Durham University, UK. The course had been over a year in the planning and marked the re-appearance of an explicitly feminist geography module on the Durham undergraduate curriculum. Its development was inspired by Kate’s interest in the presence (and often absence) of the term ‘intimacy’ across a range of geographical research (Peterson 2017; Pratt and Rosner 2012; Valentine 2008) and my desire to engage in more research led teaching on ‘the body’. What emerged through the course was an opportunity to bring the ‘lens’ of intimacy/ies to bare on a range of concepts and debates in order to enliven, think critically and consider anew feminist geographies and our relationships to them.

The two broad aims of the course are to centre ‘intimacy’ in order to explore feminist geographical research and feminist theory and to enable students (and lecturers) to situate their own lives and experiences within the context of academic debates and vice versa. In short, we take intimacy to be:

> “ a concept that opens up the space for feminist geographical analyses that situates global processes like globalization, nationhood, neo-colonialism, and capitalism within spheres of life related to materiality, emotions, relationships, and the biopolitical. In short, feminist geographies of intimacy illuminate the connectedness and blending of spaces and scales within people’s lived, embodied and emotional experiences” (Feminist Geographies of Intimacy Course Handbook 2017).

The March on Washington, therefore, became a prudent and timely event with which to teach ‘on’ and ‘with’ intimacy and also to consider on a more personal level the significance of the

March to our own feminism/s, feminist geographies and everyday lives. It was important to us for our students to encounter 'the March' in the classroom in order to consider the varied locations and forms of protest; the range of issues that were fought for or fought against; the role of humour and other emotions when expressing dissent and/or solidarity; and the exclusion and inclusion of bodies which did or did not protest.

The March for us, therefore, became a 'generative space' in that it provided a pedagogic tool with which to explore geographies of intimacy. Moreover, 'the March' led to the call for papers for this special issue which in turn led to the idea for this article co-written with students. Our initial discussion about what to write (See Figure One) centred on considering the relationships between the space of the (feminist geography) classroom, intimacy and 'the March itself. At a later meeting we also discussed what 'generative' might mean within the context of writing about 'the March'. It was described in varied terms as 'sparking discussion', 'stimulating conversation', 'putting things in a new light', 'generating emotions', 'making feminism less abstract and yet not necessarily positive and celebratory', 'acknowledging past and present feminisms' and 'as bringing feminist activism closer to home'. It is from these discussions and conversations that we present ten reflections upon 'the March' (including this one) as articulated by those teaching and studying on the course. These reflections are personal in that they are written based on each individual's experiences and interests and vary in terms of the nature of their depth of explicit engagement with academic literature. This varied format is derived from the openness with which participation in the writing of the article was sought. Indeed, the article is presented in this way in order to reflect both the personal and collective possibilities of teaching in and with a generative space. There is no template for representing what it is to be, feel and engage with feminist, feminism and feminist geographies.

The reflections from the students are arranged under three headings in order to highlight the varied responses which were elicited through engaging with 'the March'. They also indicate the multiple ways that feminist geographical research on and about intimacy mediated those responses. In the first section entitled *Learning About Feminism/Feminist Geographies,* Casson, Jollans and Taylor consider their own relationships to feminism and feminists geographies. These are relationships which have developed over time and 'the March' has provided them with an opportunity to review and reflect upon the place of contemporary feminisms in their lives and the lives of others including peers and children and young people. The second section entitled *Bodies and Emotions* contains three reflections upon what it 'felt' like to encounter 'the March' and the kinds of bodies that were present, by drawing on and/or feeling inspired by feminist geographical work in these areas. Specifically this involves discussing the inherent exclusions of particular bodies at the March (Urquart and Carr) and subsequent representations of it and an account of being at the March in London (Burke) which details the radical potential of what was 'felt' at the March but also the tendency to reproduce particular gendered and embodied hierarchies through its reporting. The final section, *Distance/Proximity*, contains two reflections on the ways that 'the March' in Washington was 'felt' as proximate in places and bodies at a distance through its presence and circulation on social media and live streaming (Smith and Jordon). Indeed, drawing attention to the geographies and affectivities of 'the March' demonstrates in practice the building of feminist solidarity and connection across and through the global and the intimate. In the concluding section, *Intimate Geopolitics*, Coddington draws the reflections together by situating them within the context of geographical research on intimacies and discusses the potential of these forms of alliance for future feminist geographies.

We present this article as a means to ensure the presence of both 'the March' and its legacy within the pages of an academic journal for feminist geographers and to acknowledge

the valued contributions that our undergraduate students make to the generation of (new) ideas and current and future feminist geographies.

Learning About Feminism/Feminist Geographies

Dirty secret?

Helena Casson

When I first arrived at university as a fresher, I was shocked to hear a female student remark: "I hope I don't have to share a room with a feminist!" as if referring to some ferocious, bra-burning creature that might eat her alive in the middle of the night. I have considered myself a feminist from a young age, and felt rather affronted at such a commented. Yet until this moment it had never truly occurred to me what others might think, or imagine, when they hear the label "a feminist". Indeed, what particular image is generated when the term *'feminist'* is talked about? Perhaps it is an inherent problem within our language.

Almost three years on, I assumed such attitudes had long been eradicated amongst my fellow students. My degree is a generative space of learning, and has opened my eyes to an intimacy of people and opinions, forcing me to be open-minded. Yet, on the day of the Women's Marches I heard an unsettling remark from a friend. Whilst scrolling through her Instagram, she looked up and exclaimed: "isn't it reassuring to see that *normal girls* can now access feminist activism!" On such an empowering, emotional day, I also felt deflated.

If young, intelligent women still think that feminism is unsavoury, even abnormal, then where have we gone wrong? There seems to be an urgent need to understand why negativity still pollutes an idea which at its heart promotes empowerment and equality. In 2017, with a female prime minister at the helm, how is it that 'feminist' is still a dirty, shameful word? For

me, learning about feminism has taught me to challenge everyday assumptions, and specifically the language that perpetuates this perhaps unconscious idea that women have to be happy with second place.

Classroom exclusions

Alice Jollans

In reflecting on the new generative spaces brought forward by the women's march, I began to think about the generative spaces myself and others have had the opportunity to access prior to recent events. Writing from the position of a student on a "Feminist Geographies of Intimacy" course, I take a step back to question the access to this intimate and safe space of the classroom in which these topics can be discovered. After chatting to peers, it transpires that for most, the only experience of feminism has been through social media. This raises questions of inclusion and exclusion, not of the physical space of the marches, but of exclusion from education, further highlighting to me my position as a young, white, cis woman. This made me question which bodies feminism is a suitable topic for in education; solidarity and inclusion were key messages emerging from marches across the world, with all bodies, genders and identities welcome in these spaces, so why is this not the same in public education. The women's march whilst being a generative space for discussion, both online and, for myself, in the classroom, highlighted to me the lack of generative classroom spaces in which people can engage with these important debates. I use this article as a mirror to the march, emerging from it, whilst also providing me with a generative platform upon which to present my concerns, yet even in this practice I notice we are all white, female scholars. Social media ensured everyone heard about marches, but left questions open as to who is

privileged enough to be formally taught (and consequently write) about these issues. In creating new, dynamic spaces of discussion, as the women's march has in spaces of the internet, it remains to be seen whether this informal, unbound generative space can become translated into both formal education and policy.

"Kids care" – the role of children within feminism.

Natasha Taylor

In this current political climate, studying feminist geography as an undergraduate student is thrilling, unsettled and fascinating. Sitting in the classroom and taking part in impassioned debates, surrounding feminist scholarship and practice, led me to question: "*when do young people first learn about feminism?"* My first memory of feminism being mentioned at school was learning about the Suffragettes aged 11. It was incredibly fact-based and historical – I did not see how it related to the intimacies of modern-day issues. I felt very distant from it. It was not until I started University that I began to experience rich engagement with contemporary issues. Therefore for me, the role of children at the women's march was particularly striking and led me to view the march as a generative space of learning, outside the traditional, educative space of the classroom. Educating young people about gender equality is imperative in order to deconstruct gender stereotypes that are imprinted upon us from a young age. It is true that a young child would not have the comprehensive political knowledge but the children were learning to use their voices and stand up for important issues. Their signs reflected a notion of innocence, hopefulness and humour that offered a diverse message to the adult slogans: "I'm a feminist, what's your superpower?", "Kids Care" and "When Voldermort is president we need a nation of Hermiones". These endearing yet thought-provoking slogans became a key focus on social

media demonstrating the inclusive nature of the women's march as a walk for all ages and a generative space for educating young people about feminism: real issues for real people in real time.

Bodies and Emotions

Emotional spaces

Shannon Burke

The affective dimensions of emotion are gaining increasing prevalence in academic literature and social life. Scholars such as Bondi (2005) call for a reconceptualization of emotions that regards them as a relational, connective medium through which researchers and their subjects are immersed. It is this attitude towards the emotional that led me to consider the Women's March as more than merely an expression of solidarity and a way to express and relate my own feeling, but as a generative emotional space.

Approaching the March, I was sceptical. The strength of my own feeling regarding the urge to 'do something' was at odds with the online reception to the event. The response on social media to the formation of the march seemed unreflective of its ethos; with racist and transphobic comment uncriticised.

However, reaching Grosvenor Square, the atmosphere was palpable. Music, drums and chants seemed to connect the thousands of bodies gathered, demonstrating the way in which affect shapes the rhythms and intensity of lived encounter (Sedgwick 2003: 19). When

speaking to people, the emotions I had anticipated, such as anger and frustration at the need to march, appeared to be overwhelmed by excitement, empowerment and happiness.

However, in the days that followed, new emotions were brought to the forefront. Hurt that slogans from the civil rights movement had been appropriated for the march, and exclusion as the 'pussy hat' became the dominant image of the event in the US and UK. An uncritical celebration of affective emotional bonds, which seemed to tie bodies together in solidarity during the march, can lead to the failure to question to which bodies these ties were extended to. The march must therefore act as a generative space, not only of immediate emotion, but of conversation and learning regarding intersectionality and a more inclusive intimacy.

Marching Bodies

Heather Urquhart

Insert <<Figure Two: Portuguese Women's March, February 2017, photo by Bella King.>>

Like a lot of people that could not make it on the day, my access to the women's march was through social media. Images of the female body were central; featuring in speeches, on signs and as accessories. As a white cis woman that could follow the marches online, I felt intimately included in the movement from a distance, images I could relate to were at the forefront and trending globally. However, with images of vast seas of pink 'pussy hats' and signs with slogans such as "this pussy grabs back!" accompanying most headlines, social

media became a generative space in the which the march became imagined as a nearly exclusively white and cis space.

After the buzz around the women's marches had largely dissipated, my friend sent me an image of a poster she had come across advertising the women's marches in Portugal. The radical intersectional solidarity that it illustrates, along with various articles and ideas presented in the feminist geographies of intimacy course, inspired me to reflect more critically on which marching bodies were being represented. Not only does the image strike me as more successful in illustrating the agency and interconnectedness of women, it does so without bounding gender to biology and generating as many exclusions. The poster prefiguritively asserts the march as an intersectional space in which all bodies are welcome, supported, respected and to be represented.

While I feel that images of women's bodies have an important role to play in feminist movements; in reclaiming it from patriarchal gaze and control, and finding pride and comfort with intimate parts of the body that are traditionally shamed, all bodies must be included. The repetition and over-representation of white cis bodies contributed to the erasure of marching trans women and women of colour. Furthermore, spaces of contestation such as the women's marches are also transformative spaces, where the valuing of bodies in such high profile politicised spaces generates new ways of understanding gendered bodies. Therefore a failure to include images of women's bodies in an intersectional way not only perpetuates harmful and oppressive understandings of gendered bodies but also represents a missed opportunity to radically challenge them.

Uneven geographies

Alexandra Carr

As an undergraduate student at Durham University being conscious of my position in the world, the point of view from which I am writing and the ability to be reflexive and considerate of other voices is something I am increasingly being encouraged to consider, particularly in the realm of feminist geography. Thus, when studying the protest marches against the inauguration of President Trump I was immediately struck at the uneven geography of the coverage; the vast majority of media reports were generated by western-based media sources which only selected examples from the UK and US. In a postcolonial feminist critique of their failure to look beyond their own position, I hope to utilise this generative space to bring to the fore the voices which have been silenced through dominant western discourses. I thus hope this article creates an intimate space through which to re-think recent world events.

A particularly striking example is an article by Booth and Topping (2017) published in the Guardian entitled "Two million protest against Trump's inauguration worldwide". Despite placing their article in a global-scale framework, the only countries referenced outside of North America and Europe were Australia, New Zealand and Canada meaning there was a significant gap in reports from developing countries in the Global South. Moreover, the New York Daily News (2017) provided photographs of marches in Nairobi, Kenya and Accra, Ghana, but even in them, the strong presence of white, western-looking women was immediately recognisable. Hence, when signs claim "can't believe we still have to protest", I personally can't believe that the voices of those in the developing world are continuing to be unheard today. This failure to represent the views of those from outside of the west ultimately calls into question the extent to which the Women's March really was for *all*.

Distance and Proximity

The Live Stream

Katie Smith

‘Sometimes we must put our bodies where our beliefs are. Sometimes pressing send is not enough’ - Gloria Steinem, speaking at the Women’s March. The march comprised for many women a distinctly embodied experience; crowds drew together, protesters chanted in unison and women sported a range of witty signs. Described by many as likening a ‘sorority’ or ‘sisterhood’, one could describe the affective structure of the day as a feeling of hope. As Steinem went on to state ‘this is the upside of the downside. This is an outpouring of energy’. Following on from ideas which posit that emotions are not bound within the skin but in fact have the capacity to affect other bodies, I consider how these emotions may have surrounded those physically present within the crowd *and* travelled across social media to generate an intimate space. For me, social media has become a space in which personal stories can be shared with ease and this was the case on the day of the women’s march in which photographs and videos paired with written vignettes dominated Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Many question the ability of such written words to evoke an affective response, therefore I consider the ‘live stream’ as a key force in translating and transmuting feelings of hope. Real time video can reconfigure intimate relations by offering increased ‘emotional proximity’. I feel that the live stream provided an emotional closeness which permitted a markedly one way transfer of affectual energies from the crowd to those watching. As I watched Gloria speak I saw in real time the ebbs and flows of the growing crowd, I heard the

reverent silence and crescendo of cheers as she spoke and I felt my eyes sting with tears as a strange mix of both sadness and hope built up inside of me.

'Onto the streets'

Sarah Jordan

The Women's March on Washington happened to take place in the first week of my new third year module 'feminist geographies of intimacy'. Interestingly, the Women's March became this phenomenon which illustrated everything which was being taught and discussed in the classroom – the space inside our classroom was suddenly expanded and projected onto a global scale. The March itself illustrated a radical change in the way I had previously interacted with feminism; for the first time I was not reading blog posts online or retweeting the content of 'Everyday Sexism', but instead viewing the physical presence of feminist activists on the streets around the world. In the classroom we were being taught about the different feminist movements of the 20th century: the protests of the suffragettes, the second wave feminism of the 1960's. These large scale public notions of feminist activism seemed alien to me, something which I had not seen or taken part in – my experience of feminism had become captured by feminist academia, and rooted in social media accounts or discussions with my friends. The Women's March suddenly became this event which illustrated everything we had been learning about and the classroom became a space in which we analysed the March's feminisms, politics and exclusions. The March became a particularly useful example of the concept of 'intimacy' – a core theme in our feminist geography module. Whilst those who attended the March commented on the close

connections they felt with their fellow protesters, I think the most interesting example of intimacy was viewed through the way in which those who were unable to attend the March, such as myself, felt an emotional connection with those out on the street, and felt compelled to watch the March on livestream, or use social media platforms to show solidarity. The March generated an intimate space despite its physical size – this notion of intimacy truly illustrates the power of collective action, despite the many differences in contemporary feminist thought, the march firmly placed the importance of physical activism back on the feminist agenda.

Intimate geopolitics

Theory and experience

Kate Coddington

As the previous authors detailed, we all accessed the Women's March on Washington in different ways. The March forced us to confront personal histories and struggles with the term 'feminism,' as Casson, Jollans, and Taylor noted, as well as relationships that have shaped our understanding of what feminism means. As Pain and Staeheli (2014: 345) note, these relationships, or "mode[s] of interaction that may also stretch from personal to distant/ global," are central to conceptualising intimacy. The March gave us a new perspective on activism: for many of us, the March was the first time we had seen women in the streets demanding political change, as Smith and Jordan described. The process through which authors took account of the diversity of lived experiences and the "complex systems of micro and macro relationships that enmesh" in activities and institutions is also central when making use of intimacy as an analytical lens, Conlon and Hiemstra (2017: 1) conclude.

Intimate analysis that focused critical attention on the March as a lived experience also demonstrated some of the fault lines within collective politics. The bodies on display in Washington and around the globe forced us to confront understandings of feminism dominated by certain bodies and specific visual tropes, and we, particularly Burke, Urquhart, and Carr, wrestled uneasily with the absences those visual images engendered. Indeed, the same close gaze that "involves a proximity that renders tangible the intimacies and economies of the body" also made clear who was missing (Mountz and Hyndman 2006: 450). For many of us, the March was the first time we placed 'feminism' squarely within our everyday lives—the once-abstract theory was rendered concrete through our intimate connections with marches, and marchers, in different parts of the world. Together, authors described how the March became tangible in their lives by making the faraway intimate: an intimate "set of spatial relations stretching from proximate to distant" grounded feminism in *our* lives, even from across the Atlantic (Pain and Staeheli 2014: 345). The production of intimacy allowed for the creation of new generative spaces of learning, albeit partial and sometimes problematic.

Many of the authors describe precisely how the March became such an intimate space of connection: through social media. Live Facebook feeds brought marchers into our bedrooms and homes, Instagram posts documented activism by friends and family, and media coverage of the March collapsed distant marches in faraway cities into our everyday lives in the UK. We understood feminism differently as 'intimate insiders,' as once-static classroom debates took shape through social media; as Cuomo and Massaro (2016: 97) write, this dynamic evolves as the researcher becomes embedded in the field as a "key social actor." The March struck such a chord in many of us precisely because it took shape within the intimate confines of our social media profiles, our networks and connections. In doing so, the March demonstrated the importance of the intimate in global social activism: as Wright (2010: 56)

writes, intimacy takes shape precisely in the spaces where "the most private and introspective experiences of embodied self meet with the multiscalar processes for constructing social identities and the relations of power they sustain across the local-global continuum."

While each of the authors above articulate a different understanding of how the March became a generative space for thinking about intimacy, a new enmeshing of proximate and distant threads through each reflection, recentering the claims from feminist geopolitics about the importance of thinking about the co-constitution of global and intimate. The intimately geopolitical reveals not just the entanglements of 'personal' and 'political,' but also for possibilities for new politics that such connections may provide, linking our views of the March from afar with "everyday intimacies in other places and times" (Mountz and Hyndman 2006: 447). The promise of such connections, on the one hand, must be tempered with the "fascist masculinity" that provoked the March: the election of Donald Trump, and the "viscerally embodied language of sexist, racist, and xenophobic hate" that his politics engender (Gokariksel and Smith 2016: 80). Yet centering intimacy allows for sustained attention on the "bodily and gendered" politics that are key for both Trump and collective responses to his rhetoric, and we see a certain promise in the rise of collective politics that inspires a new generation of feminist activists such as the authors within this piece (Gokariksel and Smith 2016: 80). In just the Durham Geography department alone, the 'Feminist Geographies of Intimacy' course that inspired this piece has developed its own momentum: just a year after launching the course, projected enrolment has nearly doubled, suggesting that the generative space these authors discuss has the potential to reach more students and inspire more conversations.

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Figure captions

Figure One: Room 007 15th February 2017, Department of Geography, Durham University, Durham, UK.

Figure Two: Portuguese Women's March, February 2017, photo by Bella King.