

***Gender, Identity, and Place:  
Understanding Feminist Geographies,*  
by Linda McDowell, Minneapolis: University of  
Minnesota Press, 1999, 284 pp.**

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To speak about woman or man is already to place them—on the outside that is also the public built by men, and into the privacy of the inside that is also the home built for women. Linda McDowell makes geography unmistakable for feminists, and gender palpable for geographers. For those new to gender and geography, *Gender, Identity, and Place* is where to start. For McDowell, the book is her attempt to answer the question “what has gender got to do with geography?” She happily notes that the offensive undertone in the question is gone, but not the question itself (viii).

McDowell surveys the historical, intellectual, and political settings of feminist geography, which aims to show the mutuality of gender and geography in place-making. Places are not just physical or spatial surfaces; they are also about the boundaries that codify women’s and men’s “proper place.” Additionally, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality or class may disqualify a man or a woman from a certain place. Thus, one could become “out of place” (4).

McDowell looks reassuringly at globalising forces, which have raised

anxiety that they might pave the way for a placeless and meaningless world. On the contrary, however, globalising phenomena have repositioned our understanding of where we are. From there, globalisation can be approached as a “condition” for building or reviving places and localities, imparting, *vice versa*, the global with a local sense (3). Globalisation creates new places and new meanings, including the meaning of geography itself. From defining place as a fixed cartographic coordinates, geography now looks at it as “contested, fluid, and uncertain” (4), and not necessarily “stable and rooted” (5).

McDowell relocates gender in the same coordinates of “contestation, fluidity and uncertainty.” In a didactic style, she reviews major thinking and thinkers that contributed to a nuanced and discerning awareness of gender and geography. One meets the likes of Simone de Beauvoir, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Neil Smith, Pierre Bourdieu, Doreen Massey and Gillian Rose. Teasing out the blank from each and filling it up from another, McDowell assembles a collection of texts without the tone of a moralising rhetorical authority apparent in politicised analyses. Her exposition is clear, bracing and amicably provocative. Readers are, therefore, allowed to witness the changes and changing definition and politics of feminism and geography from middle to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* is organised in an “ascending spatial scale.” It begins with the ubiquitous yet overlooked “place,” the Body (Ch. 2). This proceeds to the common but “very loaded” term, the Home (Ch. 3), then to Community, City and Locality, where class and ethnicity add another boundary between women and men (Ch. 4). There is a place outside the home, the “inside” of the Workplace (Ch. 5), whose “outside” is the streets and other open spaces for pleasure or pain (Ch. 6). The next two chapters focus on the nation-state with its power to include and exclude certain women and men (Ch. 7), and how certain groups of women and men are in “transit,” and

therefore “displaced” (Ch. 8).

From class inequality between women and men, gender has shifted to a “new convergence of interest on language, symbolism, representations and meanings (7) of exclusion and discrimination, transgression and ambiguity, consolidation and fragmentation. Feminist theorising moved gender from biology to culture to discourse to the “performative,” as well as from sex to sexuality and from a singular focus on women to how men are also gendered. Upon the collapse of the imagined “international sisterhood,” it became “impossible to cover one whole womankind” (26); hence, the imperative of feminist *geographies*. After all, women are actually separated and differentiated by places and locations.

McDowell reframes the body as a site geographically inscribed. She makes us aware that a geography book with hills or valleys as cover is an ingenuous portrayal of a “naked woman’s body” traceable to women-nature conflation (45). As a parallel, home is where men are hidden from the public eye. Home is equally a man’s place; they return there for rest and recreation (74).

Cities, cosmopolitan and inclusive though they might be, have a narrow approach to where women should be. Their built environment is typically marked by women’s absence in structures erected for male power, which are also closed for lower-class men and those with outlawed sexualities. The pub, the “public house,” is not really public while the maternity ward wards off paternity (96). “Public” was supposed to be an encompassing concept, along with citizenship and human rights. In practice, it becomes expedient and unquestioned grounds for exclusion.

“Multiple users” in the public implies *publics*, and this demands a multiple definition of the term itself (125), which McDowell derives from literary and cultural studies. Baudelaire’s flâneur, the detached male observer of the city, was challenged by Elizabeth Wilson’s flâneuse. Wilson suggested that such a female figure was also present in modern (Western) cities. The “flâneuse had walked visibly and anonymously on

city streets on the way to work. She shopped and gazed at consumables—just like the male flâneur” (154-155). Thus, the flâneur was reconfigured into a “feminized male” (156). In Liz Heron’s edited collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction, the independent and hardworking women workers emerged as “masculinised female,” or androgynous figures (155). McDowell leaves the readers wondering about an androgynous place. Perhaps commercial spaces purvey androgyny. Here, “the spectacle of desiring, fluid and ambiguously gendered subjects” (163) embody the spirit of consumption.

In rural settings, gender and class ambiguity is also apparent—in bodies stripped of clothes that usually mark gender and social ranking. Arguably, McDowell sees place as emanating from bodies that occupy it, and without bodies, a place is meaningless. Moreover, the body operates architecturally: it conquers space with gender-bending techniques as its building principle.

The nation-state, which Anderson argued arose from a community of readers of literary fiction and newspapers (198), is the prevailing master plan for one’s racial or ethnic identity. It is heavily drawn from and bordered by gender norms; the nation is the female to be protected and defended by a strong and commanding male state. In the family of nations, the nation-state is a heterosexual couple. As with the others, McDowell imagines Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* with gender variables.

We await Anderson’s revision as he did for the second edition, where he admits overlooking spaces as “necessary coordinates in thinking about nationalism.” By that time, he might be imagining several places and spaces--and genders--brought about by an escalating movement of people across the globe in recent times. Many of these people “have been forced to move,” so that their “normal” life is the opposite of settled, fixed and permanent. Among them are the migrants whose movements are extensively documented, except for “the journey itself” (203).

Uncovered by feminist historians is the multitude of unknown women

travelers and explorers who reached a “foreign land” as wives, tourists, paid workers or pilgrims (206). If one accounts for the history of women’s travels, one might see them outside the home, which is really very public, for it serves as the “local ground of collective life” (208). This is the implication of McDowell’s enthusiasm for looking at travel as the locus of analysis. Travel opens more spaces and locations, but they are unreachable if one departs from a “static and fixed” sense of place. Travel foregrounds a locality that is not strictly local; outside boundaries constitute it, hence the idea of the local with a global sense. A geographer with such a sense will see the local as also the “articulation of global processes” (209). In other words, the global localises as much as the local globalises.

From a feminist geographical perspective, the local with a sense of the global creates not an “international sisterhood,” but a “cartography of struggle” that maps the uneven situation of women around the world, as well as alliances and linkages (214). This is particularly relevant to third-world feminists, who are already in the first world where they continue the politics of equality and identity.

McDowell’s position on travel and all the “fluidity” it implies is upsetting to those with “fixed and static” predispositions. Calmly and patiently, she points to its continuing relevance as well as limitations. Attuned to disparities and inequalities of women and men across and within places, gender nonetheless constructed a world in binary opposition. Therefore, she posits a rethinking: that a static analysis militates against understanding, and that the postmodern vocabularies that inspired her discussions attempt for the opposite. Postmodernism became fashionable for its “defiance” of modernity’s mind-set on singularity, linearity and stability of a subject. McDowell uses it for what it does: showing the limits of one’s analysis and politics.

The political project of a feminist geographer is not to look for a woman, or a man, but to discover a plurality of genders in a place multiplied or re-

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placed by contestation, fluidity and uncertainty. In other words, s/he draws not one world map, but maps of the world's genders.