

## **Geographies of Women**

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**Beebe, Kathryn, and Angela Davis, eds. *Space, Place and Gendered Identities: Feminist History and the Spatial Turn*. London: Routledge, 2015. x + 158 pages. ISBN 978-1-138-83049-3. Hb. £110.**

Contributors of the volume *Space, Place and Gendered Identities: Feminist History and the Spatial Turn* present their work in various fields of the humanities and social sciences to compile a thought-provoking analysis of the relationship between built, or geographical, environments and the construction of gender. Thereby, it complements the fruitful scholarly discussion on geographical and architectural spaces following the so-called “spatial turn” in the 1980s, which is concerned with how different interpretations of gendered, racial, and class identities are played out in various spaces. Reading the volume, one can explore the historic house, the Canadian lesbian “scene,” the Irish farmhouse, the eighteenth century ladies’ closet, the domestic space created by the wireless, the home studios of the Suffrage Atelier, the chancel and the sanctuary of the Anglican Church, as well as the Catholic sickroom. Relying on some of the key theoretical notions in spatial studies, the authors of the volume offer a close analysis of these spaces to demonstrate how political and social meanings of gender are produced and reproduced in them. They also suggest that the seemingly fixed physical architecture of such spaces often leaves room for a more dynamic and challenging interpretation of gender roles and power relationships. The different authorial approaches—ranging from the anthropological to the historical and socio-cultural—open up an interesting dialogue between the texts, which also makes the book a rich contribution to the already voluminous body of publications in spatial studies.

In the introduction, the editors highlight some of the major theoretical milestones since the “spatial turn,” and outline how built and geographical environments affect our lived experience of gender, which gives points of orientation even to those who are relatively new to this field. They also attempt to provide a theoretical framework by exploring some notions which have been central in spatial studies: Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, Henri Lefebvre’s spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation. Alison Oram, for instance, demonstrates how historic houses as museums bear heterotopic features, revealing the various meanings attached to space through time, and

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highlighting the often contradictory nature of these meanings. Timothy Willem Jones relies on Lefebvre's theory in examining the spaces of the Anglican Church, to show how changing a spatial practice—the ordination of women into the sacred order—entails changing the way gendered and spiritual identities are constructed within and outside church walls.

The texts focus on different aspects of the interaction between space and gendered identities. The first two essays deal with the problematic presence of lesbians in traditionally heteronormative spaces. Oram discusses how ideas of heteronormative sexuality and, based on this, the traditional family structure are contested within the heterotopic space of the historic house. She analyzes the various presentations of two heritage homes, Shibden Hall and Sissinghurst Castle, whose most renowned owners had same-sex relationships (Anne Lister, Vita Sackville-West, and her husband, Harold Nicolson). She makes use of Foucault's understanding of heterotopias as being linked to "slices of time" to show how these historic houses reveal paradoxical views of lesbian and gay subjectivities, thereby also challenging ideas of heteronormative sexuality and family structure. Liz Millward takes a larger scope for her analysis, examining Canadian women's attempts of place-making, namely, creating a network of places where members of the lesbian and gay communities can socialize and discover themselves. Instead of urban place-making, she focuses on the specific challenges faced by lesbians living in rural Canada. She argues that defeating the vast physical distances characteristic of the place, various outreach initiatives were crucial for the lesbian community to create an intellectual, emotional, and political "scene," which allowed them to make their imagined community a real and lived experience.

The analysis of the physical and symbolic division of the private and the public is the focus of three other essays. Leonie Hannan, for instance, questions the place of the ladies' closet as the most private center of the family home of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by looking into women's letter writing practices. Studying a variety of correspondences from this era, she concludes that contrary to some assumptions that women's letter-writing mostly followed the patterns of "how-to" manuals, the letters discussed reveal a great thematic variety and intellectual depth. She claims that letter writing allowed women to reach beyond the domestic confines of the home, and join public networks for the exchange of political opinion, scholarly knowledge, and creative thought, which transforms the domestic interior from a static setting into a facilitator of women's public outreach. Maggie Andrews comes to a similar conclusion in her discussion of a medium which appeared two

centuries later: the radio. She states that the introduction of the wireless created a controversial cultural space, which, on the one hand, represented and reproduced traditional ideas of domesticity by structuring the airtime around women's daily routine, focusing on domestic topics, as well as by using a domestic mode of address. On the other hand, she points out, the wireless also challenged the idea of domestic isolation as it symbolically brought the world into the family home, for example, by allowing women to educate themselves. Tara Morton also explores a set of places where the ideas of domesticity are contested in the Suffrage Atelier, a group of artists who produced suffrage propaganda between 1909 and 1914, and whose headquarters were located in various artists' homes. She explains how these domestic spaces were used and reorganized so that they could fulfill a political function. Thus, while these domestic spaces continued to serve as the private homes for the artists, they also gained a new meaning by furthering women's attempts to reclaim the public sphere.

There is a thought-provoking link among three essays which focus on the question of power relationships and women's agency in relation to their use of various spaces. Katie Barclay, taking an anthropological approach, looks into the utilization of domestic space in the farmhouse in nineteenth-century rural Ireland. She argues that the various rituals connected to diverse spaces within the house, with special focus on the kitchen table as the center of the domestic realm, mostly reproduced patterns of patriarchal domination. Yet, women's use of space based on their knowledge of its symbolic meanings also allowed them to exercise a limited amount of power. There is an even closer cohesion between the last two texts in the volume, which deal with women's presence in sacred places. Jones concentrates on the debate over the ordination of women as priests in the Church of England, which was, to a great extent, a debate over the use of sacred space. The idea of women's inclusion into spaces set apart for sacred practices brought to the surface a set of controversial assumptions underlying the traditional division of church space, such as the sexual double standard associating women with purity and men with carnality. While Jones discusses the limitations women experienced in sacred spaces, Carmen M. Mangion writes about women's potential empowerment through their work in the Catholic sickroom. She defines the sickroom as a crisis heterotopia, a sacred space set apart from the rest of the world, which, acting as spaces of transition for the ill, combined medical treatment with the possibility of spiritual purification. Mangion explores how women as nurses were active participants in the rituals

connected to these transitions. Thus, the sickroom became an empowering space for them, endowing them with a sense of religious agency.

The reader of this volume can freely explore geographically distant spaces, ranging from the urban to the rural, from the public to the domestic, from the sacred to the profane. A merit of the articles is that they reveal the possible interconnectedness of these spaces, looking into how they are all implicated in the construction of political meanings of gender. Furthermore, they also examine spatial theories on a micro level, showing them “at work” in specific social environments. By analyzing closely the use of these spaces, the volume offers a dynamic interpretation of space, whereby meanings of gender are constantly produced and reproduced.

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