

Approaches to Human Geography

22 Spaces and Flows

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Searching for a geographic metaphor that would capture over four decades of research, writing, and professional engagement in geography, I settled on “braided streams.” This fluvial form is characterized by divergent and convergent channels, mostly occurring “where there are almost no lateral confining banks”¹ (Fairbridge, 1968: 90). Two channels account for the greatest volume of my work: feminist studies and geographic education, primarily as it is related to higher education, though the two often intersect. But others are evident and also overlap with these, including research related to racial/ethnic minorities in white dominant societies and on change in rural communities. Reflecting movements and encounters in my life course, I have written about Australia, the Caribbean, the European Union, the southwestern United States, and the United States–Mexico border region. My writing in English has been published in Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, Taiwan, and the United States and appeared in Catalan, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish.² I have conducted field surveys and observations, archival research, oral histories, and textual interpretations. Editorial commitments have been a major part of my work. Professional connections and related friendships have led to short-term appointments and periods as a visiting scholar or consultant in Australia, Canada, India, Israel, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Switzerland, and Taiwan. I have held appointments in departments of geography and in an interdisciplinary institute in women’s studies and been very active in professional organizations. Across these sites I see convergences and continuities in my motivations, including a consistent concern with social equity, with action as well as research, and with responsiveness to the people and places with which I have been associated. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, working within and to change institutions, and valuing international ties are pervasive in my practice. To a considerable extent, the directions emerged rather than being planned, and this account reflects hindsight and ideals that I might not have been able to articulate at the time work was undertaken. I hope my comments do not appear too self-serving.

Places, People, and Ways of Knowing

I have often looked to other disciplines, while retaining a deeply rooted geographical commitment to the importance and specificities of place. My doctoral dissertation on differences among Aboriginal communities in New South Wales exemplifies this position

(Monk, 1974). When I began that project in the mid-1960s, geographers in Australia were increasingly focusing on applying spatial theories developed in other parts of the world to local settings. Work on Aboriginal themes was not evident. Nor had geographers internationally begun to show much interest in minority populations or questions of “race.” My choice arose from personal experience. Shortly after earning my BA I had volunteered for a “work camp” that constructed a house for an Aboriginal family in a white neighborhood of a small town in New South Wales. The camp was organized by a church youth group and involved mostly recent graduates and young professionals who provided labor while the state government paid for materials as part of its “assimilation” policy. The project raised ethical and geographical questions for me. Later, as a doctoral student in the United States during the era of the Civil Rights Movement, I decided to focus my dissertation on social and economic relations between Aboriginal and white communities in New South Wales. Lacking related literature in geography, I turned to anthropology but found that work in Australia had emphasized traditional cultures and kinship themes, with some attention to aspects of institutionalized life on “reserves.” They had not really addressed the significance of wider white community contexts and relations. More useful for me were the ideas of some American anthropologists and sociologists who brought ecological and material perspectives to the study of cultural change and of race relations. While planning my research I encountered Charles Rowley, a political scientist directing a large-scale project for the Social Science Research Council of Australia on the contemporary situation of Aborigines. His work was associated with subsequent major changes in national policies. His approach meshed with my interests in material relations, and ultimately he incorporated my work in his book *Outcasts in White Australia* (Rowley, 1970).

My dissertation illustrates movement outside the channels that were common in geography at the time and reveals a pattern that has persisted in my work: drawing on personal experience to prompt examination of links between policies and people’s experiences of them. It was evident in my later study of the residential patterns and social networks of Asian professional immigrants to Sydney in the late 1970s, again at a time when race/ethnicity and immigration did not attract much attention from geographers. My study grew from the confluence of experiences of growing up in a society where the “White Australia” immigration policy was under debate and when the relatively homogeneous Anglo-Celtic majority population was beginning to change with the substantial influx of immigrants of diverse national origins, especially of southern Europeans. It also reflected my experiences of living as a foreign-born geographer in the multi-“racial”/ethnic society of the United States. My subsequent work in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the Caribbean was initiated when Charles Alexander and I were assigned to teach a summer field class in Puerto Rico for the University of Illinois. Changes we observed in the landscape prompted us to examine the impact of development policies on rural communities (Monk and Alexander, 1979). The Puerto Rican research also yielded my first feminist writing, prompted by the growing women’s movement of the 1970s and its impact on academia. We studied the intersections of gender, class, and migration in Puerto Rico and later on Margarita Island, Venezuela (Monk, 1981; Monk and Alexander, 1986).

Though changes in my employment in 1980 did not sustain opportunities for field research, the channels have recently come together again in a collaborative project in Australia. I had kept all the original materials from my dissertation research—the household interviews, field note book, letters, photographs and press clippings. I had

also made connections with a new generation of Australian geographers. Now, more than four decades later—when policies on Aboriginal people have changed markedly, though serious inequalities remain—Australian geographer Richie Howitt and I are collaborating in a two-part project funded by the Australian Research Council. I am preparing my original field data for archiving in Australia, including in local Aboriginal community organizations. He is recruiting researchers associated with those organizations in the communities where I worked who will examine the local effects of the changes in social policies of the intervening decades. One challenge is that over the years policies on the conduct of research have changed, notably with respect to confidentiality of personal information collected from people who are its subjects, and to goals of engaging people from the indigenous communities in framing and conducting research. Among our early activities has been participation in a workshop at an Aboriginal community center in one of the towns in which I had worked. We focused on questions about archival access—which materials will be open access and which restricted to the families included (or their descendants). Another goal is to involve local communities in prioritizing and conducting contemporary research building on themes addressed in the original study.

New Channels

In the late 1970s, another set of encounters prompted me to follow new directions, though ones that were compatible with my earlier attention to people outside the centers of power. The burgeoning feminist movement led scholars to see more clearly how research and teaching reflected social, cultural, and political values and gender-based inequalities. For feminists in geography, this resulted in organizing paper sessions, networking and support activities at conferences, developing new courses and teaching materials, and turning to research on women's and gender issues. One of my earliest efforts, which also initiated a practice that I have continued, was to engage in collaborations under the auspices of the Association of American Geographers (AAG). Bonnie Loyd, Arlene Rengert and I led a project supported by a US government grant available under the Women's Educational Equity Act. We obtained sponsorship of the AAG as a way to give professional sanction and recognition to feminist concerns and also to facilitate collaboration across institutions. The result was a booklet of student and instructor materials, *Women and Spatial Change* (Rengert and Monk, 1982). Bonnie and Arlene also guest-edited an issue of the *Journal of Geography* on "Women in Geographic Curricula" to which I contributed an analysis of gender biases in the language and roles represented in published simulation games in the discipline (Monk, 1978a). These pieces were intended both to critique existing practices and to advocate a more inclusive human geography.

The same goals served as the impetus for a paper with Susan Hanson (Monk and Hanson, 1982) that addressed gender biases in prevailing theories, methods, and purposes of geographic research and a review article on the emerging research on women (Zelinsky et al., 1982). Since that time, efforts on feminist-inspired curriculum change have been a continuing stream in my work, cutting across disciplines and also embracing attention to racial/ethnic diversity and cross-cultural perspectives (e.g. Monk et al., 2000; Lay et al., 2002). Another important theme has been researching the history of women as geographers (especially those outside the research universities) and the ways

in which cultural, political, and economic contexts are influential in shaping both the representation of women and gendered perspectives in the profession. When I had the honor of serving as President of the AAG I chose those histories for my past-presidential address (Monk, 2004).

Changing Institutions

In two senses, changing institutions has been a critical interest in my career. From one perspective, involvement in educational projects has meant linking research and action to attempt innovation in teaching in higher education. From another, changing the place of my employment from a geography department to a regionally oriented institute in women's studies shaped my opportunities and obligations. The educational work had begun almost by chance when researchers in the Office of Instructional Resources (OIR) at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign sought the collaboration of the Geography Department in an applied research project to experiment with alternative approaches to improving assessment of student learning. I was close to finishing my dissertation and the Geography Department asked me to take a grant-funded junior faculty appointment, teaching an honors class in physical geography and collaborating in the research. Next, OIR sought further collaboration in evaluation of courses and teaching; this work extended my association. Both assignments required learning new literatures, creating new approaches in the classroom, supervising graduate teaching assistants, and co-authoring publications (e.g. Monk, 1975; Monk and Alexander, 1973, Monk and Stallings, 1975). They involved both quantitative and qualitative methods, illustrating their strengths, limitations, and complementarity. The experience enhanced my awareness of the value of accepting multiple ways of knowing.

An AAG commitment in the 1970s to improving college geography brought further opportunities. It involved a grant-funded effort to address the preparation of doctoral students for their teaching roles. With my newly acquired expertise and my department's interest in being part of a national project, I took on the role of local project director in this multi-university program (Monk, 1978b). It fueled my interest in and commitment to changing practices in higher education through faculty and curriculum development, connected me to a national (and subsequently international) network, with large-scale funded multi-person and multi-institutional projects.

Opportunities for similar collaborations have recurred and form a major part of my recent work, again with initiatives sponsored by the AAG. For the past decade I have collaborated in studying master's and doctoral education in geography in the United States. We have researched faculty and student perspectives and institutional cultures. Our publications address conjunctions and disjunctions in aspirations and practices and discourses on diversity (Monk et al., 2013; Schlemper and Monk, 2011) and we have also created resources and activities to support the pursuit of a wide range of geography careers in academia, business, government, and nongovernmental sectors (Solem et al., 2009, 2013) We have also fostered dialogue on international practices in graduate education (Monk et al., 2012).

My diverse early career experiences and my feminist commitments have stood me in good stead since 1980, when I had to find a new position at a time when the academic job market was poor. I moved to the University of Arizona to become Associate (subsequently Executive) Director of the Southwest Institute for Research on Women (SIROW).

SIROW's approach was to obtain grants to conduct inter-institutional interdisciplinary research, educational, and outreach programs regarding women, focusing on the multicultural character of the region or being of interest to scholars in the region. My place-sensitive orientations as a geographer, experiences in multi-person and funded projects that crossed disciplinary boundaries, and engagement with feminist scholarship positioned me well for the new work. But the move also inhibited continuation of field-based research of the type I had carried out in Australia and the Caribbean. As a result, I engaged more with text-based projects, writing review essays and engaging in editorial endeavors. For over two decades at SIROW, I worked with colleagues and community organizations concerned with women's health, economic situations, and education. My role was mainly to co-author grant proposals, administer the work, and see that it was disseminated.

One of the most rewarding projects dealt with southwestern women writers and artists and their visions of the region's landscapes. It brought together my geographic interests in the meaning of place with feminist commitments, yielded the book *The Desert Is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women's Writing and Art* (Norwood and Monk, 1997), and inspired a film. Both won awards. Vera Norwood (American Studies, University of New Mexico) and I brought together researchers in literature, anthropology, and art history to explore how Mexican American, American Indian, and Anglo-American women over a century connected their senses of identity and place and expressed these in their creative works. We contrasted these with the dominant literature on the region's landscapes that had focused on visions of white men. Rather than interpreting the desert as a fragile landscape to protect or as a potential garden to exploit, the women celebrated its wildness and sensuality. Though much of my contribution involved fundraising and management, the work highlighted how representations can be manipulated and supported my awareness of the importance of attending to whose voices are represented.

Valuing the International

The final stream I would like to discuss involves convergence of the various channels. Starting in the 1980s, I began to look for ways to link "the local" and "the global" while bringing together feminism, educational efforts, and professional networks. I initiated a series of faculty and professional development programs at SIROW to introduce feminist work into internationally oriented courses across disciplines and international perspectives into US-oriented women's studies. The work resulted in a number of consultancies and co-editing of collections to disseminate approaches to linking teaching in women's studies and international studies (Monk et al., 1991; Lay et al., 2002). For over a decade, SIROW also collaborated with Mexican colleagues in research, faculty development, and community outreach on gender and health at the Mexico-US border. It generated attention to questions regarding who sets the agenda for and benefits from research, and to ways in which research and action might be respectfully linked. We developed approaches to sharing decision-making and resources equitably and reflected on the relationships among researchers and those working in community agencies (Denman et al., 2004; Monk et al., 2002).

Within geography, since the 1980s another important strand of my activities has been fostering gender scholarship within and through the International Geographical

Union (IGU). An important motive is not only to enhance the visibility of feminist geography but to promote perspectives that value visions and voices outside the dominant US and British realms. It led me to co-edit the book series *International Studies of Women and Place* with Janet Momsen, to co-edit books that include contributors from multiple countries (Katz and Monk, 1993; Garcia-Ramon and Monk, 1996), to write on comparative perspectives in feminist geography (Monk, 1994; Garcia-Ramon and Monk, 2007), to visit and consult in universities in several countries, and to edit the newsletter of the IGU Commission on Gender and Geography, as well as to coordinate publications on working across national boundaries in geographic education (Garcia-Ramon and Monk, 1997; 2007; Monk, 2011) and to promote teaching that attends to human diversity (Monk, 2000; Monk et al., 2000).

Looking back, I see my commitments as in some ways reflecting my having been on the margins geographically and professionally—an expatriate Australian feminist, a woman who grew up in the 1950s when women did not expect to pursue academic careers—but also as an immigrant who has now lived for 30 years near the border of the US and Mexico, employed for a considerable period in an interdisciplinary feminist institute. Yet I have also been shaped by and participated in the opportunities of professional organizations in the discipline. These circumstances have contributed to the positionality of my work. The braided streams, while “flowing relatively constrained by lateral banks,” have nonetheless sustained a commitment to a life in geography and a desire to bring my values to its course.

NOTES

- 1 Other tempting choices which some might apply to me include “misfit stream” and “erratics,” but I hope not “deranged drainage,” “rubble drift,” or “planetary wobbles.”
- 2 I appreciate translations by colleagues.

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