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A Different Geography: Tuning In, Stretching Geography, and Centering Life

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Abstract

In this piece, I suggest that a critical geography must be curious about how we can do geography *differently* in order to collectively work towards a more inclusive and just discipline. I build on geographers' critique of the discipline, including its ties to colonialism and imperialism, its role in producing and maintaining racialized hierarchies, and the continued sidelining of particular critical approaches, theories, and epistemologies. More specifically, I return to the concept of a feminist geopolitics of living as well as work by abolitionist scholars and activists as I explore how critical geography needs to be a geography that is driven by a critical imperative, yet attentive to the ways in which how people make lives, assert rights, and build alternative futures collectively in order to make different geographies visible. In conclusion, I argue that a critical geography must include an experimental expansion of our political imagination and praxis.

Keywords

abolition, an "other geography", critique, feminist geopolitics of living, life-making, geographies otherwise

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For me, critical geography is an insistence on doing, listing, feeling, and writing geographies otherwise. It is an approach that must always be curious, yet critical in the sense that we - as scholars - should always question our own knowledge and praxis at several scales: our understanding of the world, our methods, our analytic approaches, our representations of knowledge, and our engagement with the world – whether that being our interlocutors, our students, our colleagues and/or our comrades. A critical geography must be curious about how we can do geography *differently* in order to collectively work towards a more inclusive and just discipline, a task that is inspired by the work of others.

A growing body of work has called attention to the discipline's ties to colonialism and imperialism and critiqued its roles in producing and maintaining racialized hierarchies (Gilmore 2002; Kobayashi 2014; de Leeuw and Hunt 2018; Faria et al. 2019; Esson 2020; Bruno and Faiver-Serna 2022; Kinkaid and Fritzsche 2022). Others have shown how particular critical approaches, theories, and epistemologies including Black, anti-racist, Indigenous, feminist, queer, and trans scholarship have been sidelined and annexed off as "merely" supplementary to the geographic "canon", if not completely dismissed and erased from geography (Oswin 2019; Amoore 2020) – "a discipline deeply committed to Western epistemologies" (Bruno and Faiver-Serna 2022, 159). In response, geographers have emphasized alternative ways of thinking and producing geographical knowledge (Hunt 2014; Kobayashi 2014; Jazeel 2017; de Leeuw and Hunt 2018; McKittrick 2021) and sought to hold the discipline of geography "accountable to a diversity of intellectual traditions" (Hawthorne and Meche 2016; Oswin 2019). As Oswin (2019, 14) argues, there is "a growing creep of an other geography", fighting "forcefully against the guiding logics of the status quo" and building solidarities across modes of difference. I draw on these insights when I imagine the future of critical geography as a geography that takes critique seriously and actively works towards more just modes of knowledge production through which we can build a different and better world within and beyond the academy. In what follows, I advocate for a critical geography that pays attention to life-making and mobilizes geographical knowledge towards building and supporting life-affirming systems and ways of being in the world.

As critical geographers, we are trained to critique. Through my own work on war, displacement, and refuge this has meant that I have documented the different forms of violence that displaced people are subject to. For example, by taking displaced Syrians' knowledge seriously, I have described how displaced Syrians experience and comprehend refugee protection in Denmark as a form of war – what they call *ḥarb nafsīa* – rather than a place of refuge from state violence (Jacobsen 2022). Thus, through a critical imperative I have questioned the liberal narrative of the west as a safe haven for displaced people and showed how colonial legacies and power structures are reproduced through the contemporary refugee system. Indeed, critical geographers have made important contributions to documenting violence, structural oppression, exploitation, and inequalities. Although it is important to document state violence and critique the so-called benevolent welfare state, at times this focus has felt somewhat limiting in order to fully understand and comprehend the lives and politics of the communities that I work with. It is not to downplay the violence that people experience, rather it is to also call attention to the geographies through which people persist through such violence and build different lives for themselves and their loved ones.

To capture this, I have developed the concept of a feminist geopolitics of living (Jacobsen 2023). Building on the work of Ilana Feldman (2012; 2018) as well as other feminist

and post-colonial scholars' calls for the need to account for the practices, processes and relationships through which displaced people survive, build lives and make claims, a feminist geopolitics of living centers the ways that people persistently make life and seek to change their circumstances. More specifically, I developed a feminist geopolitics of living to better understand how Syrian families experienced protracted separation and sought to maintain intimate ties across time and space. For many people, forced separation is part of displacement, yet in March 2015 the Danish government actively prolonged the separation of Syrian families as it suspended the right to family reunification for one year for Syrians holding a temporary protection status. In February 2016, the government extended this suspension to three years and required refugees to pay the cost of transporting their families to Denmark, a cost the Danish state had previously covered (Folketinget 2016). In 2019, the government introduced a cap on the total number of family reunifications that could be granted each year (Folketinget 2019). Many of the Syrians whom I have worked with for the past 10 years have been affected by these legal changes to refugees' right to family life. While some have managed to be reunited with their family members in Denmark, other families have been destroyed by these anti-immigrant policies, and some families are still struggling to maintain intimate ties across borders as they are fighting to be reunited with their family members.

As a critical geographer, I have documented how the suspension of family reunification was made possible, including the political arguments and the legal maneuvers. I have sought to make visible the intimate and often hidden ways that the violence of protracted separation materializes through kinship ties – for example when Ranim refused to speak to her mother because she believed that her mother had abandoned her. I have situated the suspension of family reunification as an expression of white heteronormative state strategies to police intimate times. Yet, with a feminist geopolitics of living, I have also sought to move beyond critique – so to speak. I have sought to highlight the central roles of kinship ties within the struggles against violent bordering regimes. This includes the ways in which Syrian mothers maintain intimate ties with their children through playing online games, the practices of sending voice messages and emojis through various apps, as well as Al Baroudi's lawsuit against the Danish state for its decision to suspend his and others right to family life – a lawsuit that he eventually won at the European Court of Human Rights in July 2021. Indeed, everyday practices of life-making such as expressing desire, wiring money, and making legal claims come into view as entangled with and co-constitutive of geopolitics, holding the potential to subvert governing norms and laws. It is an intimate (geo)politics of practice, rather than one of protest. Following others (McKittrick 2006; Espiritu 2014; Hawthorne and Meche 2016), I argue that we must continue to center how people make lives, assert rights, and build alternative futures collectively in order to make different geographies visible – which brings me to the work of abolitionists and the question of what critical geography can and must be.

Abolitionist scholarship has existed within and beyond the realm of critical geography for decades. Abolition is, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Gilmore 2022: 20) writes, "a movement to end systemic violence, including the interpersonal vulnerabilities and displacements that keep the system going. In other words, the goal is to change how we interact with each other and the planet by putting people before profit, welfare before warfare, and life over death…". As scholars and others within social movements and radical organizing have long illustrated, this includes both systematic analysis and sustained critiques of violent systems as well as

building alternative life affirming systems and ways of being in the world (Loyd et al. 2012; Hamlin 2023; Winston 2021; Goffe 2024; Riva et al. 2024; Chennault and Sbicca 2025).

When trying to answer the question of what a critical geography can and must be, I find it more than ever relevant to turn to the insights from scholars and activists who have been involved in abolitionist struggles. I say this in part because I have found that students and others find it difficult to imagine a world without oppressive structures and institutions, like borders, prisons, and police. When I teach about the geographies of migration and borders, I ask the students to imagine and describe a world without borders – what would it look like for them, their friends, and/or their neighbors? The students find it incredibly difficult to imagine such worlds. While some attempt to describe what a world without borders may look like, others simply say that such a world would never exist, it would be impossible. Within the field of migration studies, there are ongoing debates about whether it is possible for critical migration research to influence policies, and some argue that it can be pointless to engage with policy makers on the topic of migration (Stierl 2022; Natter and Welfens 2024).

However, how can we expect migration policy to ever change – to become less oppressive - if we do not teach our students *how* to imagine otherwise. Thus, I argue that we as critical geographers much teach critique – i.e. a systematic analysis of how and where violence and oppression work – but also how people engage in everyday spatial struggles for freedom and liberation. Learning from the people who are already involved in abolitionist work and imagining otherwise, we need to take these insights seriously and give students and others the tools to begin such work. As such, for me, a critical geography must include an experimental expansion of our political imagination and praxis.

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