

# Lives lived differently: Geography and the study of black women

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This paper considers the geographical study of black women's lives through a reflection on Jacqueline Tivers' (*Area*, 10, 1978, 302) "How the other half lives: the geographical study of women." While feminist geographers have drawn on black feminist thought, the limited presence of black women academics within the discipline of Geography contributed to a lack of sensitivity to the distinctiveness of black women's geographies. The paper notes the considerable body of work that has emerged since Tivers' paper, including that which challenges the universalisation of concepts of women, gender, family, and the household, especially in relation to black women's lives globally. It asserts the globality of black women's "lifeways" – especially the interconnections between continental Africa and the African diaspora – and suggests that a more relational approach to the study of black women's lives could inform geographers' understanding of gendered and racial structures of oppression and alternative geographies of resistance and freedom.

## KEYWORDS

Black women, gender, geography, race

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This brief commentary on Jacqueline Tivers (1978) paper "How the other half lives: the geographical study of women" problematises her notion of the "other half" from the perspective of women racialised as black, whether located in the wider society, the academy, or in the discipline of Geography, and explores the extent to which Tivers' assertion that most geographical research on women focused on their family role within the household resonates with scholarship on the lived experiences of black women in the West and in Africa, a position that has been critiqued by African feminists. I begin by engaging with debates on how the universalisation of the meanings of terms such as women, gender, family, and household exclude the experiences of black women, and are imbued with relationships of power that are racialised and entangled in histories of enslavement, colonial domination, and capitalist extraction. I contend that, until recently, the physical and ontological invisibility of black women in the academy and in the discipline of Geography means that their "lifeways" have been marginal to mainstream feminist scholarship. While acknowledging the recent rise of black geographies emerging from the scholarship of black feminist geographers, I argue that their largely geographic limitation to the African diaspora speaks to the tendency of Western scholarship on Africa, including that by some Afro-diasporic scholars, to create a fault line separating ontologically the diaspora from the continent of Africa. I conclude that the shared experiences of women racialised as black in different capitalist domains demonstrate how tackling the imposition of Western normativity and

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white supremacy relationally has been central to black women's ways of living, but also opens up new emancipatory potentialities of the diversity of gendered lives.

Since Tivers' paper, feminists have acknowledged the limitations of treating women as a fixed universal category, highlighting instead a definition that is fluid, and contingent on space and place, and attentive to diverse histories of power and marginality. However, mainstream feminist thought still tends to downplay the critical element of race, even though the intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality were, and remain, "central constructs to the global capitalist system of power" (Lugones, 2010, p. 743). In the West, black women have called for the recognition of their womanhood/humanity and the distinctiveness of their experiences from white women (hooks, 1984). Black women's lives were perceived by social scientists and the media in stereotypical, pathologising, and dysfunctional ways from which there was nothing society could learn about gender relations beyond animality, victimhood, and the workings of violent black masculinity and black culture (Hartman, 2019). Black women's alterity was subsumed into quantitative categories of black masses – immigrants, ethnics, refugees, and ghetto residents. Consequently, for the past 50 years, black and non-white women in the West and in the global South have been challenging not only the structures of oppression but those universalising assumptions, whether in liberal policymaking or in feminist discourses, that either erased, homogenised, or marginalised their experiences.

To paraphrase Tivers, as most geographers are white and most feminist geographers are white women, it is not surprising that questions of race and the distinct experiences of black women have been marginal to mainstream feminist geographical thought. When studied, diversity in Geography has largely been confined to class and space/place, although the growth of queer theory has enabled the consideration of a greater range of differences. This lacuna remains substantive despite Mollett and Faria's (2018, p. 568) acknowledgement of the "intersectional sensibilities" present in some feminist research in Geography, mainly from the 1990s onwards. This does not mean that black women's ideas about the nature of their oppression were not adopted by white feminist scholars. Black feminist thought has inspired writings on marginality (hooks, 1984) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). The mainstreaming of these black-originating concepts tends to sideline the contribution of black women scholars and shift attention away from the particularities of the black experience. Mollett & Faria (2018) have shown how intersectionality can be discussed and used without reference to race or to the black women originators of the concepts. In 2019, Crenshaw had to remind an audience that she developed the concept of intersectionality out of her activism for gender justice to address specifically the overlapping and intersecting domains that make addressing discrimination against black women so difficult to tackle (Crenshaw, 2019).

McKittrick's (2006) seminal text *Demonic grounds: black women and the cartographies of struggle* opened up the space in the discipline of Geography to think gender differently. McKittrick (2006, p. 7), drawing on the works of Afro-diasporic scholars, such as Sylvia Wynter and Paul Gilroy, calls for the discipline to recognise the "attendant" and "complex geographies" produced by black bodies, from the slave auction block to the streets of Montreal in Canada. These geographies, she argues, are multiscalar and "bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession" (2006, p. 3). McKittrick's black geographies, which are essentially Afro-diasporic geographies, arise out of particular histories of struggle and cultures of resistance, as articulated in Paul Gilroy's (1993) *Black Atlantic*. However, there is a danger that we might encounter them as divorced from the continent of "Africa," as Gilroy (1993, p. 2) sees these two spaces of Africanity and blackness as "being locked symbiotically in an antagonist relationship" (Echeruo, 2001). McKittrick's (2006, p. 3) use of inverted commas for "Africa" serves to distance the continent, metaphorically and physically, yet her theorisation resonates with the experiences of black bodies in Africa. Black lives continue to be lived, as Christina Sharpe (2016) notes, "under occupation," whether in the West or in the militarised coloniality that exists in African or Latin American countries. Sharpe uses the concept of the wake – the after-life of slavery and colonialism, of non-citizenship and non-status – as a transboundary concept. For her, "living in the wake at the global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and African migrations" (p. 15). In sum, Afro-diasporic black geographies' exoticisation of Africa may inadvertently collude with wider social science and colonial scholars on Africa who, as Michael West and William Martin (1999, p. 8) point out, have "long sought to separate sub-Saharan Africa, the object of their study and research agenda, from the African diaspora and the issues of race" – a cartographic violence that is alien to most African and African diaspora scholars of the African continent.

## 2 | GLOBAL COLONIALITY AND BLACK WOMEN

Transcending the modernist cartographic racism that delineates black people's lives requires an understanding of the various ways in which racial capitalism constructed black women in relation to white women and sought to separate black women spatially. Under colonialism and chattel slavery, and even in the women's suffrage movement, females racialised as black were not included in the social category of women. The "other half" of mankind, referring to women, as widely

understood, not only excludes heterogeneity among the category women, but following Weheliye represented “Western configurations of the human as synonymous with the heteromale, white, propertied, and liberal subject that renders all those who do not conform to these characteristics as exploitable nonhumans, literal legal non-bodies” (2014, p. 135). The woman, on the other hand, was white, slight, delicate, marriageable, and prized. Lugones (2010, p. 243) has explored how, in the colonial modernity that emerged in America and the Caribbean, a hierarchal dichotomous distinction was made between white/non-white, men/women, and human/non-human. The white woman was “someone who reproduced race and capital through her sexual purity, passivity, and being homebound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man.” Non-white women were depicted as the antithesis of white women: “as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild” (Lugones, 2010, p. 243) and therefore rapeable and dangerous (McKittrick, 2006). In Africa, racial, ethnic, and gendered categorisations were promoted as progress and modernity. With respect to colonial Zimbabwe, for example, Ranger writes of how the colonial racial order juxtaposed the white woman with “the ‘other’ – the immoral or helpless figures of native womanhood. There could be no question of transforming such creatures into ladies” (1993, pp. 66/67). Geographers might appreciate the nuanced ways in which African feminist scholarship has explored how a universal feminism and gender have become rooted in the continent. In the edited volume *Africa after gender?*, Cole et al. call for scholars to address “where gender came from, what kinds of knowledge it has and has not authorised in Africa, and how expansive or limiting the term might prove in the future” (2007, p. 3).

Replication of gender norms associated with white supremacy was fundamental to the disruption and re-ordering of colonial societies to make them fit for capitalist extraction. McClintock discusses how instituting a new system of patriarchy was central to the capture of female labour by the colonial power and to “disrupt the patriarchal power of the colonised men” (1996, p. 268). McClintock (1996, p. 265), drawing on Fanon’s *Black skins, white masks*, notes how military violence and the authority of a centralised state strengthened and enlarged the domestication of gender power within the family. This indoctrination did not end with political independence. Oyěwùmí (1997) contends that colonial and later United Nations’ promotion of the category women and heteronormativity led to suppression of other ways of being in Africa. Non-binary relations were criminalised to ensure the reordering of gender along Eurocentric lines.

As with Tivers’ critique of researchers’ acceptance of society’s emphasis on sex-role differentiation, African feminists have challenged the use of sex-roles as an interpretative tool to understand the position of men and women in African societies. Oyewumi, for example, (1997, p. x) argues against the biological determinism that defines and essentialises the social category women in Western scholarship on Africa. For her, the issue is not the exclusion of females racialised as black from the category women, but how Western biological categories of “women” and “gender” were alien to some African societies. Along with scholars, such as Amadiume (1987) and Nzegwu (2001), she questions the use of the categories to explain familial and male/female relationships in former matrilineal and matriarchal African societies. They show how, in pre-colonial Yoruba and Igbo society in Nigeria, the categories daughters and sons and husbands and wives were not anatomically determined; were more complementary than hierarchical; and did not demarcate distinct spheres of activities that were public and private. Oyewumi contends that in Western feminist anthropological research on Africa, the category “*woman* is used as a synonym for *wife* both conceptually and linguistically, and *husband* as a synonym for *man*” (2000, p. 1,096; her italics). She argues that in Yoruba culture, husband is not gender-specific and “females too assume the role of husband.” She goes to argue that the term wife was “functional and necessary,” and was a “transitional phase on the road to motherhood.” Women’s preferred self-identification were as “mothers” (Oyěwùmí, 2000, p. 1096). African feminists have also questioned the focus on husband–wife relationship to the exclusion of other “culturally salient axes of difference,” such as those associated with the consanguineal roles present in Africa’s extended family structures (Sudarkasa, 1986), as well as age and seniority. This body of scholarship shows how persistent coloniality in modern African societies has led to the penetration of patriarchy and women’s subordination in both the public and private spheres.

From a geographical perspective, the concept of the private domain did not apply to black women in the West or in Africa. Enslaved women laboured in the cotton and sugarcane fields and later free women mostly as servants to white women – where their blackness, and perceived ugliness, served to maintain the superiority of white womanhood. In making enslaved black women chattel, slaveowners were able to represent them as being bereft of the emotional attachments that come with motherhood or in interpersonal relations with men, thus justifying their efforts to destroy consanguineal and affective bonds of the enslaved. Post-slavery, black single motherhood, along with absent fathers, has been vilified in the Western public discourse as dysfunctional and the cause of moral decay and criminality. In contrast, in Africa, in order to capture African men’s labour, and to have the moral authority to intervene in African family relations, African women were invariably presented as burdened with work, agricultural and domestic, and thus helpless creatures of a primitive patriarchy. Missionaries pursued programmes of civilising and subordinating African women, educating them for monogamy and domestication in the home, with the goal of bifurcating the public and private spheres. International gender policy experts’

focus on reproduction added to the spatial enclosure of African women (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Despite this, African women were able to subvert the new order in liberating ways – disrupting colonial spatialities by challenging attempts to keep them in place – to confine them to the home, to rural areas, and to the farm.

Tivers' criticism of the study of women through the unit of the household applies also to Western scholarship on African women in which the household remains the predominant unit of analysis in the study of gender relations. Tivers contends that "by adopting the household (which almost invariably really means the nuclear family) as the primary unit, geographers have implicitly accepted existing family roles in attempting to explain spatial behaviour" (p. 304). Liberal policymakers tend to view the adoption of the nuclear family as a mechanism to entrench individualised capitalist accumulation practices in African societies. African feminist scholarship has challenged this application of the normative definition of the household to the African context and attempts to study gender relations therein, which, they argue, promote an idealised European racial and gendered modernity (Amadiume, 1987; Nzegwu, 2001; Sudarkasa, 1986; Beoku-Betts, 2005). Policy-makers represent the African household as the site of African women's oppression and empowerment programmes are directed to targeting and shifting "culturally defined roles," and promoting new subjectivities among women. This Western capitalist domestic arrangement remains unrepresentative of African societies. Even in the West, it is used to marginalise and pathologise Afro-diasporic families who have struggled to maintain it under economic oppression. In this context, "strong" black women's living their lives "in their own right" (Tivers, 1978, p. 304) are perceived as threatening to the patriarchal social order. In Africa, where the economic and political logics of capital have entrenched poverty, generated political instabilities, and fractured families through displacement and long-distance migration, people's survival has depended on the persistence of extended and polygynous family forms. Non-nuclear family forms in Afro-diasporic communities and in Africa represent resilient forms of familyhood within and outside of the capitalist paternalist model. Rather than patriarchal gender roles, class may be more important in framing gender subjectivities for people racialised as black (Dosekun, 2015).

### 3 | STUDYING LIVES LIVED DIFFERENTLY

Liberal studies of black women's lives have focused on their entrapment in predominantly black places and spaces and thus vulnerable to inhumane cultural practices and violent relationships – irrespective of where they are on the globe. From such studies, redemption and empowerment involves moving away from black culture and blackness, a direction encouraged by Christianity, in which Christ is represented as a white European and whiteness is symbolic of purity, superiority, and success. Attempts to evade blackness can be physical or psychological, but invariably come at a cost; see for example, the recent commoditisation of African women's bodies as they are trafficked and forced into prostitution in the Global North, but also those enslaved and abused by their Arab employers in the Middle East. The psychic urge among some black women for a recognised Western normality of being may account for the 21st-century proliferation of wigs and weaves to cover healthy black hair and skin-bleaching among black women in the Caribbean and Africa (Blay, 2011; Pierre, 2008), which Blay & Charles "link to the legacy of global White supremacy vis a vis European/White nationalism and commodity racism" (2011, p. 20). Some 50 years after the "black is beautiful campaign," the natural hair movement has resurged as a new form of resistance to white aesthetics of beauty. Studies of racialisation and mobility in geography can extend the debate beyond the North's reactions to refugees and migrants seeking to gain entry, by also looking at how those migrants themselves are attracted to the racialised spaces of whiteness, as those spaces and bodies are associated globally with economic success, security, and peace.

Black people and women in the West have always conceptualised their aspirations and struggles within a relational and flexible understanding of space and human relations – a partial legacy of the African cultural contexts, but mostly from the experiences of slavery, uprootedness, displacement, and marginality (Joyce, 2001). Similarly, in many parts of Africa intra and extra-continental mobility have been shaped by capitalist logics. The transatlantic slave trade along with forced relocation to ethnic reserves/homelands, long-distance labour migration to plantations and urban centres, and refugee movements have transformed the lives of black people since the 17th century. Consequently, geographic mobility has shaped how black women perceive their futures, whether it is through their own or their kinfolk's trajectories.

When Tivers was writing, black women intellectuals were already articulating the distinctiveness of their situations and the need to think their liberation differently. Black women have largely written from spaces outside the academy in their struggles for ontological and political emancipation. Some Black/African-centred analysis draws on concepts that challenge hegemonic Eurocentric understandings of knowledge. Alice Walker's (2005) concept of "womanism" expresses the holism of black women's subjectivities that incorporate "black culture, black myths, spiritual life, and orality" (2005, p. 27). In effect the experiences of black women who sought fulfilment in life beyond the white gaze. Black women, drawing on



intergenerational histories of black women's struggles, carry out what Sadiya Hartman (2019, pp. xiv & xv) terms "beautiful experiments" in living – "tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise." Such experiments are necessarily spatial (McKittrick, 2006; Mollet and Faria, 2018), but are also sensual, spiritual, and experiential, having what Oyewumi (1997, p. 3) terms "a world sense" – an attribute of cultural groups that do not privilege the visual over other senses.

While being aware of the particularities of geographies, these lifeways carved out by black women are transnational, global, and intersectional. Black women/African women come out of heterogeneous cultural spaces but share commonalities in the oppressive structures of racial capitalism, including being differentiated by skin shade (colourism) and class (Dosekun, 2015). At the same time, black women are spatially entangled with global feminist struggles through the internationalisation of Western gender relations by the women's equality movements, development institutions, and the Christian religion. Using digital technologies, Montgomery's (2017) research in Tanzania demonstrates how the legacy of German Catholic missionaries continues to produce unequal gender educational outcomes in the contemporary period. Studying black women requires the adoption of a transnational intersectional scholarship and, according to Mollett and Faria, can "deepen not just critical race feminism and race sexuality studies within feminist geography, but also extend new ways of thinking about enduring spatialities" (2018, p. 573).

Studies of black internationalism, pan-Africanism, and global Africans seek to transcend the confinement associated with colonial imaginations of space (Falola & Hoyer, 2018). For example, Schechter (2017) looks at the "geographical boundary crossing" of African American women resisters, as they use mobility and border practices as forms of resistance. Black women's lived experiences occur in spaces that Krug (2018) terms "fugitive modernities": spaces that refuse to distinguish between the local and global. These spaces build and nurture communities and collectives beyond the imaginations of the European nation-state. Krug's study of Kisama – a non-hierarchical community of fugitives formed from slave raiding in Angola and the transmission of the practice to South America and the Caribbean – illustrates the African abilities to create alternative lifeworlds. In the West, these revolutionary spaces (maroons, black worlds, or peripheries) are at the margins, or outside of, but parallel to the white mainstream, sometimes intersecting, but self-sustaining for purposes of community survival. To concur with hooks "to be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (1984, preface) enabling black women to develop a "particular way of seeing," focusing on understanding "both the centre as well as on the margin," thus possessing a "mode of seeing [that] reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center." In that way, black feminist geographies can produce distinct non-racial and non-gendered geographies that challenge the dominant social order.

## 4 | CONCLUSION

If the normative understanding of women, gender, and household still excludes and marginalises black/African women's experiences, then feminist geographical studies are still further away from understanding the everyday lives of black women in their struggles against the racialised patriarchal system that is bound up with global processes of accumulation and extraction. Anti-blackness is pernicious and pervades black women's lives globally. In colonial Africa and in the West, black women have been subjected to a range of de-humanising and exclusionary practices that deny their femininity, beauty, cognitive abilities, familial attachments, and the importance of their labour both in the public and private spheres, even when attempts are being made to control their reproductive capabilities. These practices have not disappeared in the post-colonial era or with globalisation. Despite my call for a transnational perspective on black women's lifeways, I am aware that black women do not constitute a homogenous category, and am conscious of how colourism and class can define differences among them, and that one should remain attentive to differences among women racialised as black that are not just cultural but also racial and economic.

Black women's theorisation of the specificities of their experiences nonetheless has enriched feminist thought by introducing new concepts and exposing the nuances and challenges of transcending gender oppression under capitalism. Yet the continued marginalisation of race analysis from geographical study deprives scholarship of new insights into alternative ways of living and surviving oppressive structures. An activist project then for white feminist geographers is to work to diversify the discipline. More black women's scholarship within the discipline has the potential to transform the geography of women – only then can white feminists' adoption of black feminists' theories become progressive and meaningful.

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