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29 Producing Feminist Geographies: Theory, Methodologies and Research Strategies

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Feminist geographers have been pivotal in the unfolding and ongoing debates about research methods and methodology in human geography. Debates are an important part of knowledge creation, and feminist geographies have not (and do not) all agree on the best way to produce feminist understandings of the world. In part this is because there is not a singular feminist geography, but rather several strands existing simultaneously. So there are multiple, even competing visions of feminist geographies, with disagreements, negotiations and compromises around different approaches to practising and producing feminist geographies. That said, there are commonalities among the strands of feminist geography. At the heart of feminist geographies are analyses of the complexities of power, privilege, oppression and representation, with gender foregrounded as the primary social relation (although gender is increasingly understood as constructed within a multiplicity of social relations of differentiation – i.e. intersectionality). Feminist geographers expose the (often naturalized) power relations in past and contemporary sociospatial constructions of gender. And feminist geographers share the political and intellectual goal of socially and politically changing the world they seek to understand.

Feminist research challenges and redefines disciplinary assumptions and methods, and develops new understandings of what counts as knowledge. In this chapter I discuss one of the most important aspects of 'the feminist challenge': our debates about methods (techniques used to collect and analyse data) and methodologies (the epistemological or theoretical stance taken towards a particular research problem). The task of the first feminist geographers was to recover women in human geography and to address geographers' persistent erasure of gender differences. Thus early feminist scholarship closely focused on challenging male dominance, making women's lives visible and counting and 'mapping' gender inequalities. Debates about methods and methodologies were about the usefulness for feminists of existing (gender-blind, sexist, malestream) methods of inquiry, especially quantitative methods, standardized surveys and 'traditional' interviews conducted 'objectively'. Debates focused on questions such as 'Is there a feminist method?' and 'Which method is most feminist?' 'Feminist' here is *adjectival*, in the sense of whether certain research methods are 'feminist' in the way that some are 'quantitative' or 'qualitative'. Qualitative methods, especially in-depth, interactive interviews, were generally considered best suited to the goals and politics of feminist analysis (Reinharz, 1979; Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1993). In their recollections about these early feminist debates, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993) revisit

those earlier positions and suggest that on reflection they were not really about method *per se*, but about sexist methodologies and exclusionary knowledge creation. In fact they and others argue that there is nothing inherently feminist in either quantitative or qualitative *methods*, but that what is 'feminist' is the *epistemological stance* taken towards methods and the uses to which researchers puts them. No single method provides privileged access to the 'truth', and as it becomes less imperative (and less expedient) to associate certain methods with particular epistemologies, there has been a move towards a position where the choice of appropriate method is taken depending on the research question being asked.

The argument I make in this chapter is that feminists' contributions to research practices in human geography are generally more about epistemology (ways of knowing the world), methodology and politics than about inventing new research methods. In the first section I discuss the various epistemological claims feminist scholars make about research methods and methodologies. In the second section I turn to the methods feminist geographers rely on to produce and represent feminist understandings of the world.

Methods and Methodology in Feminist Geographies

Since its inception in the 1970s, feminist geography has deconstructed the 'taken-for-granted' and offered profound and influential critiques of conventional concepts and categories in human geography (see Chapter 4). Across the academy, feminist scholars challenged conventional wisdom that 'good research' requires impartiality and 'scientific' objectivity. Since then, feminist scholars have continued to challenge conventional wisdom and to develop feminist approaches to knowledge creation. In the past couple of decades, feminists have produced a sizeable literature about feminist methods and methodologies, and geographers have published many book chapters and journal articles on this topic (e.g. special issues of *ACME*, 2003 and *The Professional Geographer*, 1994, 1995; Moss, 2001, 2002; Sharp, 2005). In this section I describe the major elements of the discussion regarding the epistemological claims and politics of practising feminist research that are intertwined in the ongoing process of feminist knowledges creation and feminists' commitment to progressive research practices. (Much of my description of this discussion is about face-to-face research encounters, but similar arguments are made about other methods: see Gillian Rose, 2012 on visual cultures and visual methodologies and Kate Boyer, 2004 on archives and feminist historical geography.)

Objectivity and situated knowledges

The 'western industrial scientific approach values the orderly, rational, quantifiable, predictable, abstract and theoretical: feminism spat in its eye' (Stanley and Wise, 1993: 66). Early on, feminists raised suspicions that 'good research' could only be produced by unbiased 'experts' seeking universal truths by using value-free data where 'the facts speak for themselves'. Research informed by the 'western industrial scientific approach' is anchored by a logical positivist epistemology of objectivity. Positivism, what it values (rationality, etc.) and the search for universal truths and all-encompassing knowledge

constitute an approach Donna Haraway describes as an all-seeing 'god-trick ... seeing everything from nowhere' (1991: 189). No research inquiry, whether positivist or indeed humanist or feminist, exists outside the realms of ideology, representation and politics; research is never value-free (even 'hard science' research). Instead, feminists understand research to be created in a world already continually being interpreted by people, including ourselves, who live their lives in it.[1] By becoming 'researchers', whether physicists or feminists, we cannot put aside common-sense understandings of the world. Instead, feminists argue, 'good research' must be sensitive to how values, power and politics frame what we take to be 'facts', how we develop a particular research approach and what research questions we ask and what we see when conducting research.

Since the early 1980s, feminist critiques of objectivity have been enriched by feminist science studies scholars (e.g. Fox-Keller, 1985; Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991). Evelyn Fox-Keller argues that traditional western thought rests upon an ontology (a theory of what is, and the relations between what is) of self/other opposition, and a binary opposition between (male) objectivity and (female) subjectivity. Her alternative is a *feminist relational ontology* generated from self–other mutuality and interdependence, and of continual process (rather than stasis). Haraway argues for an *embodied feminist objectivity* where both researchers and participants are appreciated for their *situated knowledges* and *partial perspectives*. Situated knowledges means that there is no one truth waiting to be discovered; that knowledges are situational, marked by the contexts in which they are produced, by their specificity, limited location and partiality.

Researcher–researched relationship and power relations

Sensitivity to power relations lies at the very heart of feminists' discussions about methods and methodologies. Traditional objectivist social science methods (be they quantitative or qualitative) position researchers as detached omniscient experts in control of the research process, the (passive) objects of their research and themselves (remaining unbiased by being detached, uninvolved and emotionally distant). Feminist relational ontology and embodied feminist objectivity challenge this strict dichotomy between object and subject. In feminist research, especially in face-to-face fieldwork, the researched are not passive; they are knowledgeable agents accepted as 'experts' of their own experience. Instead of attempting to minimize interaction (in order to minimize observer bias), feminists deliberately and consciously seek interaction. Feminist researchers try to reduce the distance between ourselves and the researched by building on our commonalities, working collaboratively and sharing knowledge. By seeking research relationships based on empathy, mutuality and respect, feminists focus on the informant's own understanding of their circumstances and the social structures in which they are implicated (rather than imposing our explanations; Nagar and Swarr, 2010). In practice this usually means being flexible in question-asking, and shifting the direction of the interview according to what the interviewee wants to or is able to talk about. As a research strategy this may provide deeper understandings of the subtle nuances of meaning that structure and shape the everyday lives of informants, and politically it grounds feminist knowledge and politics in people's everyday experiences.

Poststructural feminist theorizing sees researchers and the researched as caught up in complex webs of power and privilege. Much feminist research is about marginalized groups, and there is a great deal of social power associated with being a scholar. Thus research strategies based on an embodied feminist objectivity have the potential to minimize the hierarchical relationship between researcher and interviewee, and to avoid exploiting less powerful people as mere sources of data. At the same time, the research encounter is now understood as being structured by both the researcher and the researched, both of who construct their worlds. Poststructural understandings of the researcher–researched relation see it as one where both discursively produce 'the field' and create a co-produced project. This idea is also useful when considering the power relations and research relation in feminist geographers' interviews with elites (see, for example, McDowell, 1998; England, 2002). In this case, we are in positions of less power relative to the researched, who are accustomed to having a great deal of control and authority over others, but nevertheless the researcher and researched are still engaged in co-created research.

Positionality and reflexivity

Among the most influential elements in feminists' theorizing about the research process are the concepts of positionality and reflexivity (England, 1994; Rose, 1997; Sultana, 2007). They raise important questions about the politics and ethics of research, and have been highly influential concepts both within and beyond feminist geographies. Positionality is about how people view the world from different embodied locations. The partial situatedness of knowledge means whether we are researchers or participants, we are differently situated by our social, intellectual and spatial locations, by our intellectual history and our lived experience, all of which shape our understandings of the world and the knowledge we produce. Positionality also refers to how we are positioned (by ourselves, by others, by particular discourses) in relation to multiple, intersectional, relational social processes of difference (gender, class, 'race'/ethnicity, age, sexuality and so on), which also means we are differently positioned in hierarchies of power and privilege. Our positionality shapes our research, and may inhibit or enable certain research insights (see Moss, 2001, where geographers discuss their autobiographies in relation to their research). Positionality has been further extended to include considering others' reactions to us as researchers. As researchers we are an embodied and integral part of the research process (rather than external, detached observers). So both our embodied presence as researchers and the participants' responses to us mediate the information collected in the research encounter.

In a research context, reflexivity means the self-conscious, analytical scrutiny of oneself as a researcher. Within feminist methodologies, reflexivity extends to a consideration of power and its consequences within the research relationship. Gillian Rose (1997) remarks that being reflexive cannot make everything completely transparent and we cannot fully locate ourselves in our research, because we never fully understand (or are fully aware of) our position in webs of power. Her concerns remind us to constantly interrogate our assumptions and remember that knowledge is always partial, including that about ourselves. Nevertheless, reflexivity gets us to think about the consequences of our interactions with the researched. For instance, is what we might find out actually worth the intrusion into other people's lives? Are we engaging in appropriation or even theft of other people's knowledges? However, while reflexivity can make us more aware

of power relations, and asymmetrical or exploitative research relations, it does not remove them, so we alone have to accept responsibility for our research.

Politics and accountability

Feminist geographers argue that we must be accountable for our research, for our intrusions into people's lives and for our representations of those lives in our final written products. We should acknowledge our *own* positionality and our locations in systems of privilege and oppression, and be sure to write this into our papers. As Juliana Mansvelt and Lawrence Berg argue, 'The process of writing constructs what we know about our research but it also speaks powerfully about who we are and where we speak from' (2010: 343). We must be accountable for the consequences of our interactions with those we research (and now many university ethics review boards require this). This is acutely important where our research might expose previously invisible practices to those who could use that information in oppressive ways, even when our goal was to make systems of oppression more transparent to the oppressed (Katz, 1994; Kobayashi, 1994; more recently, in the context of participatory action research [PAR], see for example kinpaisby-hill [2011]). For example, it was common that the first researchers studying lesbian communities did not reveal the location of their fieldwork (see, for example, Valentine, 1993), instead giving the locations pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality, to respect both the participants' desire not to be 'outed' and their concerns about potential reprisals, including physical attack.

Feminist geographers share the political and intellectual goal of socially and politically changing the world our research seeks to understand. The popularity of reflexivity and positionality in research raises serious political and ethical dilemmas – a crisis, even – about working with groups we do not belong to. This raises difficult questions about the politics of location (both social and geographical, including white women from the west researching women from/in the global south). This has been an especially contentious and even painful debate for feminists, both inside and outside the academy. Some academic feminists have abandoned research projects involving groups to which they have no social claim, leaving them to those with 'insider status'. This discussion escalated just as (or because?) feminist geographers were becoming increasingly committed to taking account of the diverse positionings of women (and men and children) across a wide range of social and spatial settings.

This impasse has been especially troubling for those feminists wishing to address multiple and cross-cutting positions of privilege and oppression, who are committed to effect change. However, Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr (2010) suggest the gap might be bridged via 'a trananational praxis that is critically aware of its own historical, geographical, and political locations, even as it is invested in alliances that are created and sustained through deeply dialogic and critically self-reflexive processes of knowledge production and dissemination' (2010: 3). Building alliances and commonalities, whether locally or transnationally, does not mean ignoring difference or dismissing the experiences of less powerful groups: quite the opposite. Rather, it means building on the notion that everyone is entangled in multiple webs of privilege and oppression, so that there are really few pure oppressors or pure oppressed. Materially engaged transformative (and transnational) politics can emerge from accepting that privilege results from historical and contemporary conditions of oppression and exclusion, and people are variously located in the resulting webs of power. This means for

instance that whether I acknowledge it or not, as a white woman I participate in and benefit from white privilege. For those of us with more social privilege (including being scholars), rather than agonizing over our culpability, it may be more productive to address our complicity, to strive to work hard to unlearn our privilege and make our lives sites of resistance (Peake and Kobayashi, 2002). Feminists argue that we are committed to the political and intellectual goals not only of exposing power and privilege, but also of transforming them. An important part of that is to understand how the world works, and to theorize how power operates and expose it, because this means we are better able to gauge the possibilities for transformation and provide situated knowledges that can most effectively produce change.

Producing Feminist Understandings

In this section I discuss how methods are employed by feminist geographers to produce and represent feminist understandings of the world. Generally methods are described as either qualitative or quantitative, so I begin with broad definitions of each. Then I will provide some examples of how methods are used in feminist geographers' research (see Box 30.1). Finally I address the so-called 'quantitative–qualitative divide'.

Box 30.1 Some Examples of Qualitative and Quantitative Research In Feminist Geography

An example of qualitative feminist research is Richa Nagar's work on the gendered and classed communal and racial politics in South Asian communities in postcolonial Dar es Salaam. Richa's fieldwork in Tanzania included analysing documents from Hindi and caste-based organizations and the Tanzanian government; gathering 36 life histories and 98 shorter interviews with Hindi and Ithna Asheri (Muslim) women and men of South Asian descent; and conducting participant observations of communal places, homes and neighbourhoods. In her paper 'I'd rather be rude than ruled' (Nagar, 2000), she tells the stories of four economically privileged women, and focuses on their spatial tactics and subversive acts against the dominant gendered practices and codes of conduct in communal public places. Another example of qualitative feminist research is Gillian Rose's research about interpreting meanings in landscapes and visual representations. Gillian investigates visual culture, especially contemporary and historical photographs (see her 2012 book on reading visual culture). In her book (Rose, 2010) about family photographs she explores the idea that the meanings of photographs are established through their uses, in this instance being a 'proper mother', and the production of domestic space that extends beyond their house to include, for example, relatives elsewhere (in other places and other times). She conducted semi-structured interviews with two different sets of 14 (28 total) white middle-class mothers with young, able-bodied children. The women showed Gillian family photos, and she took note of where and how the women stored and displayed the photos.

Both Richa and Gillian are posing 'why?' questions, and seeking to understand meanings within broader social processes and structures. Richa looks at the creation and modification of social identity in a context of rapid political and economic change, while Gillian explores the multiple meanings of mothering, family and domestic space. In each project the samples are small (four women in Richa's case, 14 in Gillian's) and the research strategies were based on the participants' own understanding of their circumstances, which Richa and Gillian interpret in relation to broader

social structures and processes. Also, as is common in qualitative research, they write about the research using extensive quotes from the participants, and detailed textual descriptions of the cultural codes and webs of significance evident in and beyond the research setting.

In feminist geography, quantitative methods are frequently employed in what can broadly be described as accessibility studies (such as access to child care, jobs and social services). For example, in a series of papers, Selima Sultana (2007) uses US census data for the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) to measure quantifiable aspects of intra-urban labour markets (e.g. commuting times). In a 2005 article, she uses the 2000 5% Public Use Micro Sample data (PUMS) to explore jobs–housing balance via the commuting patterns of dual-earner versus single-earner married couple households in 31 sub-regions that make up the Atlanta MSA. Using an analysis of variance (ANOVA – a statistical test for significant differences in the means of several groups) and multivariate regression analysis (a technique that determines the statistical relationship among a set of variables), she shows that a variety of socioeconomic variables are important in explaining commuting patterns.

A second example of employing quantitative methods in feminist geography is Sara McLafferty's ongoing research on geographic inequalities in health and social wellbeing in the US. In an earlier piece with Linda Timander (McLafferty and Timander, 1998), Sara explored the elevated incidence of breast cancer in West Islip, New York, using individual address-level data from a survey of 816 women (39 with a history of breast cancer, 777 without). The survey data were collected by a group of women in West Islip. Sara and Linda employed statistical techniques (chi-squared and logistic regression analysis) to analyse the relationship between breast cancer and 'known risk factors' (such as a family history of breast cancer). For those women where 'known risk factors' did not explain the incidence of breast cancer, Linda and Sara used GIS to analyse spatial clustering to see whether local environmental exposure was a factor.

In these two examples, the authors ask: 'how many?' Selima counts married (heterosexual) Atlanta couples in dual-earner versus single-earner households and explores various census variables associated with those households; Sara asks how many women have breast cancer in specific locations on Long Island. They also show how quantitative techniques can be applied to primary (an individual level, large survey) and secondary (standardized census categories) data. Each study involves measuring some quantifiable occurrence (commuting time and the incidence of breast cancer) and employing spatial statistics and mapping.

Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods

Quantitative research focuses on questions like 'how many?' and 'how often?' and seeks to *measure* general patterns among *representative samples* of the population. *Statistical techniques* are used to analyse data – for example, descriptive statistics, spatial statistics and geographic information systems (GIS). The data are often secondary data (usually collected in an 'official' capacity, like the census) and are based on standardized measures (again like those in the census). Primary data may also be used; the researcher collects their own data usually based on large samples using highly *structured questionnaires* containing easily quantifiable categories (see Box 30.1 for examples).

Qualitative research focuses on the question 'why?' and seeks to decipher experiences within broader webs of meanings and within sets of social structures and processes. Techniques are interpretive and meanings centred and include *oral methods* (e.g. semi-structured interviews, focus groups and oral histories), *participant observation* and *textual analysis* (of, for example, diaries, historical documents, maps, landscapes,

films, photographs and print media). Samples are usually small and are often *purposefully selected* (to relate to the research topic), and if oral methods are used it is not uncommon for researchers to ask informants to help find other participants (known as snowballing) (see Box 30.1 for examples).

In some instances, feminist understandings of the world are best produced with a politically informed combination of research methods, variously described as *mixed methods, multimethods* or *triangulation.* In human geography we commonly think of mixed methods as mixing data obtained using qualitative and quantitative methods as complementary strategies. For example, in their extensive study of gender, work and space in Worcester, Massachusetts, Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt (1995) sought to more fully understand the complex links between domestic responsibilities, occupational segregation, job search and residential choice. Their research involved statistical analyses and mapping of census data; and the quantitative and qualitative analyses of semi-structured questionnaires gathered in interviews with 700 working-age women and men from across Worcester, and 150 employers and 200 employees in four different Worcester communities.

'Mixed methods' also refers to mixing methods or variety of 'data' within a broadly qualitative or quantitative research project. In the examples, in Box 30.1, Richa Nagar's Dar es Salaam project included oral histories, interviews and participant observation, and Sara McLafferty's breast cancer project involved statistical techniques and GIS. Mixed methods can also involve a research design with different investigators coming at the research question from different fields of research or epistemological positions. For example, Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt describe how their collaboration was based not only on their 'shared interest in feminism and urban social geography but in our differences: one of us having roots in transportation and quantitative geography; the other in housing and cultural geography' (1995: xiv). Mixed methods can allow all these sorts of differences to be held in productive tension, and may keep our research sensitive to a range of questions and debates.

The quantitative–qualitative divide?

The sorts of epistemological claims I described in the previous section mean that feminists do tend to use qualitative rather than quantitative methods. But Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1993: 188) point out that even in the early 1980s, few feminist scholars called for an outright rejection of quantitative methods, and they urged feminists to use any and every means possible to produce critically aware feminist understandings of the world. Since the mid-1990s there has been a spirited discussion among feminist geographers about employing quantitative methods, but adapting them as appropriate (The *Professional Geographer,* 1995; *Gender, Place and Culture,* 2002). Vicky Lawson argued that 'feminist scholars can and should employ quantitative techniques within the context of relational ontologies *to answer particular kinds of questions*' (1995: 453, emphasis in the original).

Some feminist geographers argue that certain longstanding feminist critiques of quantitative methods need reconsidering. For example, one criticism is that quantitative research can only analyse a particular cross-section in time (e.g. the census), whereas qualitative research captures historical and social contexts. However, innovation in quantitative techniques and GIS blurs this distinction (Elwood et al., 2011). For example, event history analysis involves longitudinal studies and

documents the historical sequencing of events to predict statistical probabilities of a particular event generating a particular action. Linda Peake and Karen de Souza (2010) suggest that the disavowal of quantitative techniques for feminist purposes, notably in transnational projects, may reinscribe a global north–south divide, as feminist activists from the global south may want statistics about their lives in order to press political claims and to obtain their own research funding. Certainly there are claims that critically aware, politically sensitive quantitative methodologies are possible. For instance, Sara McLafferty (2002) describes how she was approached by the West Islip women for help in analysing the breast cancer survey and conducting further statistical analysis (described in Box 30.1). Thus, Sara argues, GIS has potential as a tool for feminist activism and women's empowerment. And Mei-Po Kwan (2002), in making the case for feminist GIS (especially 3D geovisualization methods), argues that converting quantitative data into visual representations 'allows, to a certain extent, a more interpretative mode of analysis than what conventional quantitative methods would permit' (2002: 271). Elwood et al. (2011), meanwhile, argue that a key contribution of critical GIS has been to demonstrate that qualitative data, including ethnographies and volunteered geographic information (VGI), can be incorporated into geographical technologies and used to further social justice goals.

My descriptions of qualitative and quantitative methods at the beginning of this section were represented as dichotomies, which is often the way they are represented in method/methodology debates. Potent dichotomies structure our concepts of research (object/subject, researcher/researched), and an enduring dualism for feminist geographers is the quantitative–qualitative divide. But disagreements over methods are often really disagreements about epistemology and methodologies, and the use to which the methods are put. Quantitative and qualitative methods do have different strengths and weaknesses, but rather than a clear epistemological break between quantitative and qualitative methods, there is a fundamental link between the two, because one often involves an element of the other. For instance, interview data can be coded using both qualitative and quantitative techniques, and the same dataset can be analysed using qualitative and quantitative analyses (such as Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt's project described above). An example is Charlotte Wrigley-Asante's study of women's empowerment and credit-based poverty reduction programmes in Dangme West, Ghana (Wrigley-Asante, 2012). She interviewed 402 women and the resulting data included quantitative indicators (e.g. savings level and access to credit) and qualitative information about, for instance, their life histories and experiences with the programmes. Rather than assuming that qualitative and quantitative research methods are mutually exclusive, it is more productive to think of methods forming a continuum from which we pick those best suited to the purpose of our enquiry. So although qualitative methods tend to be favoured by feminist scholars, feminist geographers have employed a range of methods, including quantitative techniques, GIS and 'newer' qualitative techniques such as textual and visual analysis.

Conclusion

Today, feminist geography strides confidently across human geography's terrain. Because of feminist theorizing, it is now common (and even expected) for all human geographers to locate themselves socially, politically and intellectually within their

research. Human geographers are now likely to consider themselves as producing partial, embodied, situated knowledges rather than fixed, universal truths. Feminist geographies have transformed human geographies. Feminist reconceptualizations have also transformed our understandings of ways of knowing and seeing the world. So feminist geographers have not only extended human geography's research agendas; they have redefined what human geographers do and how they do it. Looking to the future, feminist geographers will continue to produce new understandings and to politically engage in the progressive use of research. But we do need to be more open to 'negative' findings and to evidence that runs counter to our point of view. Like Susan Hanson, I hope 'to see us devise methods and methodologies that maximize the chance that we will see things we were not expecting to see, that leave us open to surprise, that do not foreclose the unexpected' (1997: 125). By thinking critically about epistemologies, methodologies and methods, feminist geographers have created richer, more complex human geographies; feminist meditations on the research process have transformed the way human geography is practised, produced and taught. By continuing to ask incisive questions and by seeking to develop the very best approaches to knowledge creation in the future, the explanatory power of feminist geography remains strong and compelling.

NOTE

1 I use 'we' and 'us' throughout this chapter, but not because I speak for all feminist geographers (or you the reader!). I am also mindful of concerns raised by, for instance, women from the global south who argue they are excluded from the 'we' of many feminisms (for example, see Nagar and Swarr, 2010). I avoid the third person because it distances me from what I am writing, and I am certainly not (and do not wish to be) disconnected from feminist knowledge creation (Mansvelt and Berg, 2010).

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