

Women Graduate Students of Colour in Geography: Increased Ethnic and Racial Diversity, or Maintenance of the Status Quo?

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This paper explores the experiences of women of colour graduate students in human geography. I begin by drawing upon my own experiences to contextualize the process through which the discipline tends to exclude the full participation of women of colour in geography. I then turn to sixteen qualitative, open-ended interviews conducted with women of colour graduate students and faculty members in geography departments in Canada, the US and the UK to pinpoint some of the struggles facing women of colour in geography. I end by suggesting some strategies for success among women of colour graduate students.

Keywords: Race, women of colour, feminist geography, discrimination, racism, sexism

This paper examines the experiences of women of colour graduate students in human geography, paying particular attention to the challenges they face in relation to race and gender dynamics in geography departments. Drawing from sixteen interviews with women of colour graduate students and faculty members in geography departments in Canada, the US and the UK, the article provides an introductory appraisal of the experiences of women of colour in human geography. I begin by mapping my own relationship to the discipline. I then draw from qualitative interviews with women of colour graduate students and women of colour professors in geography who share their opinions and thoughts about their experiences in various geography departments in Canada, the US and the UK. The final section of the paper proposes some coping strategies to help women of colour students make their way through graduate work in geography.

My Positioning Within the Field

Women remain in the minority in geography. More than twenty years ago, Susan Hanson and Janice Monk (1982) penned the groundbreaking article, “On Not Excluding Half the Human in Human Geography”, which set the stage for an analysis of the experiences of women in our field. Almost fifteen years later, the number of women in geography remains limited. As White notes, women made up only 14% of geography faculty members in Canada (White 2000; see also the series of articles in recent issues of the *Professional Geographer*; including Domosh 2000; Falconer Al-Hindi 2000; Hanson 2000; Nast and Pulido 2000; Seager 2000; Winkler 2000). My own experience as a graduate student in geography reflects this grim picture. As a woman of mixed ethnic origin myself (my mother is Iranian, my father Indian), I noticed during my undergraduate years that few professors in geography were women, let alone women of colour. I stumbled upon geography early in my academic career – ironically, at an institution that can boast no geography department. While still a senior in high school, I attended Harvard University’s summer school programme. I signed up for a course entitled “Visual Landscape Perception” in the Graduate School of Design with a professor of American Studies who was obsessed with space. “Look around,” he used to say, peering over his glasses. “Contemplate your environment. Think about geography, and how it is related to your lives.” I had never thought about space in that way before, and it opened my eyes to consider events not only in time, but as located and grounded in day-to-day lives. But I was yet to pursue geography in any dedicated way.

In my first year of undergraduate study at University of Toronto, I took an elective course as part of my International Development programme. The class was “Modern Urban Landscapes” with Ted Relph, in the Department of Geography. The course sounded similar to the one I had taken at Harvard, and I was curious to explore the resonances between the two. I soon found that my interest in International Development waned and dwindled, while my curiosity for my elective grew. I became fascinated with the relationship between cities, landscapes and spatial analysis. Even the words “place,” “geographical,” “location” and “situationality” sounded melodic to me. I began arguing the merits of contemplating space at cocktail parties,

waving my hands animatedly, emphasizing the importance of place every chance I could get. I eventually abandoned my degree in International Development and transferred to Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia to continue my undergraduate degree.

Although I chose to pursue a degree in social anthropology at Dalhousie (again, like Harvard, Dalhousie had no geography department) it was in Halifax that I really began to think about geography seriously. I begged the professors at nearby St. Mary’s University to allow me to sit in on their courses in human geography, and drove my anthropology professors at Dalhousie mad by writing paper after paper related to space and geography. “Why keep on bringing up space?” they would scribble in the margins of my course finals with red ink. “Why not stick to anthropology?” But I refused to discard my geographical perspective, and was convinced that geography informed current analyses in feminist anthropology.

At St. Mary’s University library, I would scour the journal aisles, and read voraciously from geographical journals almost on the sly. While the rest of my senior class were dog-eared and highlighting anthropology journals, I was stealthily citing from *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *Annals of the Association of the American Geographers*, and *Gender, Place and Culture*. I was elated to stumble upon feminist geography while flipping through these journals. Finally, I had found a subdiscipline which spoke directly to my interests. For me, feminist geography opened up new worlds and allowed me to contemplate the relationship between space, identity, race and gender. The work of feminist geographers like Gillian Rose (1993) and Audrey Kobayashi (Kobayashi and Peake 2000), among others, inspired me to think critically about the role of geography in the production and consumption of racialized and gendered selves. And it provided me with an opportunity to contemplate my own relationship, as a “mixed race” woman, to space. I was delighted when I was offered a scholarship to study at University College London in the UK to pursue some of these complex issues for my PhD.

Safely ensconced in a geography department, I thought I had finally found my intellectual and academic home. But as I travelled throughout the UK to attend various geography conferences, I was puzzled as to why there were so few women of colour teaching and studying in geography. My department was staffed by mostly white, middle-class men; there were few

women, and women of colour were mostly employed in secretarial roles. When I visited other departments in England, I found that they were staffed similarly to my own. And I was too shy and anxious in my early doctoral years to speak up about the paucity of women of colour. I thought, “Is it only me? Am I overreacting? It just couldn’t be this way in all geography departments.” And there were no other students of colour, let alone women of colour, that I could turn to in order to discuss this issue.

As I began to read more widely, I also became more and more disappointed by the dearth of literature in geography by women of colour. Why were so few articles written about the experiences of people of colour? Why were so few articles written by women of colour in geography? Indeed, it seemed to me that geography provided an ideal “space” from which to consider the relationship between race, place and gender. I believe geographical knowledges open up new possibilities to contemplate how a politics of a gendered and racialized identity is directly related to a politics of location (Bondi 1993). But I experienced difficulty in finding articles, books and research that explored that relationship in geography. I had to turn to Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies to find articles that shed light on racialized and gendered identities. Although feminist geography is beginning to deal with the lack of research in this arena (see Kobayashi and Peake 2000; Mahtani 2002; Mantani in preparation), it remains an open question as to why there remain so few women of colour pursuing graduate degrees in human geography, especially given that many social scientists deem geography an ideal location for the examination of these issues (Probyn 1996). Why, for instance, out of 774 MA students in geography listed in the CAG (Canadian Association of Geographers) Equity Report pertaining to graduate students, are only 15 visible minorities? (Rose et al. 1996; see also Yasmee’s excellent analysis of this report, forthcoming). In the next section, I explore some of these seeming contradictions through interviews with women faculty members and graduate students of colour in geography.

Turning to the Interviews: Geography’s Potentials and Pitfalls

The interviews were carried out via email between June-September 2001. Due to the difficulty in finding interviewees because of the low number of women of colour working in geography departments, I had to rely on email to create networks of women faculty and graduate students of colour in Canada, US and the UK. It was extremely difficult to track down participants. In all, I interviewed six women of colour graduate students and ten women of colour faculty in geography. These low figures speak to the paucity of women of colour working and studying in geography departments across the two continents.

Interview topics discussed include: experiences of marginalization within the academy, with specific reference to sexism and racism. While some faculty responses are referred to here, the main focus is on graduate students. Faculty comments are explored in depth in a forthcoming paper in the *Journal of Geography of Higher Education* (Mahtani under preparation).

The interviews were dominated by a general consensus among graduate students and faculty women of colour alike that geography sheds light upon their various research pursuits. Indeed, all the women graduate students interviewed expressed enthusiasm in regards to their interest in geography, not dissimilar to my own passion for the discipline. When asked why she chose to pursue graduate work in geography, one women of colour graduate student explained:

I majored in Geography for my undergraduate degree and I wanted to continue the lines of research interest that I had developed then. Its open, interdisciplinary nature encourages journeys across the humanities and social sciences. Geography, with one of its central concerns being the relationship between place and people, thus plays an integral role in my research.

Another woman graduate student of colour felt similarly, expressing her delight with the field because of its highly interdisciplinary nature:

To me the beauty of geography lies in its ability to straddle so many disciplines at once, and since my topic seemed complex and multi-faceted, they seemed a perfect fit.

However, in spite of the enthusiasm I encountered when I asked why women of colour graduate students pursued geography as the home for their graduate work, these same women told me they face a variety of struggles within the discipline. Through the interviews, it is clear that the experience of women of colour in geography is in fact very different from those who are not of a minority background, primarily because of the Eurocentric perspective of the discipline. All of the women interviewed said that their experience was dissimilar to non-minority students because of persistent discrimination, racism and the “devaluing of difference” within their departments (see Yasmee forthcoming). One woman of colour geographer in a tenure track position responded to the question, “Is it different for visible minorities in geography?” in this way:

Of course it's different! If you don't look like the majority (white men and women) they don't think you belong. Besides being oppressive, it's also tiring.

This response clearly identifies that many women of colour in geography are seen as “out of place” within their departments. Several graduate students told me that they felt alone because they were often the only other person of colour (apart from staff and secretaries). Questions of belonging and acceptance played a key role in interviews. Did they really belong? Did others see their presence within their departments as solely an affirmative action hire or recruitment policy initiative? Many graduate students expressed that they often feel as if they do not quite belong in their departments. One woman graduate student of colour explained:

Yes, it is different for women of colour in geography. We are walking around a seemingly white and patriarchal landscape which has been produced (and maintained) by androcentric ideologies and maps – within and outside the academy. Interventions into this landscape are about struggle – within and outside the academy.

Many women of colour told me that their presence within their departments, and often their accompanying research projects, are considered outside the accepted arenas of geographical knowledge. One graduate student explained that this is because of institutional racism and sexism within the academy:

The white, patriarchal and Euro-American domination of maps and how geography is academically understood are hegemonic; it is a discipline that, like history or other disciplines, holds in it a false sense of ‘tradition.’ Folks fight to maintain this problematic traditional hegemony. Non-white women are discouraged, found flawed (accents being used as a reason not to hire are a good example of this), and problematic.

Other women of colour graduate students also discussed feelings of marginalization. For example, one woman of colour student explained how she is continually bombarded with questions about research interests. When I asked her if it is different for women of colour in geography, she responded in this fashion, pointing out the gendered, sexualized and racialized aspects of her experience:

Are you kidding me? Big time, yes! It is totally different for women of colour. As a woman of South Asian heritage, many other geographers assume me to be studying some issue of the developing world or feminist approaches to ‘x’ issue. People are terrific at ignoring the academic threads that lead to my interest, and instead focus on my swarthy breasted shell.

In interviews, many women of colour graduate students explained that they are often questioned about their particular research topics in relation to their own racialized and gendered identities, whereas white women were rarely asked the same question. Often, it is expected that women of colour simply must be studying development issues or feminist issues related to race because of their racialized, gendered and/or ethnic identities. This was a source of frustration for many women of colour graduate students, who told me that although their work was often illuminated by developments in feminist geography, they were unhappy with people’s expectations that just because they were women of colour, they had to be studying issues around race and gender in geography when often that was not the case (see also Hall, this issue).

When I interviewed those women of colour graduate students who were studying issues related to feminist geography and critical “race” theory, I found that some graduate students of colour expressed disappointment with the current state of research on women of colour in geography. Several students

explained that they turn to Women's Studies more generally, or to Ethnic Studies, to shed light on their own intellectual pursuits simply because there was no concerted literature to turn towards in geography. For example, one graduate student of colour told me pointedly that she was exasperated with the dearth of knowledge produced about people of colour in our discipline:

I have been very frustrated with the lack of work on non-white women in geography – I have spent some time looking for analyses that involve everyday experiences of black women, for example, and been left with only a few 'classic' articles (Kobayashi and Peake, Peake, Jackson, Ruthie Gilmore). Although these texts are relevant – to my work and thinking – there seems to be little follow up or a consistency in work in this area. What I am saying is that there isn't a whole knowledge base that keeps growing; rather it is sporadic and undetermined. The recent push in cultural studies, feminist studies, and sociology toward 'space' with specific reference to 'race' has been useful (migrations of the subject, the black Atlantic), but here there lacks that certain materiality which is so terrific in human geography: race is often a genderless category and space is almost always metaphorical.

As I have pointed out in my research (Mahtani 2001; Mahtani 2002; Mahtani forthcoming), several critical "race" theorists and feminist theorists have sung the praises of geography (see hooks 1984; Probyn 1996, among others). There has been an explosion in the employment of a variety of spatial metaphors (inside/outside; margin/centre, among others) to describe the rapidly shifting modalities of day-to-day living, particularly to illuminate questions surrounding the politics of identity among racialized groups (see McDowell 1993; McKittrick 2000, among others). However, space as a concept is rarely grounded and is almost always metaphorical, not lived, in most of feminist theory and critical "race" theory. As geographers of colour, we may well be ideally located to engage more fully with these spatial metaphors by examining how they work in the everyday. Unfortunately, our current work does not yet fully unravel those complex relationships in any great detail. Furthermore, although geographers continue to emphasize the reality that race is a social construction, we have yet to unravel the complex ways that racialization is socially constructed in particular places (Mahtani 2001). Part of our project ought to include more critically

reflexive analyses of these political categories – and the impacts of those categories upon the experiences of women of colour in our discipline – as many women of colour graduate students pointed out.

As the Concerned Group on Race and Geography (CGRG) has indicated, there is a circular relationship between the participation of people of colour in geography and the research developments in regards to race in geography. In particular, the CGRG states, "no progress [can] be made in contemporary research in geography without first confronting the profound under-representation of non-whites within the discipline" (CGRG 2000). The CGRG explain that there is a "strong correlation between the relatively low levels of diversity within the discipline and the amount and quality of research in geography on issues of race, racism and ethnicity." Clearly, geography's historical legacy as a discipline that has been largely influenced and underpinned by colonialism and imperialism (see Gibbons 2001) continues to have serious repercussions for the future evolution of the discipline, as evidenced through the narratives from women here who express feelings of isolation and alienation in geography.

Moving Away from Geography: Why Other Disciplines Prove Appealing

Many of the geography graduate students of colour revealed the challenges and tensions they face while pursuing a degree in geography. Often the research they choose to conduct is highly interdisciplinary, and many women of colour graduate students in our discipline could indeed pursue their degrees in other areas as a result. Some of them told me that when they talk about their work in their departments, they are often told by geographers, "Well, that's not really geography." These kinds of comments speak to what is considered appropriate geographical knowledge and how the gatekeepers of those knowledges are resistant to contemplating other ways of knowing (See also Murphy and Hall, this issue).

One graduate student of colour explained the difficulties she faces in analyzing what are considered the key texts in geography. She told me that she often sees these texts as Eurocentric and male-dominated. However, she is

understandably insecure to raise these issues in class for fear of being singled out because of her perspective:

One of the obstacles for me as a woman of colour in geography has been not understanding some of the positions and arguments of seminal texts...and in fact not seeing them as seminal. Not believing that I have anything to contribute to discussion since my contributions are almost always intuitive, personal and experiential rather than derived from the theoretical literature.

In my own experience as a professor, I have found that many of my women of colour students express concern and trepidation about voicing their opinions about research in geography that they find racist or sexist, especially in tutorials, for fear of being chided or laughed at by senior professors. These women suspect that their opinions might not be considered "legitimate" because they are seemingly only based upon personal experience, and thus could not possibly have any real merit in the classroom. Another graduate student of colour explained the struggles associated with working in a discipline that is historically dominated by whiteness and how that relates to the absence of diversity in the curriculum and texts that are read:

Traditionally, geography is a white middle-class discipline. From a perspective that looks at the history of the discipline, the answer would be yes, it is different for visible minorities in geography. There are still many silences that need a fundamental shift in our way of thinking.

As a result, many women graduate students of colour expressed discomfort with the discipline and consider other departments where they could pursue their graduate work with support and freedom. An assistant professor explained why she thought there were so few people of colour in geography:

Most of my great students of colour refuse to major in geography; they do ethnic studies, women's studies, or choose another discipline instead.

Similarly, in my own teaching, I have found that many of the best students who take my course, which is cross-listed in women's studies and ethnic studies, often are initially entranced by the lure of spatial analysis and what it could offer to their work. However, many of them decide that there just is not enough support – either financially or intellectually – in relation to critical

work on race and geography, and eventually choose to pursue their graduate work in another department.

What You Can Do: Strategies for Success

When asked what geography could do to support women of colour in geography, several graduate students had very specific and clear suggestions. For example, one graduate student of colour put it this way:

[We need to] recognize, encourage, validate their voices in tutorials. Respect the different points of view they may offer. Institute readings that reflect different voices and methodologies. Engage in discussion of some of the more obtuse and difficult readings in geography and who they are written by and why they are written, seemingly to obfuscate rather than illuminate.

Another student expressed a similar viewpoint, explaining that the silences in tutorials among people of colour may well be addressed through a more culturally sensitive perspective:

What can our discipline do to encourage more women of colour to pursue graduate work in this field? Be more sensitive to the cultural inhibitions that may prevent some students from expressing their views.

If you are a woman of colour currently pursuing a degree in geography, there are steps you can take towards feeling a little less alone in the discipline. What follows is a list of potential strategies:

1. Develop relationships with other graduate students of colour in Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies and other departments at your university. There may not be many people of colour in your graduating class in geography, but there will most likely be in other departments. There are also geography specialty groups like Gender Perspectives on Women (GPOW) whom you may want to contact in relation to this topic. There are also internet networks to tap into – for example, the group Supporting Women in Geography (SWIG) has several chapters around North America. Other groups include Canadian Women in Geography (CWAG) in the Canadian Association of Geographers and the Women and Geography Study Group (WGS) in the Institute

of British Geographers. Develop email relationships with other women of colour in these groups.

2. Attend geography conferences and make mental notes to attend panels and sessions that do deal with issues of racial inequalities or race and geography. Although the research in this arena is limited, there is a growing number of women of colour scholars as well as critical feminist geographers who are beginning to delve into issues of race, gender and geography in a concerted fashion. For example, at the AAG annual conference, sessions and panels may address issues facing women of colour in geography. Come to these sessions, and hear what others have to say. It may well inspire you.
3. Have faith in what you do, and turn to people of colour who support and nourish those interests. Geography can well be your intellectual nirvana, but this might mean that you will have to turn to other academics outside of geography for scholarly support related to your research topic. All of us have, at some point or another, contemplated abandoning our research or shifting to another discipline for fear that our work will not be well received. The pervasive whiteness of geography has been documented by other feminist geographers (see Pulido 2002, Yasmeen forthcoming) and it would be worth your while to refer to these texts to provide a context for some of the feelings you might be having.¹ As the CGRG explains, the profound under-representation of non-whites within the discipline remains a major obstacle to substantive and theoretical developments in geography. It is important to surround yourself with an academic support network of scholars who will respect and appreciate your work and your contribution to the field.
4. Find a mentor. While it is useful to have a supervisor who supports your work, he/she might not necessarily act as a mentor for you in relation to your experiences as a woman of colour in geography. It is worthwhile to spend some time finding someone to whom you can turn towards to ask questions about funding, postdoctoral applications, and submitting journal articles. This does not mean knocking on the first door you see in Ethnic Studies and saying breathlessly to whoever answers the door, "I want you to be my role model! Help me find a dissertation topic, please?" What it does mean is taking the time to find someone (and this person does not need to be in geography, nor a

person of colour for that matter) who will understand your intellectual and professional pursuits, as well as personal goals. Narrow down what exactly you are looking for from a mentor. This will ensure that the person will be able to help you. As I said, remember that your mentor not necessarily need be in geography. There are wonderful women working in Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies, for example, who may well prove invaluable in terms of advice and assistance. As Hanson (2001) and Moss et al. (1999) remind us, networking plays a significant role in structuring opportunities for advancement, particularly for women in geography. The same could be said for women of colour in geography.

Conclusion: Moving Forward

Interviews with women of colour graduate students and faculty members in geography demonstrate the persistence of racial and gendered barriers to success in our discipline. Although women of colour now make up the majority of the world's population, as many women of colour faculty members were quick to point out in interviews, the world of geography has neither reflected that diversity within their graduate student population, nor in their respective department faculty population. One of the greatest pleasures I have had since completing my PhD in geography has been working with graduate students of colour in our field. We need not feel so alone during our graduate careers. Although the numbers are small, there are successful, talented women of colour in geography who are willing to help and extend a listening ear. They also have stories to tell, and lessons to teach that we can learn from in our struggles in geography (for example, see Pulido's courageous discussion of her experiences in geography, 2002). These narratives attest to the importance of diversifying our curriculum, our praxis, and our recruitment policies in order to promote more progressive geography departments in regards to race and gender in the US, UK and Canada.

Endnotes

¹ For a few excellent texts that should be required reading for all women entering graduate school, see "Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia" (Toth 1997), a highly

entertaining yet useful guide for both women starting out in graduate school and women professors going up for tenure. Also see Paula Caplan's "Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide For Surviving in the Academic World" (Caplan 1993). Drawing on hundreds of interviews with academic women, Caplan demonstrates that the very maleness of academe creates a veritable minefield for women academics, and comes up with a litany of practical techniques and strategies for women.

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