

# *Emergent and divergent spaces in the Women's March: the challenges of intersectionality and inclusion*

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**[pre-proofs version] Emergent and Divergent Spaces in the Women's  
March: The Challenges of Intersectionality and Inclusion**

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## **Emergent and Divergent Spaces in the Women's March: The Challenges of Intersectionality and Inclusion**

This piece introduces the set of articles assembled from our call for Rapid Responses to the Women's March on Washington circulated in February, 2017. Each addresses issues arising through collective expressions of protest. The Women's March on Washington, organized on the twin principles of intersectionality and inclusion, acted as a flashpoint for the generation of emergent spaces to do politics differently. In the search for solidarity, tensions within groups and among individuals shaped the way in which resistance and protests were responded to and organized. The authors in this collection take up themes of intersectionality and inclusion/exclusion via politicizing the personal, contesting the state, and challenging simplistic notions of unity in solidarity.

**Keywords:** gender; intersectionality; relationality; resistance; social justice; feminist organizing; Women's March on Washington

### **The Women's March on Washington**

The Women's March on Washington 21 January 2017, was organized as a protest against the policies and personal conduct of the newly elected 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. It was estimated that over a million people filled the streets of Washington -- two to three times as many marchers than the inauguration the day before (Stein et al. 2017; Wallace and Parlapiano 2017). But the protest was not restricted to or contained within the US. It spilled over national boundaries and spread across the globe. Estimates of the numbers of marchers worldwide ranged from between 3.3 and 4.6 million protesters (Waddell 2017). If measured solely in numbers and international reach, there is no doubt of the success of the Women's March, as it has come to be called across activist groups.

Numbers however tell only part of the story. Organizers of the Women's March sought to bring together diverse groups of people with a single focus. The twin

principles of intersectionality and inclusion framed the approach. The organizers' commitment to intersectionality was reflected in their reference to the triad of gender, race, and economic justice in their call to participation, inviting *all* women to join the march: "Black women, Indigenous women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian, queer and trans women" (Women's March on Washington 2016). Invitations were issued to everyone, 'regardless of gender or gender identity, who believes women's rights are human rights' (Women's March on Washington 2016). The organizers of the March, in refusing a singular identity of woman as well as who can support women's rights, attempted to bring the reality of living in bodies marked by social difference into a common voice of dissent. For many, 'pussy hats' symbolised this alliance. Lurid and gaudy, the pink knitted hats worn in Washington and elsewhere signalled unity and acted as a rebuke to Donald Trump's bragging about grabbing women by their pussies.

For some, the women's march was an epiphany, a political awakening, a wondrous expression of interwoven resistance and solidarity. Yet in the days before and immediately after the March, criticism arising from feminist activists, bloggers, and scholars about the way in which intersectionality and inclusion were taken up by organizers, protesters and marchers eclipsed the glow of solidarity experienced by many participants. Looking beyond the numbers, critics questioned the value of 'comfort feminism' called on to do the work of consoling in times of crisis that had driven people into the streets (Silva, 2017) and raised a number of piercing questions and ongoing debate. Has the Women's March been able to tap into a collectivity that could act as an umbrella group that would reinvigorate the drive toward rights and social justice for women? Have feminists been able to surmount the divisive politics of difference and collaborate over the populist, globalized Right? Are protests and days of action effective

in bringing about the change so desperately needed? Furthermore, would the momentum be sustained? Could the energy from the Women's March be harnessed to effect structural shifts in the economy, in the US and elsewhere? Would existing tensions between activists' experience and agenda be reproduced in these spaces? Or would this new mobilisation of a gendered political statement transform into sustained activism and keep the women's movement salient? In short, has the Women's March really spawned a new social movement? As Editors of *Gender, Place and Culture* we felt compelled to ask feminist geographers what they were doing, experiencing and thinking about intersectionality and inclusion in the context of the Women's March. The rich and varied responses can be found in the pages here and as a set of blog posts and responses on the journal's website: [genderplaceandculture.wordpress.com](http://genderplaceandculture.wordpress.com).

### **The Need for Rapid Responses**

Rapid Response is a new format for *Gender, Place and Culture*. Rapid responses in academic journals arose out of a need to engage quickly with published material, especially in the medical sciences (see *BMJ*). These post-publication commentaries are meant to spur discussion and encourage debate, yet have a low participation rate making it difficult to sustain such interactivity (Hames 2012). Our choice of Rapid Response is not based on soliciting exchanges about that which is already in print; rather, our choice of Rapid Response is a call to action.

What has the Women's March unleashed? What resistance is happening? What are the possibilities? We have received inquiries about these emergent spaces on campuses, in parks, on the streets, in classrooms, and as a globalizing phenomenon. We have also been part of email exchanges, Skype calls, and meetings over coffee about how to support colleagues that are targeted in exclusionary state practices. Discussions about the Boston meeting at the AAG [American Association of Geographers] have forced us to think about the politics of boycotts, what

supportive spaces mean, and what a feminist politics looks like. Include a project in your course for students to write what they are going and how they are inspired. These spaces are where things are happening, and we invite you to write about them. (*GPC* Editors 2017)

As a call to action, the invitation to write and analyse what is going on right now, in the moment matters:

The very *act* of writing then, conjuring/coming to ‘see’, what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to be true. The body – that site which houses the intuitive, the unspoken, the viscera of our being. – this is the revolutionary promise of ‘theory in the flesh;’ for it is both the *expression* of evolving political consciousness and the *creator* of consciousness, itself. Seldom recorded and hardly honored, our theory *incarnate* provides the most reliable roadmap to liberation (Moraga 2015, xxiv)

While quick responses may seem antithetical to much scholarly work, critical analytical skills, galvanized by the immediacy of the political environment, are necessary in times like these, when autocratic and right-wing movements are mobilising populist politics on an international scale and new expressions of populist resistance are emerging, but vulnerable to the dialectical tensions of varied and differing identity politics.

As Editors, we have sought to provide space to record some of these analyses of emergent spaces and practices of solidarity as well as to engage with the tensions arising within in-the-moment struggles around intersectionality and inclusion. Rather than waiting for analyses of political spaces – like that of the Women’s March – after years of research and long publication timelines, we see the need to offer a Third Space between social media posts and research papers for rigorous and timely analyses of current issues. In doing so, we want to bring the politics of the everyday and the immediate into the publishing agenda of *Gender, Place and Culture* in ways that



maintain analytical acumen and push the boundaries of feminist thinking and doing – but acknowledge that this process itself has its limitations, including those inherent to the short timeframe of curating such a rapid response as a collection of interventions compared to standard journal publication timelines.

### **The Contributors**

The contributions to this Rapid Response encompass a wide variety of feminist politics and experiences of protest. The contributors address sexism, racism, trans rights, and state policies as well as resistance, emotions, and solidarity. Within these discussions, they lay out critiques of collective organizing, strategies of inclusions, and paths to transformation. Most of the contributors relate experiences of the March and how those experiences moved them to act, ranging from being inspired by the verve of the pageantry and magnitude of the March to being conflicted by the purpose and politics of how and what was being protested. They politicize their experiences including those grounded in excitement, discomfort, or a blend of both. They also widen their analysis to include the broader context within which they strive to act relationally whether as individuals or a group (including as couples, families and interest groups). Some of the contributors took the March and the associated actions as entry points into an intersectional analysis of what comprises unity and dissonance among women and feminists. They highlight how the practices of those marching, expressed through material and discursive icons and memes, support and contest the meaning of inclusion for solidarity.

In politicizing the personal – in a long-standing feminist tradition – the contributors have been able to contextualize experience within a wider politics and ethics of political action. Naomi Adiv, in a creative non-fiction essay responding to Trump's personal behaviour, shows how sexism gets normalized in everyday practice.

She recalls three instances of groping on three separate flights at three different times in her life. Her reactions and that of others call into question fundamental issues of what counts as sexual assault – why is assumed consent commensurate with age, which body parts comprise sexual contact, and when does behaviour without contact constitute invasive and transgressive attentions? The normalization of systems of oppression in personal spaces support and reinforce systemic discrimination, marginalization, and violence. Yet these processes are not smooth or unidirectional. Banu Gökariksel and Sara Smith complicate understandings of systems of oppression by focusing on embodied politics to show dissonance as resistance. In their intersectional analysis, they draw out discursive and material implications of pussy hats and American flag hijab, as both icons and headwear, to demonstrate how multiple differences disrupt certain white masculinities, especially that which is on display in the US White House. The resulting politics makes for unevenness both in the capacity to resist and among strategies for resistance. CindyAnn Rose-Redwood and Reuben Rose-Redwood extend this particular point around whiteness in their piece on their experiences of the local Women’s March in Victoria, British Columbia. They explore tensions among expressions of solidarity arising out of who attends which collective protests. They argue that even though including a wider range of issues around which to organize protest may attract more people, marginalization and erasure of women of colour is further reinforced.

Within these articles, points of contention within grassroots women’s organization get taken up by individuals and movements quite differently. In her essay, Amanda Hooykaas shows how the March acted as a catalyst not only for action but also for thinking about a wider politics. She was moved to be part of the Women’s March in Toronto, not because of her life-long commitment to a feminist politics as many were, but because of her need to claim feminism as a politics for resisting the autocratic

governance shaping Western democracies right now. She finds support through her everyday contact with women in her choir that continually challenges inequality across difference. In contrast, as part of the intense intimacy of experiencing a global phenomenon, Shannon Burke, Alexandra Carr, Helena Casson, Kate Coddington, Rachel Colls, Alice Jollans, Sarah Jordan, Katie Smith, Natasha Taylor and Heather Urquhart share their responses to the March. The authors are students and instructors of a geography course about intimacy in Britain. In a series of vignettes, they bring together their analytical thinking about exclusion of particular bodies and voices, geopolitical strife around the globe, and uneven proximities of engaging in resistance.

Given that not all feminist politics are oriented along the same axes, identifying and mapping how varied movements can relate to and assist one another in achieving social and economic justice is one way that academic activists may be able make a contribution. In trying to connect the politics of the March with other social movements, Garrett Graddy-Lovelace intertwines her experiences of the Women's March in Washington with her political ecology work. She argues that feminism and the women's movement could learn from the women-led agrarian transnational movement. Groups like *La Via Campesina* have over 25 years of experience of action while being informed by intersectional politics. Having been borne out of a resistance to global neoliberalizing economies, *La Via Campesina* puts at the centre of the movement paid and unpaid work while seeking to bridge the divide between rural and urban women in light of food sovereignty. Exploring a different entry point into resistance, Shannon Black looks to craft activism to address the widespread use of the pussy hat. She recounts a brief history of craft activism, or craftivism, within North America as a way to insert crafts back into the women's movement. Craftivism itself is often in conflict with politicized movements because crafts are not viewed or respected as political

entities or those involved in crafts do not seem themselves as political. She inserts craftivism back into the agenda as a strategy for resistance in North America. Tracing the effects of what happens in widely-based protests can show the potential fractious politics within a movement. Sydney Boothroyd, Rachelle Bowen, Kenda Chang-Swanson, Alicia Lauren Cattermole, Hanna Daltrop, Sasha Dwyer, Anna Gunn, Brydon Kramer, Delaney M. McCartan, Jasmine Nagra, Shereen Samimi and Qwisun Yoon-Potkins show how key pieces of the March came together to reproduce a hegemonic femininity, one (hopefully) not intended by the organizers of the Women's March on Washington or any of the satellite marches. They argue that there is a politics of purity at play within the March that consistently, systematically, and systemically sets up white women with female genitalia who display appropriate emotions as the ideal. They support their argument by tracing the erasure of the Black Lives Matter movement in Vancouver, the implication of the PussyHat project for defining woman, and the effectiveness of anger as a political strategy.

All these contributions disclose the personal nature of engagement with protest, whether it is about the experience of exclusion or the exaltation of claiming a political position. The building blocks to politicize the personal is a process and usually manifest in fits and starts over a long period of time. Bisola Falola and Chelsi West Ohueri trace this process in a creative non-fiction essay that highlights the complex terrain from where personal politics emerge. Through talk-story they identify and then discuss the points of exclusion in the political strategies of inclusion, of black women's experiences of gendered solidarity, and of complexity of one's everyday lives. They organize their work around three types of responses -- resist, persist, desist -- as they manoeuvre through their daily life in order to make sense of the March. They argue that these encounters texture their political positioning as black women. This politicization of the

personal can also come in a watershed moment. Petra Doan writes about her involvement in the state-wide LGBTQ group in Florida. She writes about how long it took her to be part of the LGBTQ movement while she did the personal work around transitioning. But it was not until the Fall of 2016 that she decided to engage fully with her own embodied politics. For the March, she gave a speech, one that brought together the politics resonating for her in this moment. In her essay, she describes the presence and connections of various diverse groups that marched in protest on a rainy day in Tallahassee. The words in her speech bring the protest to life and show how a meshwork of resistance can indeed flourish.

As a collection, these contributors show how the Women's March on Washington was a catalyst for action that generated spaces for collective resistance against oppression and discrimination while at the same time revealed tensions among resisters that might prove to break apart solidarity ties. These everyday spaces – kitchens, living rooms, city streets, town halls, airplanes, buses, classrooms – tell a story of resistance and protest. As a collection, they tell inspirational tales of moving beyond one's comfort zone into a space that can deal with collective discomfort around discrimination, marginalization, and violence. They also layer their accounts with their intimate and political responses to tensions that had led to aggressive acts of erasure. Their collective work entreats feminists to go beyond personal levels of comfort and move into spaces full of trepidation so as not to let rallying cries eradicate difference and to listen to the silence that is protest. These contributions support the notion that there are ebbs and flows of convergence within resistance rather than a stable monolithic universalist approach to unite all women. Without this movement toward uneasiness, toward awkwardness, toward discomfort, feminists may contribute to normalizing economic and social injustices as women across difference continue to be

subjects and objects of systemic discrimination, economic exploitation, powerlessness, systematic marginalization, and state violence (after Young, 1990).

These pieces highlight the situating of political experience and agenda, as well as how this can be challenged, coloured and changed by the experience and insights of others. Despite its critiques, we remain encouraged. Underlying each of these contributions, even among those with the most pained and perilous analytical claims, there is some optimism. There is hope. There is hope in those taking to the streets in protest for the first time. There is hope in feminist solidarity across within and across all genders. There is hope that anger can be corralled and directed at the things that need to be changed, that diverse bodies can be included in ever-evolving resistance movements, and that precarious alliances and strategic networks can move forward together, strengthening one another. There is potential. There is potential in that feminists occupy these emergent spaces and keep them moving on and developing. There is potential in that grassroots groups acknowledging and apologizing for offences committed in rash and unthinking acts. There is potential in that individuals remain engaged and supportive instead of retreating into privilege and isolation, that groups have a will to forge dynamic collective inclusive strategies, and that both individuals and groups appreciate the relations and dialectical tensions that bind them together. And, we know that where there is hope and potential, there is always possibility. We see that this collection as a provocation to ongoing feminist activism, one grounded in the challenge to actively see, recognise, and respond to the needs and desires of diverse others, not least those whose experience differs from our own, and likewise to respect those who are changing. For some, possibility represents a call to a new form of political commitment and entwinement. For others, possibility depicts the long-time-in-coming vision of togetherness on a path worn through decades-long struggle, protest, and

resistance. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (2015, 263) ‘We must align ourselves with and support those who challenge their own inherited or acquired privileges, examine their social positions, and take responsibility for their assumptions.’ In short, we must be open to possibility.

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