Critical Geographies and Geography’s Creative Re/Turn:

Poetics and Practices for New Disciplinary Spaces

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# Abstract

We are two feminist geographers working as practitioners and researchers in creative geographies and the discipline’s creative re/turn. Human geographers interested in new representational and non-representational methods and methodologies are, as we explore in this article, increasingly turning to artistic and creative modes of expression, including (amongst others) literary and visual arts, in which we are both involved. For some time now, we have been curious about what we experience as a lack of expressly politicized critical interrogations of the discipline’s creative re/turn and a shortage of expressly critical and politicized creative outputs. In this article, then, we explore geography’s embrace of creative practices as research methods and as means of developing outputs but, more specifically, we ask about where and how decolonizing, feminist, anti-racist, and/or queer voices, practices, and theorizations might fit within the creative re/turn. Using two different creative geographic works (one a book of poetry, the other a curation project), we trouble what we conclude may be ongoing (perhaps unconsciously) masculinist, often White and colonial, perhaps overly heteronormative, modes of geographic inquiry and practice within geography’s creative re/turn. In this context, we reflexively consider our own creative practices as ones that may offer examples to open new critical spaces and modes of representation for creative geographers.

**Keywords**: Geography’s Creative Re/turn; Geohumanities; Critical Feminist Geographies.

# Introduction: Towards Critical Creative Geographies

…we simply trust that what is not visible exists, like you, not here with your hips settling against my lower back you not here with your thumb in my mouth you not here with your hand resting between my upper thighs and you are not a river during break-up full against banks straining through muscled ice blocks nor are you the wrist-thick sturdy roots of water lilies wedged firmly into muskeg bogs warm below the line of decomposition…Sarah de Leeuw, Geographies of a Lover

<insert figure one here>

Figure 1. Exhibition Pavilion with The Creative Compass Installation, 2010 (The Creative Compass Catalogue, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), London; supported by Arts Council England; photography: Sir Colin Hampden-White).

We are two feminist geographers working as practitioners and researchers in creative geographies and the discipline’s creative re/turn. This resurgence of creative and arts-based work in geography over the last decade builds on a long relationship between geographical knowledge making and creative practices (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Daniels et al. 2012; Dear et al. 2012; de Leeuw 2003; Hawkins 2014; Nash 1996) and is expressed in a variety of forms: new journals such as *GeoHumanites* and *Literary Geographies* dedicated to the disciplinary intersections of geography and humanities; inclusion of creative works in established scholarly journals; special issues focused on creative practice; increasing numbers of practice-based doctorates in geography; even post-graduate courses bringing creative practice together with geographical scholarship. Many geographers are also and increasingly engaging directly with creative practice: they curate exhibitions, create installations, and produce other works of visual arts; they write and produce theatre works; they make sound art; they write poety and novels. The literary arts and humanities have also engaged deeply with geography and geographers (Alexander and Cooper 2013; Scott and Swenson 2015). We have participated in these worlds: one of us as a poet writing about a woman’s sexualized relationship with ecology and land; the other as a curator and co-practitioner of a range of visual arts projects making political and material interventions into masculinized geographies.

We see much potential in geography’s creative re/turn. The boundary-crossing works and collaborations we have participated in and observed offer important opportunities to create new spaces and modes for thinking about and expressing space, place, and human relationships with and within the world. Like other turns in geography (see Domosh 2005 on the cultural turn and its alliances with feminist geography), these new spaces also create opportunity for critical and reflexive attention to the presence or absence of certain voices, practices, or ways of knowing and being in the discipline of geography. Beginning from our own practices as feminist white cis-gendered women who work in this burgeoning field of creative geographies, we reflect on how creative practices might be further expanded to produce new spaces and opportunities for critical modalities, including (to name only a few) feminist, queer, anti-racist and anti-colonial ways of being in and thinking about the world. Taking up in particular the important critical work done by feminist, queer, Indigenous, and anti-racist geographers, we offer two examples of our own work as practices that might begin conversations about opening new spaces for talking and thinking critically *and* creatively about the geographies of our past, present, and future. Through this reflexive exercise, we hope to extend existing conversations about what critical forms the creative re/turn might take up and, thus, how creative geographies might become more explicitly critical and political in searching for new ways to (re)make our world into a more just, ethical, and livable place.

We begin this article with an overview of geography’s creative re/turn. Specifically, we consider relationships between critical and creative work in geography. In the second and third sections, we engage (somewhat autoethnographically) with our own work, offering examples of two different modes of creative practice that intervene into the world in different ways –both with the common and expressly feminist goal of locating women’s bodies, whether they be bodies visually erased in the history of the Royal Geographic Society or orgasmic bodies poetically intertwined with landscapes of northern British Columbia. In reflecting on our creative practices, we invite critical conversations about how creative geographies work in the world. In reflecting on our creative practices, we explore how the landscapes, perspectives, experiences, and political subjectivities that are expressed, understood, and made possible through our work might suggest further ways of extending ranges of voices and visions in geography’s creative re/turn.

# Critical Geographies and Geography’s Creative Re/turn

Notwithstanding critics and cynics, and those areas of the discipline that are stubbornly resistant to critical perspectives, preferring to remain focused on elite knowledge and practices, one is hard pressed to find human geographers writing social science research in the opening decades of the twenty-first century who are not, at least somewhat, attuned to scholarship that accounts for the spaces, places, and voices of myriad subaltern or sublimated others. Feminist, anti-racist, decolonizing, queer, and radical geographers have all been instrumental in expanding the theoretical and material geographies of our discipline (Blunt and Rose 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Nash 2002; Peake and Schein 2000; Peake and Sheppard 2014; Rose 1993). Whilst not all areas of the discipline have been impacted equally by this critical work, it is fair to say its impact has been significant (Peake and Sheppard 2014). Many contemporary human geographers *are* accounting for and trying to mitigate ways that power produces unequal epistemological and ontological geographies in which we all live—in part by expanding our methods and methodologies and making new spaces in the discipline for overlooked or marginalized subjects. This work takes a number of different forms; geographers engage with participatory research methods, embrace critical self-reflexivity, interrogate the spaces of knowledge production, and work to decolonize and/or ‘make queer’ the heternormative colonial histories of our discipline (Kobayashi 2003; Morgensen 2011; Pain 2004).

Within this context, it seems opportune to consider how geography’s creative re/turn engages critical geographies. This seems particularly opportune given feminists and other critical geographers have documented how early work produced by geographers working in humanities traditions historically overlooked difference and sociocultural power imbalances—particularly those experienced by women and racialized peoples (see for instance Bonnett 1996; Blunt 2003; Rose 1993). Furthermore, geographical scholarship broadly and more recently has been influenced by the cultural turn in critical social theory. Geographers are thus exploring how art forms—from painting to installation, to music, bio-art and literature—perform politics: many of these inquiries engage a broad range of critical subjects, from feminist geographies of the body and debates around racialized bodies, to questions of post-humanism and the ethics of how we live on earth (Carter 2006; Colls 2012; Dixon 2009; Hawkins et al. 2015). This critical geographical scholarship has brought to creative practices (over and against art theory, literary criticism, or film scholarship, for example) a focus not just on the aesthetics, logics and traditions of creative art works and the contexts of their creation, but also a concern with the ways in which these creative works both make and remake spaces, places, and human relationships. Given the rich possibilities emerging from bringing together critical geographical and creative practices, we hope to highlight here some important questions about the potentials, possibilities, and responsibilities of geographers’ engagements with creative arts (including our own).

We have observed that when geographers are *practicing creativity*—as opposed to studying the creativity of others—the critical and creative seem to come together less often. Creative geographies are often taken up in order to create geographic understandings about the world and or to reflect on geographical scholarship (see surveys in Hawkins 2011; 2014; Last 2014 and examples such as Wylie and Lorimer 2012) rather than to critically intervene in the contemporary or historical power imbalances so often the focus of much critical geographical scholarship. Of course exceptions exist and, interestingly, when such critical and creative work happens it often (but not always) involves geographers co-producing with artists and also with activists and communities. This rich range of work finds geographers collaborating, sometimes with the help of creative professionals, to develop theatre, video, art or story-telling modes that seek to empower and advocate for marginalized groups; to build community relations; to remake urban spaces; to attune us to non-human environments; or as a method through which to assemble new publics around issues that need wider attention (Eshun and Madge 2012; Hawkins, 2015; Pratt and Johnson 2012; Till 2012; Tolia-Kelly 2008). Work with marginalized or hard to reach individuals has oftentimes been important here, whether that be Parr’s (2007) exploration of making videos with the mentally ill, Stratford’s (see Statford and Low 2015) use of a suite of creative practices to cultivate children’s metrological imaginations; McClean’s performance work with neoliberal urban policies (2015) or Bagelmann and Bagelmann’s (2016) collaborative ‘zine-making to engage issues of food justice. Such projects are often driven by four-fold agendas: to do practical and important work in the world; to generate new academic knowledge; to create an aesthetic output, but also often to critique the politics and elitism of many art forms, including white heteronormative forms of cultural production and those based on elite expertise and knowledge practices. Indeed, for many writing and working from within this body of scholarship and creative practice, the politics and power of the work lies in its potential to challenge and change not just how we conduct research and create knowledge, but also how we live in the world (Hawkins 2014; 2015; Kitchin 2014; Last 2014; Marston and de Leeuw 2013).

We would note that many geographers who are working in these ways do so either through collaboration with trained creative practitioners or through acquiring years of their own training. This marks a difference between methods and mobilization of specific aesthetic practices and the broader gambit of participatory practices that enroll visual methods such as video-making or photo elicitation in a manner more clearly informed by social science methods as forms of record, archive, or speech acts, thus underplaying the aesthetic intent and possibilities (see Pink 2015; 2013). We emphasize this is not a boundary to be explicitly policed: we would suggest, however, that within much of this work the importance and political implications of the aesthetic bears further study (see also Hawkins 2015). In other words, we see the critical modes of analysis so well established in social and cultural geography as having found *some* but perhaps not enoughspace in geography’s creative re/turn. Creative geographic work is partially attending to sociocultural power inequities across different geographies but significant critical reflection about how (or indeed where or by whom) creative geographic practices challenge and change the status quo seem still notably lacking and require further interrogation. Indeed, aside from those geographers for whom political intent is central to their work, many geographers are producing creative work and undertaking creative practices with little or no explicit reflection on or explanation of the politics of their work or the works’ political implications.

We are not alone in our observations. Eshun and Madge (2016) as well as Noxolo (2016) identified concerns around the distinctly northern-hemisphere-focused nature of cultural geography in general and the creative turn in particular. Others have observed that placelessness or a lack of specific authorial-positioning, including in practices that include creative crafts such as earth-geo-writings and storytelling, can lead to white Eurocentric colonial performances of universalization and rationalism (see Sundberg 2014). That so little reflection exists about the particular geographies, authorial power, and/or about the whiteness, heteronormativity and maleness of works being cited and/or identities of those producing or editing the work is as troubling today as it was when critical feminists and postcolonial theorists addressed the same issues in humanities-focused geographers from the late 20th century. We know that quantifying this is a complicated and slippery business. Conducting a survey about the degree to which radical or critical geographies are present (or absent) in creative geographic work may be one small measure, albeit a complex one because the forms of this creative work –from ephemeral performance, to beautifully created artefact– often defy capture within traditional academic forums such as journal databases and keyword searches. Nevertheless, as others have suggested, keyword searches in disciplinary-specific databases can operate as a kind of generalized canvasing that offers insights into broad trends, into discursive climates, within publishing realms (see Cameron et al 2014). Something might be learned, then, from zero records being generated upon a search of Web of Science with the search term ‘queer’ and ‘geograph\*’ and ‘creative return.’ The more generalized search for ‘feminist,’ ‘geography’ and ‘creative’ found seven records. ‘Racism’ ‘geography’ and ‘creative’ generates one record, the search terms ‘colonial’ ‘geography’ and ‘creative’ nine records, although if ‘anti-colonialism’ or ‘decolonization’ were substituted for ‘colonial,’ no records were generated. Combining ‘Marx’ ‘geography’ and ‘creative’ generated two records. Of course this is not a comprehensive statement on the state of geography’s creative re/turn, especially given how creative geographies often develop outputs other than journal articles and to survey for these is much harder. Our own experience would suggest however that expressly critical journals like *ACME*, *Antipode, Human Geography* or *Gender Place and Culture* are rarely publishing creative works produced by geographers (e.g. poems, visual images, curations between artists and feminist or queer geographers) that are clearly undertaking decolonizing, anarchist, anti-racist, feminist, or queer work. It is interesting to reflect on why such work is not appearing in these journals, and why, where it does, it often appears less on its own terms than as the feature discussion of a article that advances methodological issues.

These observations about the paucity of intersections between radical or critical and creative geographies within institutional spaces are reinforced by our own ethnographic reflections as participants in this scholarly world. Indeed, as we move through our roles as geographers—including scanning and responding to listserv announcements about creative geographies events or calls for papers; sitting on specialty and research group committees; editing and reviewing journals, articles, books, PhD theses, and wider creative work; as well as reviewing conference sessions for sponsorship by the AAG Specialty Group Geographic Perspective on Women (GPOW), the Canadian Women and Geography (CWAG) specialty group, and the Royal Geographical Society’s Gender and Feminist Geographies Research group—we have been struck by a marked lack of engagement between the creative and the redical or critical in geographic thought and practice. As editors of special journal issues and sections and edited books—some with the express delimitations looking for creative geographic work involved with critical political expression—we can attest to a dearth of expressly radical or critical geographic creative work produced by geographers. Attendance at a range of symposiums and events over the years reveals similar something similar: sessions on creative practice and craft are often bereft of analysis about, for instance, racialization or able-bodiedness; the creativity of gardening practices or creative urban design rarely conjure questions about White settler privilege or colonialism; poetry performances rarely or expressly concern themselves with the politics of representation. As such work gathers pace, we do note sessions becoming more refined, occasionally turning towards more explicit political queries. An AAG 2014 session on the Methodologies of Intimate Writing expressly considered how ‘intimate writing is part of feminist research in geography.’ A session on geopoetics raised some questions about human environment relations. We are not suggesting, then, that critical political issues considerations are *completely* absent from creative practices and inquiries in geography. Rather, we observe that radical critical geography and geography’s creative re/turn do not seem to be in *much* conversation with each other. We suggest that if they were, geography’s creative re/turn may be even richer than it is.

As we move onto reflections about our own work, we hope to account not only for the ways in which our creative practices might produce critical geographical knowledge, but also how in doing so they might intervene in the world in intended and unintended ways. We acknowledge this might involve thinking in different ways about the meaning(s) of intervention(s), and about the registers, scales and potential results of these interventions. Claims are often made for political efficacy of art and its transformative potentials, but as yet little has been done—either inside or outside disciplinary boundaries—to explore what these potentials might be (Hawkins 2014; 2015). For us, then, an important first step is to explore how we might begin to create dialogue between our critical social theories and our creative methods. To this end we reflect in the next two sections on our own critical and creative practices as feminist geographers.

# Critical Curations: The Politics of Display

Historically, geographical engagements with curatorial practices—building exhibitions through art works and/ or objects—often took form as landscape art exhibitions run in regional art galleries. More recently, however, curatorial practices have gained traction as part of geography’s wider creative (re)turn (Driver 2013). Geographers have collaborated with curatorial teams creating art exhibitions at some of the world’s major art galleries, creating exhibitions informed by geographical analytic frames—including feminist, Marxist and postcolonial discussions. This section focuses on how a 2010 exhibition entitled *Creative Compass* (see figure 2) took on historical invisibility of women in the spaces the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) one of England’s earliest geography institutions.

Geography for a long while was assumed to be ‘almost always done by men’ (Rose 1993). In the last three decades, however, the place of women in the making of geographical knowledge has been asserted through both the telling of their stories and the retelling of geographic histories (Domosh 1991; Maddrell 2009). As Maddrell (2009) has noted, women occupied complex locations within the institutional spaces of geography, including those of the Royal Geographical Society—although this place was for a long time obscured by the gendered regulations of the RGS (Maddrell 2009, 29). In the nineteenth century, battling to remain a ‘manly science’, geography rejected inclusion of not only women but also anything that seemed like a more humanities approach to scholarship. As Maddrell (2009) notes, as long as the place of women in geographical knowledge remained hidden and faceless, it did not threaten the male hegemony of travel or the society itself.

Curation practices have a significant role in shaping the stories we tell about geographic knowledge. Indeed, until a recent campaign to mark the centenary of women’s admittance as fellows of the RGS, there were very few visual representations of women on display in the Society—in contrast to the many portraits, photos, and busts of male geographers that fill the interior of the RGS building. Over the course of its history, RGS maintained what they considered ‘proper’ practice of geographical science (Driver 2012; Hawkins 2014) through a variety of mechanisms: lectures, journals, manuals, scientific tools, rules, rewards—and exhibitions. If historical exhibitions might be understood as a mechanism of disciplinary boundary-setting that systematically ordered its practice by excluding certain voices and perspectives, then *Creative Compass* (along with another recent RGS exhibition titled *Hidden Histories*) have sought to push back by critically revealing the ‘power lines within the palace’ of academic geography as a means to combat the telling of exclusionary disciplinary histories (McEwan 1998).

*Creative Compass* was curated and commissioned by a team including staff from the Royal Geographical Society, curators from the International Institute for Visual Arts, and one of the author’s as a geographical advisor. Acknowledging that the criticality of exhibition practice lies not only in the politics of representation found in the display, but also in the relationship between the works displayed and the sites of their production and display, the RGS was not only the site of the exhibition’s display, but was also the location for the making of the number of the art works in the show. This is particularly significant given the physical location of Royal Geographical Society within London’s great exhibitionary complex. Situated alongside the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, the Natural History Museum, and more recently the Serpentine Art Gallery, it is one of a suite of institutions historically engaged in producing and reproducing societal power.



<Insert Figure 2>

Figure 2. *Money Dress and Colonial Dress*, Susan Stockwell, 2010 (© Susan Stockwell, 2010. The Creative Compass Catalogue, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), London; supported by Arts Council England; photography: Sir Colin Hampden-White).

In its simplest sense, *Creative Compass* (2010) inserted women explorers into the spaces of the society. Artists Susan Stockwell and Anges Pointin-Navarre were invited to explore the RGS archives and create and exhibition in collaboration with the curatorial team focusing on feminist histories of geographical knowledge making. Between them they created, as figure one illustrates, a series of sculptural and wall works, from large participatory maps of London that filled a single wall of the space to the installation of cabinets in the grand style of the RGS that mimicked the format of the Society’s medal tables. While any of the pieces could have been chosen to talk through the relationship between women and the Society, for the purposes of this study I want to focus on a sequence of works by Susan Stockwell in which this concern was particularly well developed.

As figures 1 and 2 illustrate, Stockwell’s *Colonial Dress* (2009) and *Money Dress* (2010) sat central in the RGS’s pavilion display space. Both sculptures feature female dress forms created from maps and money from around the world. Informed by her encounters in the RGS archive, Stockwell styled *Money Dress* (2010) after an 1870s-dress worn by female explorers. Stitching together bank notes from around the Empire, bearing the visage of Queen Victoria, Stockwell has faithfully recreated historical modifications to the dresses worn by female explorers of the era, loosening sleeves and bustle to enable greater ease of movement. *Colonial Dress* is stitched together from maps of the British Empire dating from the 1920s, with occupied territories picked out in pink. Stitched and glued onto the metal frame of a tailor’s dummy, the female form re-shapes these cartographies: Europe sits above the heart, while Africa fills out the front of the bodice, Brazil curves in from the left-hand side suturing the mid-Atlantic ridge. A sash constructed from a folded map is held in place on the right hip by a carefully stitched rosette of Africa, and further rectangles of turquoise and pink fall to the floor as the frills on the skirt. The exhibition refuses an easy ‘add women and stir’ narrative of disciplinary history, instead animating tensions in the representation and practices of geographical knowledge making.

Gazing out over the pavilion are the printed faces of Scott, Livingstone, Smith, Raleigh, and Cabot. The disembodied explorers and industrialists of Stockwell’s *The Empire Builders* (2010) offer their heroic visages as a stark contrast to the anonymous, headless dress forms they overlook. Standing beneath these masculine explorers, the clothed female forms created from territorial representations recall all those discourses of feminised nature and territory. Here landscapes are worlds to be ‘conquered’ and ‘penetrated,’ activities undertaken by men, lands imagined and described as female (Domosh 1991; Hawkins 2014, 41). Yet, as much as they recreate the symbolism of the conquering gaze, these works also reterritorialise the worldly practices of ‘manly’ science by way of clothed feminine forms.

Setting masculine figure-heads and faceless female forms in dialogue across the gallery space created a series of exhibitionary echoes of both critiques of disciplinary histories as well as knowledge making practices. As such what and who was being recovered and installed here, were not only women as knowledge makers, but also the unquestioned practices of the visualizing subject and the erased subjectivities of those being visualized and surveilled. The female dress forms directly countermand the absencing of corporeality enacted through the god’s eye trick that is reproduced in the male visages that stare out across the gallery, they do so through their assertion of fleshy, multi- sensory, desiring body of the geographical knowledge maker. Such a critique is an enduring feature of geographical critiques of vision, and has long found its sharpest articulation in feminist work.

In their headless forms, Stockwell’s dress works not only assert the gendered bodies of geographical knowledge making, they also, in their anonymity come to stand for the women as modest witness. In other words as other than god-eye’s viewer from above, but also more than simply oppositional, instead, she is a figure who enables the exploration of the ‘theatrical production of authority, innovation, discovery’ (Haraway 1997, 2). In their tracing of a generalised female form, the dress sculptures asserts the role of the countless women whose impulses of exploration and will to knowledge were writ in terms other than those sanctified by science, empire, and power. The impetus is thus less to recover stories of specific famous, female geographers, reversing their erasure by the discipline’s patriarchal lineage, by simply replacing the recognizable faces of Stockwell’s printed male faces with female figureheads (Rose 1997). Rather, in their anonymity the female forms are suggestive of an army of unrecognised, marginalised creators of geographical knowledge. This is a set of figures that do not just assert other ways of knowing in these institutional spaces, but in being made present they come to challenge the very epistemological foundations of knowledge making practices.

Collaborative commissioning and curatorial practices can, as *Creative Compass* demonstrates offer the means to develop spatial interventions into institutional and other spaces. In this case the Royal Geographical Society, a bastion of geographic knowledge, was the site for a critical engagement with geography’s knowledge making practices. Working with the artists to discuss elements of their investigations of the Royal Geographical Society archives and reflecting on the layout of the exhibition, reveals how curation might offer much as a political practice, enabling us not only to narrate alternative stories, but also to critically intervene in particular places. Of course, while the works discussed draw out the gendered history of geographic exploration, they leave unvisualised and unsaid the colonial dimensions of this critique. A growing body of geographical work offers ways through which performance art (Mclean 2016) and creative critical literary forms (Krupar 2013; Price, 2004) might pose challenges to politics of white settler privilege and colonialism. Future RGS-IBG based commissions might look to such work for creative critical means by which to address their own colonial histories.

Focused within a gallery and exhibition space this is perhaps a rather traditional example of curation. More recently, through narratives of museums and galleries without walls, curation has moved beyond traditional gallery spaces to function in the context of places and communities where artists work (see for example work developed by geographers discussed in Elwood and Hawkins, 2016; Mclean 2016). Curation in these contexts involves the critical intervention within lives lived, rather than within institutional spaces. To think then about the politics of curation is to appreciate the possibilities both to tell alterative stories, to intervene within our authoritative institutional spaces as well as within our more everyday places and communities.

# ‘Messy Fleshy’ Geographies and Ecopoetry: Embodying New Expressions

Poetry, including the sub-discipline of ecopoetry or other poetics especially concerned with place, is gathering increasing attention from geographers (Cresswell 2014; Madge 2014; Magrane 2015; Magrane and Cokinos 2016). Highlighting the eminently geographic work often done by poetry, Lorimer (2008) noted that ‘poetry might be figured as earth-grown…[And] acute geographical sensibility is by no means the exclusive preserve of the fully paid-up professional geographer’. Poets, in other words, produce geographic knowledge and geographers produce poetry (Magrane and Cokinos 2016; Cresswell 2013, 2015; de Leeuw 2012, 2015). Ecopoetry, a genre expressly articulating itself as geographic, as earth-grown and earth-focused, as concerned with relationships between non-human-physical/ecological geographies and sociocultural human geographies (Bryson 2002, Knickerbocker 2012, Skinner 2009) has found space in geography conferences and geographic writings (Magrane 2015). Ecopoetry might resonate especially with geographers because, in paying attention to this Anthropocene moment in which we live, we are calling for new ways of telling new stories about the livingness of *earthlife*, stories that explore and express rich textured kinds of sensible and relational knowledge in part by writing differently about the world (Whatmore 2006).

Our interest here is specifically in the feminist geographies and politics of ecopoetry—especially how women’s ‘fleshy and messy’ (Katz 2004) spaces, labours, ecologies, and voices figure within the genre. Thinking this through allows us to contemplate how geographer-poets producing work about place and ecology might more expressly engage with critical or radical positionalities, especially ones that account for multiple and varied bodies and embodied realities. Further still, and noting ways geographers like Katherine McKittrick (2016) expressly enlist poetry as a political tool in unsettling and ‘undoing the deadly yet normalized workings’ (5) of colonialism and White supremacy, we are in part responding to what we worry is a tacit assumption by geographers producing or writing about creative (especially poetic and literary) work that –for it to be ‘good’ poetry– it not be expressly messy, embodied, racialized, or feminist: ‘[I]t is the crafting of an authorial voice, or presence, that is of paramount importance’ so that ‘the desired effect is something more artful and delicate than the categorical indexing of identity (or 'positionality') demanded as a social science standard of the critically engaged geographer’ (Lorimer 2008, p. 182-83). We argue to the contrary. As geographers and social scientists engaged in production of creative work, we must remain especially vigilant in thinking through issues of identity and positionality.

Given the field of ecopoetry presents itself as an explicitly political genre, we contend geographer-poets and poet-geographers have an opportunity to self-reflexively consider and actively expand the scope of perspectives it represents and to which it responds. Indeed, Gander (2008) reflects on the field of ecopoetry as a way poets might take up the responsibility to address ecological crisis in efforts to deepen environmental literacy. Poetry *can* be ecological, Gander argues, especially insofar as it ‘doesn’t simply supplement the rational intellect, but provides inherently and sometimes incommensurable forms of insight’ (Gander 2008, n.p.). Ecopoetry is thus called upon to investigate ‘the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception’ (Gander 2008, n.p.), and also to ‘starkly [confront] what it means to be human’ through a poetics of ‘bodied connection with the world’ (Engelhardt 2008, n.p.).

In calling for a poetics of connectedness and responsibility in engaging with a world in ecological crisis, the embodied, grounded, and geographical work of the ecopoet fits within larger projects of understanding how to live and be in the world—including, for instance, Gibson-Graham’s (2011) feminist project for belonging in the Anthropocene. Acknowledging the enormity of the scale of Anthropocene ecological crisis, the project of connection and belonging articulated by Gibson-Graham (2011) is their response to the challenge of learning how to ‘live differently with others on the earth’ (p. 1). Taking up the call of ecofeminist Val Plumwood (2007) to ‘rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies’ (Plumwood 2007 cited in Gibson-Graham, 2011, p. 2), this project for developing a new political subject calls for deep recognition both of human kinship with the non-human world and of the ‘vital materialism’ that connects human and non-humans within non-hierarchical configurations of ‘different collections of the same stuff—bacteria, heavy metals, atoms, matter-energy’ (Gibson-Graham 2011). We see much in ecopoetry as a response to that building of a new mode of humanity (Gibson-Graham 2011) based on connection and vital materialities. What we find to be remarkably and noticeably absent in this word-engagement of the world is any fleshy, material, guts and tendons humans; any embodied, physical, intertwining of people—especially diversely constituted and positioned human subjects—with the physical environment.

Despite the call for ecopoetics to be bodied and connected to the world (Engelhardt 2008), we note the work of eco-poets is often most lauded when it avoids the carnal or the messy. Ecopoet Robert Bringhurst is praised for having ‘the curiosity of a scientist,’ and ‘[aiming] high … never [indulging] in emotion’ (Kellaway 2010). Reflecting upon his own work, ecopoet Tim Lilburn noted he sees himself as ‘someone who engages in various contemplative acts…. The writing is the sort of wake thrown by that … contemplative momentum’ (Whetter 1997, n.p.). For some theorists of ecopoetry, ‘poetic attention begins in awe’ (McCaslin n.d.). Harkening back to our observations that some geographers have suggested poetic craft aims for a desired effect more artful and delicate than critically engaged, the language and a rational authorial voice seem central in much contemporary ecopoetry: earth, ground, ecology, territory, and even animal life are all reverently contemplated but are almost entirely separated from human tissues, excretions, muscles, and ligatures. Sexual or sexualized –not to mention expressly racialized or radically othered– bodies are almost entirely absent. Scant and somewhat veneration-full references to love-making in memory are occasionally made, but these are usually in unnamed places of the somewhere and elsewhere – a distancing that demands neutrality and a kind of emptying of identity and specificity.

Indeed, even when geographers write poetry expressly as affective, embodied, and passionate stimuli through which to considerer geography (Attoh 2011; Madge 2014; Magrane 2015), when we produce geographic writing meant to evoke a storied, poetic, and deep relationship with the world, or when we call upon literary, narrative, or poetic methods and methodologies to produce new geographic contemplations (Eshun and Madge 2012; Cameron 2012, Christensen 2012), the work is often asexual, often without racialization, flesh, mess or the radical potentials of contamination (see Tsing 2015). This is despite some spaces for richly sexualized bodies beig made in geography, especially by queer geographers (see for Bell and Binne 1998; Bell et al 1994). Little in the work of many ecopoets, or geographers writing place-based poetry or creative literatures, is either explicitly sexually arousing or radically feminist and embodied; little poetic space privileges the carnality of bodies, opting instead to enact a sage focus on the mind of a presumably heteronormative white gender-neutral (read male) subject. This calls back the risks outlined by Sundberg (2014): the craft and creativity of writing, including poetic and creative literary writing, must actively emplace and embody authorial positionality or it may risk Eurocentric and colonial performances of universalization and rationalism.

In contrast to the focus on the mind privileged by other ecopoets, *Geographies of a Lover* (de Leeuw, 2013) gives central place to messy, fleshy, organic, and orgasmic bodies—to interpenetration and the material configurations of human and non-human worlds from a feminist perspective. In its express engagement of the human and more-than-human, *Geographies of a Lover* responds in part to Jagose’s (2013) call for ‘the orgasm’ to be taken up as a way of engaging the world. For Jagose, the orgasm is precisely what is required to act, be, and move differently in the world: ‘twentieth-century orgasm is biological and cultural, representable and unrepresentable, personal and impersonal […] it is also and at once worldly and out of this world’ (p. 34). The sexualized physicality explored in *Geographies of a Lover* intertwines the cultural with the ecological, eschewing the primacy of thought, mindfulness, or efforts to sublimate a climax in what poet Nancy Holmes referred to in her review of the book as work of ‘eco-erotica’:

…making love in the morning, oolichan running close to the river’s surface, days of early spring and the nights still long, a perpetual greyness in the northwest coast sky small silver fish twisting in the beaks of gulls converging by the thousands on the skeena river on the nass river, after a thousand times or more inside of me the rhythm is perfectly matched and at low tide the mud flats smell slightly of salt the ocean reaching this far inland eel grass wet bent, seals gorging, round bodies with eagles overhead slow flying barely a flicker of movement in their outstretched wings then a quick collapse and closing tight like a fist hammering their bodies drop i like to hoist my cunt upward and watch you lean back both hands on my hip bones wrenching my body harder i can reach down and feel you, in out in, with my finger the ice still not broken up on sections of the rivers, monstrous blocks of graveled snow blue and black with salt speckles and once at high tide… (de Leeuw 2013, 27)

Reception of *Geographies of a Lover* has revealed some interesting tensions about how messy, fleshy, orgasmic elements play up or down depending on context. Seen as too sexually-charged for broadcast readings on CBC (Canada’s national broadcasting station), the book was introduced at festivals and live readings on several occasions as a text that would make people ‘blush’ or ‘squirm.’ In various literary festivals, the text was slotted into sessions entitled ‘Sizzle’ and ‘Reading in Bed.’ Reception of the book, in other words, separated the erotic from the ecopolitical, privileging the former over the latter and downplaying the embodied, fleshy, human connection (or loss thereof) with ecology and physical geography. In parsing the geo-poetic work of the text from the expressly feminist-informed fleshy, messy, raw sexual language, there has been a marked tendency to sublimate the sexual in efforts to call forth the literary and/or geographic qualities of the poetry.

Situating our thoughts in this context as critical feminist geographers, we wonder how an uncritical deployment of ecopoetics, including by geographers, may serve to (re)produce and validate work that is fundamentally bereft of women’s (especially sexualized) bodies. We are especially interested in ways that expressly bodied creative practices may be sublimated, thus closing off as of yet fully imagined spaces for fresh and original ways of being in the world. It has always been our belief that the work of feminist geographers, including ourselves, is to destabilize taken-for-granted ideas about what is normal, especially when that norm is by default disembodied. There are, we suspect, possibilities in messier fleshier eco and geo poetics. These may build a different sense of the world, an embodied, fully fleshy and ontological relationship with the world, an orgasmic human becomingness resonant with some geographers’ project of being deeply attuned and worldly ecological subjects.

# Some Creative and Critical Conclusions

Rather than answers or prescriptions for practice, we have sought in this article to offer two examples of how we might begin to bring together our creative practices with our concerns for critical geographies that do work within and beyond the academy. The two examples we have delineated here accomplish this work through very different creative practices, with respect to very different topics and through different modes of criticality. On the one hand, we have a spatial intervention seeking to disrupt normative disciplinary histories and contribute creative efforts to wider concerns to retell the histories of geography in ways that make space of those whose knowledge contributions have been ‘othered’ within discussions of disciplinary histories. On the other hand, and in contrast to these more representational efforts, we find in ecopoetics a rather different set of tools that work well beyond the representational register to engage us sensorily and affectively. The politics built through this project resonate with those in feminist ecological projects seeking to build connections between human bodies and non-human bodies with sensory and affective languages that works through —but also on and in the registers of— messy fleshy bodies.

Beyond the specificities of these two projects, we find much potential for political geographies within geography’s creative return. As our two projects demonstrate, while expertise and skills such as those of a published poet are important and aid in the developing of work that can be examined through critical lenses, we see also how collaboration and the development of skills through practical experience when geographers work with and alongside artists can also build creative-critical geographic knowledge. We would also point towards the myriad of ways these two very different mediums have developed their critical projects, through the symbolic but also the affective force of language, through the recovery and installation of lost stories that disrupt strong narratives. We urge critical geographers seeking means to engage with bodies, emotions and places and communities they study to think through the possibilities creative geographies may offer. We equally urge creative geographers to reflect on how they might deploy their skills to build projects that are as much critical as they are creative.

This is an increasingly important time for reflection. Creative geographical practices are now enrolled within the wider trend for public intellectuals and, in the UK, what has been termed the ‘impact agenda’. In tandem with the impact agenda are also increasingly challenging and precarious work environments resulting in ever-higher rates of poor mental and physical health for many in our discipline and a corresponding desire to cultivate wellness (Mullings et al 2016). Scholars of creative geographies have noted the possibilities of creative practices to engage audiences beyond the academy, to make the production of academic scholarship or research and writing more enjoyable, to cultivate new publics for some of the pressing concerns of our time, or perhaps even to slow down scholarship so as to lead more fulsome and healthy lives (Hawkins 2014; Pratt and Johnson 2013). Given these possibilities, we believe it is important both that creative practitioners have concern for the quality of the work they produce in critical, creative and aesthetic senses and that we also have concern for the critical potential of that work. Impact agendas often have very particular sense of what impact is and how it is measured. Although we do not want to dampen the enthusiasm for creative production, for poetry and curations and cooking and music and theater (to name a few) in geography, we suggest that uncritically taking up creative practices and projects in order to participate in impact factoring or to feel better in ‘out of wack’ (Berlant 1997, 59) institutions may risk instrumentalizing them, may produce end-oriented practices as opposed to critical open-ended potentials (see Ahmed 2010. See too de Leeuw et al 2017). The practices of creative geographies do not, and also perhaps should not, sit too neatly within the strictures and structures of the neo-liberal university or searches for happiness therein (see Bagelman and Bagelman 2016 for critical possibilities in this regard. See also Ahmed 2010). Growing pressures on time, as well as the intensification of metrics across university activities are beginning, as Mountz et al. (2016, 208) note, to influence what, how, and why work is done. Discussions about the politics of creative geographies (Marston and de Leeuw, 2013) have noted the need for time to develop skills, either of practice or of collaboration: time is increasingly scarce in contemporary universities, however. While some departments are clearly welcoming and supportive of creative geographic practices, seeing them as innovative research frontiers, other departments are quick to dismiss them as at best a side-line and at worst as a distraction to ‘standard’ research practices and outputs: many institutions also want creative practices to cohere with academic values and metrics, perhaps constraining the works’ critical or radically disruptive potential. These imperatives make even more urgent our call for more time and space to consider possibilities of extending the critical reach of creative practices by geographers.

Let us end this article by stating that we have no particular or specific solution to the challenges we have identified. Indeed, one of the important ways that our two creative works have dialogued with each other in this article is to provide widely divergent practices as means for cultivating conversation. It this spirit of difference and dialogue, coupled with critical self-reflection and positioning, that we are advocating for more broadly. Fundamentally, we advocate the need to write and to make and theorize against the circulation of work and thoughts that do not account for othered subjectivities. We suggest the need for new creative spaces of radically sexualized, politically biologized, queerly-feminist and even orgasmic bodies – which we hope can be productively intertwined with more-than-human worlds to produce new radical positionalities. We hope too that geographers embracing the creative re/turn or taking up the call of geohumanities will seriously embrace critical radical geographies, queer geographies, feminist geographies, anti-racist geographies, decolonizing geographies and the myriad of radical positionings that have always opened new spaces and contributed to a vibrant and living discipline that might, ultimately, just make an embodied difference to the many bodies living in and around the world.

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# Notes on Contributors

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