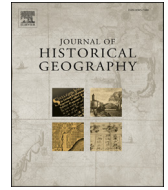




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Historical Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhg

Situating knowledges, making kin and telling stories: Geographical encounters with Donna J Haraway

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 April 2022

Received in revised form

3 June 2024

Accepted 4 June 2024

Keywords:

Haraway

Feminist geographies

Animal geographies

Posthumanism

Indigenous scholarship

ABSTRACT

Donna Haraway has been a constant presence in geographical thought and practice over the past 30 years. From her early and very influential essay on *Situated Knowledges*, to her more recent engagements with the Anthropocene in *Staying with the Trouble*, her work has become a key reference point for questioning the production of geographical knowledge. In this commentary I trace the influence of Haraway's thought on geographical scholarship, exploring how it both shapes our disciplinary histories and provides a critical lens upon them. In particular I highlight how Haraway's work informs feminist and more-than-human geographies, resonates with Indigenous ontologies and challenges geographers to reflect critically on the implications of their positionality and provinciality for academic research.

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Donna Haraway has been a constant presence in geographical thought and practice over the past 30 years. From her early and very influential essay on *'Situated Knowledges'*, to her more recent engagements with the Anthropocene in *Staying with the Trouble* her work has become a key reference point for questioning the production of geographical knowledge.¹ In this brief commentary I want to trace the influence of Haraway's thought on geographical scholarship, exploring how it both shapes our disciplinary histories and provides a critical lens upon them.

Situating knowledges: feminist science studies and the privilege of partial perspectives

My first encounter with the work of Donna Haraway was through her 1991 edited collection, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*. Haraway's essays opened up the possibility that feminism could – and arguably should – be a very different project to the confrontational rejection of patriarchal structures and caricatures of women's rights campaigners I'd grown up with as a western-educated white woman in southern England.² This collection

reproduced two highly influential essays on *'Situated Knowledge'* and *'The Cyborg Manifesto'*.

The first of these essays drew attention to practices and technologies of visualisation, and sought to replace the god-trick of a seemingly universal perspectivism with an insistence on the partiality and situatedness of knowledge: 'There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines', Haraway argues, 'there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds'.³ Agnew et al. suggest for feminist geographers Haraway's work raised important questions about the production of geographical knowledge: 'by addressing the connections between space, power and knowledge Haraway points towards a history of geography which focuses as much on the sites of production of geography as on the objects of its attention' thereby opening up the 'possibility of a feminist historiography of geography'.⁴ Haraway however later suggested her concern not so much with the sites of knowledge production per se, as with its corporealization.⁵

Haraway's focus on the body as a key site shaping knowledge production resonated strongly with the turn towards embodiment in

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¹ Donna J Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988) 575–599; Donna J Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

² Donna J Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

³ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges' p.583.

⁴ John Agnew, David N Livingstone, and Alisdair Rogers, 'Preface to Chapter 6', in *Human Geography: An Essential Anthology*, ed. by John Agnew, David N Livingstone, and Alisdair Rogers (Blackwell, 1994), p. 108.

⁵ David Harvey and Donna J Haraway, 'Nature, Politics, and Possibilities: A Debate and Discussion with David Harvey and Donna Haraway', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1995) 507–27.

feminist geographical scholarship, with Haraway's work being drawn on by a number of leading feminist geographers including Doreen Massey, Gillian Rose, Linda McDowell and the members of the Women and Geography Study Group.⁶ For example, in her 1993 *Progress in Human Geography* report Linda McDowell cites Haraway's work as exemplary of feminist standpoint scholarship, critiquing the gendered nature of knowledge construction and validating the gender specific and differentiated perspective of women. As McDowell (quoting Haraway) notes, 'there is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful' and therefore a feminist perspective is a 'preferable grounding for inquiry - preferable because the experience and perspective of women as the excluded and exploited other is judged to be more inclusive and critically coherent than that of the masculine group'.⁷ The implications of Haraway's work for feminist geographical practice are beautifully captured by Gillian Rose in her 1997 essay on 'Situating Knowledges', which argues Haraway's work draws attention to 'subjugated and critical knowledges' which 'work from their situatedness to produce partial perspectives on the world'.⁸ Rose expands on this to derive a specific agenda for geographic praxis which encompasses a careful accounting of both the limitations and possibilities of partial perspectives. Rose argues for a need to inscribe 'into our research practices some absences and fallibilities', a case for reflexivity which remains increasingly important in the wake of an increasingly systematised and bureaucratic approach to the ethical evaluation of research.⁹

The second of those two essays, 'The Cyborg Manifesto', famously posited that, '[b]y the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics'.¹⁰ The use of the cyborg figure, inspired by the futuristic golem character in Marge Piercy's cyberpunk novel *He She and It*, sought to articulate a positionality which resisted dualistic classifications around nature/culture, male/female, machine/organism, thereby constituting a response to ecofeminist and socialist feminist positions which, Haraway argued, risked essentializing and privileging some versions of feminism whilst simultaneously excluding others.¹¹ This argument sits well alongside later work in geography engaging with questions of intersectionality and seeking to decolonialise the discipline (on which more below).¹² Haraway's work further pushed me (and many others) towards awareness of the ways in which

positionalities emerged, developed and were strengthened by sometimes unlikely alliances across difference. Haraway's refusal to abandon the cyborg to its paternalistic, masculinist, western forebears spoke eloquently not only to processes of marginalisation, but also possibilities of resistance and seeing things otherwise, a disposition echoed in political projects which seek to appropriate the visual technologies of the oppressor for their own ends.¹³

Making kin: Haraway's more-than-human geographies

In 2003 Haraway published her *Companion Species Manifesto*, followed in 2008 by *When Species Meet*, both of which serve to set out her particular take on human-animal relations through an emphasis on the co-constitution of multispecies worlds, and a corresponding need to both respect and respond to more-than-human agency.¹⁴ In this manifesto we see a continuation of Haraway's refusal of the nature/culture divide, but cut across with a recognition of the response-abilities (in terms of both the obligation and capacity to respond) that accompany this, informed by her own relationships with her dogs and – amongst others things – work in ethology and animal behavior. Here her work found a receptive audience amongst scholars working in the emerging field of animal geographies, both in its recognition of more-than-human agency, and in the search for new kinds of (ethological) methods and approaches which might allow geographers to gain insight into more-than-human worlds. For Henry Buller, Haraway's work inspired a move from a focus on animal spaces, which positions 'the animal as a conceptual device from which to interrogate the human', and towards 'a more intimate and experienced set of lived and dwelt encounters with actual 'critters''.¹⁵ Citing *When Species Meet*, Buller suggests this work constitutes part of an 'experimental movement towards genuine 'trans-species methodologies' willing to combine cognitive ethology, social anthropology and ethnomethodology. These approaches are very evident in recent work exploring, for example, lively capital and nonhuman labour, animal research ethics, dog training and anthropocene storytelling.¹⁶

Key to these efforts has been the process of attunement, and - in contrast to the ocular centric narratives of situated knowledges – a shift from seeing to sensing. One of my favourite examples is from a

⁶ Doreen B. Massey, 'Flexible Sexism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9 (1991) 31–57; Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993); Linda McDowell, 'Space, Place and Gender Relations: Part II. Identity, Difference, Feminist Geometries and Geographies', *Progress in Human Geography* 17 (1993) 305–18. Women and Geography Study Group, *Feminist Geographies: Explorations in Diversity and Difference* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁷ McDowell, 'Space, Place and Gender Relations: Part II', p. 306, citing Haraway *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*.

⁸ Rose, 'Situating Knowledges', p. 308.

⁹ Rose, 'Situating Knowledges', p. 319. See for example Gabrielle King, 'Towards a Culture of Care for Ethical Review: Connections and Frictions in Institutional and Individual Practices of Social Research Ethics', *Social & Cultural Geography* 24 (2023) 104–120.

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', p. 151.

¹¹ Marge Piercy, *He, She and It* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

¹² Gill Valentine, 'Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography', *The Professional Geographer* 59 (2007) 10–21; Andrew Curley and Sara Smith, 'Against Colonial Grounds: Geography on Indigenous Lands', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 10 (2020) 37–40; Federico Ferretti, 'History and Philosophy of Geography I: Decolonising the Discipline, Diversifying Archives and Historicising Radicalism', *Progress in Human Geography* 44 (2019) 1161–1171; Sarah A Radcliffe, 'Decolonising Geographical Knowledges', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017) 329–33.

¹³ Amalia Campos-Delgado, 'Counter-Mapping Migration: Irregular Migrants' Stories through Cognitive Mapping', *Mobilities* 13 (2018) 488–504; Nancy Lee Peluso, 'Whose woods are these? Counter-Mapping Forest Territories in Kalimantan, Indonesia' *Antipode* 27 (1995) 383–406.

¹⁴ Donna J Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Donna J Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Henry Buller, 'Animal Geographies I', *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (2014) p. 313; see also J Lorimer, 'Multinatural Geographies for the Anthropocene', *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012) 593–612.

¹⁶ Buller, *Animal Geographies I*, p. 314; Harriet Smith, Mara Miele, Nickie Charles, and Rebekah Fox, 'Becoming with a Police Dog: Training Technologies for Bonding', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 46 (2021) 478–94; Beth Greenhough and Emma Roe, 'Ethics, Space, and Somatic Sensibilities: Comparing Relationships between Scientific Researchers and Their Human and Animal Experimental Subjects', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011) 47–66; Maan Barua, 'Lively Commodities and Encounter Value', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34 (2016) 725–744; Maan Barua, 'Nonhuman Labour, Encounter Value, Spectacular Accumulation: The Geographies of a Lively Commodity', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42 (2017) 274–288; Maan Barua and Anindya Sinha, 'Animating the Urban: An Ethological and Geographical Conversation', *Social & Cultural Geography* 20 (2019) 1160–80; Steve Hinchliffe and Sarah Whatmore, 'Living Cities: Towards a Politics of Conviviality', *Science as Culture* 15 (2006) 123–38; H Lorimer, 'Herding Memories of Humans and Animals', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006) 497–518; Jamie Lorimer, 'Multinatural Geographies for the Anthropocene'; Lauren Van Patter, Jonathon Turnbull, and Jennifer Dodsworth, 'More-than-Human Collaborations' for Hacking the Anthropocene', *Feral Feminisms* 10 (2021) 85–102.

project on urban nature led by Steve Hinchliffe and colleagues when they found themselves developing new skills in order to trace the absent presence of water voles inhabiting a brownfield urban site, describing how, 'faeces figure highly. The size, shape, organisation, and smell of faeces enable us to identify water vole presence on the site and upstream'.¹⁷ Interestingly, in positioning Haraway's work as key to problematising the divide between humans and animals, these studies can often lose sight of the ways in which Haraway's (especially earlier) work problematized other kinds of separation, notably those between living and non-living beings, and later engagements saw an expansion of the methodological approaches beyond the animal. In a 2004 AAG Cultural Geographies annual lecture, Sarah Whatmore recognized an 'urgent need to supplement the familiar repertoire of human geography methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers and extend the company and modality of what constitutes a research subject' as part of a wider move towards developing hybrid, more-than-human geographies.¹⁸ Here we see the conceptual and methodological shifts advocated by Haraway's work open up into a more broadly defined field of more-than-human geographies, which engage with the agency of (to name but a few) objects, plants and viruses.¹⁹

Telling stories: speculative fabulation and Indigenous place-thought

The final element I want to draw from Haraway's work is concerned with the way in which she positions academic work – and in particular academic writing – as a specific form of intervention into the world (and one we may note she is particularly talented at). As David Harvey observed in conversation with Haraway at the 2005 Chicago meeting of the Association of Association Geographers, 'she has evolved a wonderful way of talking that acknowledges that, if everything is related to everything else in the world, then we must create sentences to reflect that fact'.²⁰ When students challenge me on the 'readability' of Haraway's texts, I have been known to suggest that perhaps this is precisely the point; the world is complex, not something that should be reduced to easily digestible bite-sized pieces. That said, Haraway undoubtedly has a knack for producing quotable snippets. Not unlike the cyborgs she describes, her metaphors and words often travel far beyond and outside the scope of what their creator intended, at times losing some of their critical purchase along the way. As Simandan asks in a closing response to a 2019 forum piece addressing Haraway's 'Situating Knowledges' essay, 'we need to ask ourselves how, why, and even at what cost we have collectively canonized Haraway (1998) as the key reference for the problematic of positionality and situated knowledges?'²¹

In her more recent work it is therefore notable that Haraway offers us not only a recommendation to attend closely to the worlds

within which we work and write, but also to remain open to the possibility of new ones; a process Haraway terms speculative fabulation. As Haraway herself is keen to observe, speculative fabulation is more than science (or any other kind of fiction); it is a deliberately political intervention into the world which seeks to show other worlds (and ways of being) are possible: 'It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories'.²²

Writing in 2012, Cameron describes Haraway's 'long standing interest in narrative, materiality and social change' as illustrative of 'stories as productive, participatory, ontological interventions that might call into being alternative worlds'.²³ Similarly, Jamie Lorimer notes how Haraway (along with Anna Tsing) is 'particularly interested in the power of speculative, present-future narratives to imagine and begin to enact alternative futures'.²⁴ For Haraway histories and philosophies are as often acts of speculative fabulation as they are artefacts of institutional pasts and presents. While not always explicitly a decolonial scholar, Haraway's ability to speak to, with and through an attention to difference – seen for example in her fascination with the coyote figure from Navajo teachings – suggests we might both critically reflect on the ways we narrate our disciplinary pasts and speculate as to how we might create openings for other traditions of thought.

Some more critical voices suggest Haraway's more recent engagement with Indigenous ontologies remains more speculative than sustained.²⁵ Others, however, see in Haraway's tentative fictive ventures an act of attunement or listening to Indigenous and other voices often marginalised, silenced or ignored within western academic scholarship.²⁶ In a recent discussion geographer and sound artist Anja Kangieser and Metis scholar Zoe Todd reflect on how the work of Haraway and Tsing resonates with Indigenous scholars' advocacy for ethical relationality, Indigenous Place-Thought and notions of reciprocity through kinship.²⁷ Later Kangieser reflects on what this might mean for research practice, and for histories of geography, noting that, 'Historians are not taught how to encounter thresholds, how to move into unknown spaces without territorializing them through our bodies, thoughts, arguments, pre-suppositions'.²⁸ If we cannot escape and should not deny our disciplinary histories, perhaps we can at least provincialise them, making space in turn for other stories and geographies to emerge?

Such move is beautifully articulated in recent work by Bakawa Country et al., the status of Bakawa Country as first author an explicit acknowledgement that, 'Bawaka is indeed the authority of

²² Haraway, 'Staying with the Trouble' p. 12.

²³ Emilie Cameron, 'New Geographies of Story and Storytelling', *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012) p. 580.

²⁴ Jamie Lorimer, 'The Anthro-Scene: A Guide for the Perplexed', *Social Studies of Science* 47 (2017) p. 130; see also Heather Anne Swanson, Nils Bubandt, and Anna Tsing, 'Less Than One But More Than Many: Anthropocene as Science Fiction and Scholarship-in-the-Making', *Environment and Society* 6 (2015).

²⁵ Juan Guevara, 'Donna Haraway: Staying with the Trouble. Book Review', *Space and Culture* 2018 <https://www.spaceandculture.com/2018/04/25/donna-haraway-staying-with-the-trouble-book-review-by-juan-guevara/> (last accessed 13th March 2024).

²⁶ Zoe Todd, "'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism: An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29 (2016) 4–22.

²⁷ Anja M Kangieser and Zoe Todd, 'From environmental case study to environmental kin study', *History and Theory* 59 (2020) 385–93; see also Brandy Nalani McDougall, *The Salt-Wind: Ka Makani Pa'akai* (Kuleana 'Oiwi Press, 2008); Vanessa Watts, 'Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!)', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2 (2013) 20–34.

²⁸ Kangieser and Todd, 'From environmental case study to environmental kin study', p.390.

¹⁷ Steve Hinchliffe, Matthew B Kearnes, Monica Degan and Sarah Whatmore, 'Urban Wild Things: A Cosmopolitical Experiment', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23 (2005) p. 647.

¹⁸ Sarah Whatmore, 'Materialist Returns: Practising Cultural Geography in and for a More-than-Human World', *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006) p. 606–7; Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Sage, 2002).

¹⁹ Nick Bingham, 'Object-Ions: From Technological Determinism towards Geographies of Relations', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14 (1996) 635–57; Marion Ernwein, James Palmer, and Franklin Ginn, *The Work That Plants Do Life, Labour and the Future of Vegetal Economies* (New York: Transcript, 2021).

²⁰ Harvey and Haraway, 'Nature, Politics, and Possibilities', p. 507–8.

²¹ Dragos Simandan, 'Beyond Haraway? Addressing Constructive Criticisms to the "Four Epistemic Gaps" Interpretation of Positionality and Situated Knowledges', *Dialogues in Human Geography* 9 (2019) p.169.

this piece'.²⁹ For this collective, the history and philosophy of geography is about knowledge, but is also about law, relationships, kinships and obligations to other beings of many kinds, extending far beyond the narrow limitations of a particular disciplinary canon. At the same time, and importantly, this is not a relationality without limitations or boundaries; rather this is a situated relationality, grounded through place, through Country. Their work calls on us to not only situate but embed and materialise disciplinary histories and philosophies in the places that (often in very literal ways) sustain them.

In this brief commentary I have sought to weave together some threads of over 30 years of interdisciplinary engagement between geography and Haraway. It is only one telling, one story, but one which I hope productively traces Haraway's influence on how we situate geographical knowledges, engage with more-than-human geographies and tell stories about multiple possible worlds, simultaneously shaping and critiquing disciplinary pasts, presents and speculative futures.

Funding source

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Heike Jons and members of the RGS-IBG *History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group* for the invitation to contribute to this special issue, and the editorial team at JHG and reviewers for their careful and thoughtful feedback.

²⁹ Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru 'Working with and Learning from Country: Decentring Human Author-ity', *Cultural Geographies* 22 (2015) p. 456; see also Bawaka Country Bawaka Country, Sarah Wright, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Kate Lloyd, Laklak Burarrwanga, Ritjilili Ganambarr, Merrkiyawuy Ganambarr-Stubbs, Banbapuy Ganambarr, Djawundil Maymuru, and Jill Sweeney 'Co-Becoming Bawaka: Towards a Relational Understanding of Place/Space', *Progress in Human Geography* 40 (2016) 455–75.