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Critical Geography from Within: Embodied Standpoints, Visibilisation and Reparative Praxis

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Abstract

This paper reflects on what it means to do critical geography today by tracing its complex history and situating it within my own positionality as a feminist political geographer inspired by post/de/anti-colonial perspectives. While critical geography is often located in the radical movements of the 1960s-1970s in North America and Europe, these accounts overlook wider and earlier histories of critique, and the contributions of non-white, non-male, and non-Anglophone thinkers. I argue that critical geography has always been plural, shaped by feminist, anti-racist, postcolonial, and Global South perspectives that have since become central to the discipline. Writing from a standpoint shaped by my own history of migration, displacement, and simultaneous privilege within academia, I emphasise that our positions influence the forms of critique we produce. I describe this approach as the *production of knowledge from within out*: a way of engaging with the world that acknowledges how embodied, emotional, and experiential ways of knowing can generate critical insight. From this perspective, I outline my two key commitments in doing critical geography today based on my own work. The first is a *Politics of Visibilisation* – making visible the systemic, intimate, and embodied violences of extraction, displacement, and exhaustion. The second is a *Reparative Praxis*, which asks how we might move beyond critique toward responsibility, creativity, and care. Drawing on feminist and art-based methodologies, I suggest that critical geography can be a reparative and participatory practice, one that not only exposes injustice but also nurtures resilience, connection, and the possibility of repair.

Keywords
politics of visibilisation, reparative praxis, embodied standpoint, feminist political geography, ecologies of exhaustion

Plural Histories of Critical Geography

The prompt 'what is critical geography and what can it be' in the contemporary present cannot be fully answered without an acknowledgement of the situated histories within which the discipline of geography has evolved, and the origins and genesis of the subfield of critical geography. Opinions diverge on when and where to place the origins of the field, with a tendency to focus on North America or Anglophone geographies. Most histories of radical/critical geography focus on the mid/late 1960s, when the civil rights and the anti-Vietnam war movements in the United States and the May 1968 revolts in Europe pushed geographers away from their value-free spatial science and regionalist traditions. In 1970, the creation of the journal Antipode created space and recognition for radical geographers who were heavily inspired by Marxist thought. This radical inclination has also been analysed as one of the reasons for the curtailment of the discipline in North America.

For Peake and Sheppard (2014, 305-207) who also wrote in ACME, we must also recognise the wide range of precursors to this late 1960s movement, including the many non-white, non-male, non-middle-class thinkers who have been ruthlessly 'sidelined'. Critical geography also goes far beyond radical geographers in North America inspired by Marxist thought but must encompass the history of critique in other contexts. Long before, as well as concurrently with, the radical geography of the 1960s/1970s, North American and Anglophone geographies saw the flourishing of critique from abolitionist, anti-racist, feminist, and Indigenous scholars, which then expanded and consolidated throughout the 1980s and the cultural turn. They were also heavily inspired by geographers of the Global South, who shed light on the erasure of subaltern knowledges[1]. By the late 1990s, radical and critical geography was not marginal anymore, but central to the discipline. Therefore, speaking today of a 'critical geography' versus a 'mainstream geography' feels obsolete. Rather, critical geography is inherently plural and defining what it is can only be done by recognising the diversity that geographers have embraced in their engagement with critique. This is in this genealogy that I inscribe my response to the prompt of the editors of this themed issue.

Embodied Standpoints and Positionality

Answering the question 'what is critical geography?' in the contemporary moment, and 'what it should be?' first requires recognising situated standpoints within the history of the discipline, and how they influence the critique we develop. I speak as a French Iranian woman,1.5-generation migrant, child of political refugees whose parents experienced downward social mobility, naturalised French, brown, speaking English with a French accent, but educated in elite French and British universities. I am also in a situation of privilege,

[1] See for instance Audrey Kobayashi's review (2014) of the study of race in the discipline of geography and the emergence of critique. See also Ferrett's (2019) review of other geographical traditions beyond Anglo Western radical geographies of the 1960s/1970s revealing the historical plurality of critical geography.

holding a permanent position in a university situated in a city central to British colonialism and imperialism.

Recognising this positionality is not 'paying lip service', it is about acknowledging, as Prof. James Esson mentioned during our ACME panel at the RGS-IBG 2025 conference, my own 'politics of enunciation', and continuing to challenge objectivist knowledge – a goal still necessary in critical geography. I speak from the perspective of a scholar who is far from the white, male, bourgeois or middle-class subject of geography, but also as a hybrid who escapes some colonial imaginaries imposed on subjects more obviously linked to British colonial history. I also function within a powerful institution: The British university. Leaving the violence of French academia and the heavy racialisation of French society was a blessing. The difficulty of 'pinning me down' to a specific British history has given me a sense of academic freedom and space to speak up about my own and other's experiences of exclusion and violence.

My feminist, post/de/anti colonial ethos as a political geographer is thus inscribed in a personal history that has exposed me to the social issues I study. This personal history also creates sensitivity to various injustices and a responsibility to voice them beyond my experience, in all spaces I navigate. My research focuses on key questions around displacement, exclusion, violence and the traces they leave on places, people's senses of selves, and bodies. While these concepts are narrow, my focus is wide: from extractive violence in political ecologies of extraction, to histories of colonialism in the Soviet borderlands, to questions of memory and migration. I work in depth, (auto)ethnographically, with careful attention to peoples' stories and life histories, using art-based and participatory methods such as film, poetry, dance, storytelling or memory writing. I aim to challenge the distanced gaze that masculinist modes of knowledge production have imposed and call for the *production of knowledge from within out*. This recognises that our view of the world is mediated by embodied and emotional histories. Specific standpoints are unique, yet they can connect us to others, shedding light on experiences that need to be shared.

My theoretical political and personal location also makes me approach 'critique' critically, beyond masculinist and Western Centric approaches. I aim to question the world from a location open to being unsettled, committed to address injustices without attacking or undermining others. I am wary of dogmatism, which is essential in a polarised political context that hinders dialogue and social change. My response to 'what critical geography is and should be' is thus personal and experiential rather than prescriptive. I do not claim to reinvent the wheel but aim to contribute through this situated outlook, advancing a long project of critical geography and pushing the boundaries of knowledge production in our discipline.

Politics of Visibilisation

From this standpoint, I make two core commitments central to my practice of critical geography. The first is making visible exclusion, violence, and displacement – their systemic nature on one side, and their finer-grained, personal, intimate, and embodied impacts on the other. I call this *a Politics of Visibilisation*. Recently, I have applied this to my work on political ecologies of extraction through what I conceptualise as 'ecologies of exhaustion' (Behzadi, 2024; Behzadi, forthcoming). This concept refers to the dialectical exhaustion of land/resources brought caused by the current ecological crisis and embedded into long

histories of extractivist plunder and destruction, and the simultaneous exhaustion of the bodies living at the margins or in stressed environments. This often involves the most vulnerable – women, children, Indigenous peoples, and other context-specific actors. Following a long tradition of feminist thought, I focus on the reproductive nature of exhaustion today, i.e. how our ways of living reproduce slow forms of violence (Nixon, 2011) that threaten the capacity to sustain future lives. In my work, I examine bodily, social, and intergenerational consequences of extraction, including fatigue, physical harm, and social vulnerabilities.

Patterns of exhaustion are not isolated, they reflect systemic, historical, and colonial-modernist extractivist logics, where exploitation of nature is inseparable from the exploitation of human life. Making these vulnerabilities visible involves recognising that 'all bodies are not exhausted in the same way' (Behzadi 2024, 115), i.e., thinking about intersectionality critically, beyond the flatness of intersectionality as a buzzword, and in ways that engage with the historical production of axes of difference. In other work, making violence visible involves exploring histories of displacement archived in bodies and unlocked through memory work (see project *Memory work and migration*[2]). This has involved engaging with migrants on narrating histories of migration, working with elderly women in Central Asia on their memories of colonial violence (see project *A feminist geopolitics of the Soviet borderlands*[3]), or working on my own history of migration. In these projects, I am similarly interested in looking at the personal, emotional, embodied intimate impacts and responses to forms of violence.

Reparative Praxis

If my first commitment focuses on making visible the systemic and embodied violences of extraction and displacement, my second asks what we can do with that visibility. Exposure on its own is not enough. Critical geography can also address questions of responsibility, creativity, and the possibility of reparation, which leads me to my second commitment: engaging in *Reparative Praxis*. Here, I am less interested in what critical geography is than in exploring what it can become.

As geographers, we are in a privileged position to recognise the extractivist nature of academic knowledge production, prompting questions about the politics of voice: who do we research, how do we listen, and what stories do we tell? This involves not only making resilience and agency visible but also fostering them through the very methodologies we use (Behzadi, forthcoming). Geography's openness to methodological and epistemological diversity is a strength. Unlike some other disciplines that hold tightly to one way of working, geography allows us to be creative, to think carefully about the kinds of knowledge we produce, and how.

For me, creativity has become central to this reflection. In my recent work on migration, I draw on Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) notion of archive of feelings. Instead of limiting ourselves

[2] See my project *Memory work and migration: Exploring the body as a living archive of intergenerational memories* hhttps://www.bristol.ac.uk/brigstow/research/projects/20222023/memory-work-and-migration.html

[3] See my project funded by ISRF *A feminist geopolitics of the Soviet borderlands: Creative memory work with elderly women in Tajikistan* https://isrf.org/projects/a-feminist-geopolitics-of-the-soviet-borderlands-creative-memory-work-with-elderly-women-in-tajikistan

to official records, we can look at and even create everyday forms of cultural expressions: diaries, performances, films, that bear emotional resonance. These archives help us see how marginalised communities record their lives and struggles when the official record turns away. In practice, this involves experimenting with methodologies: autoethnography, where I draw on conversations with my mother about our history of migration, and art-based methods like film, poetry, dance, participatory photography or creative memory work[4]. These practices not only document, but can also make visible, repair, and sometimes even heal (Behzadi, forthcoming). Engaging with knowledge production is thus not just about exposing violence, but is also about asking: what responsibility do we carry, as researchers? Are we mere observers, or are we active agents and participants in social change and repair?

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[4] see for instance the films *Komor* (Behzadi 2020) and *Nadirah* (Behzadi and Jessop 2021) that I directed.