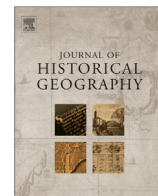




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Historical Geography at Large

Towards a participatory historical geography: archival interventions, volunteer service, and public outreach in research on early women pilots



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Abstract

Some scholars doing research set in the present time and near past seek to ground their research in community-based agendas, for example, through various forms of participatory research. Due to the contemporary nature of participatory research, historical scholarship has not fit easily into these rubrics. But what if a historical geographer wanted to contribute to the community she was studying? Here I examine what such a 'participatory historical geography' might look like using as brief example my efforts to forward the agendas of women pilots who flew in the US in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I seek to show how—at least when the agendas of our research communities are known, when scholars are willing to make archival interventions themselves, and when we seek to make contributions other than traditional scholarly publications—historical geography can endeavor to adopt a participatory model. In this context, archival interventions can include organizing, contributing to, and creating archives; and research contributions can include volunteer service of various sorts. Though not all historical research can be participatory, and although all forms of participatory research present (ethical) challenges, I here argue for a participatory historical geography in order to advance historical agendas in ways that facilitate contemporary engagements, and enable historical geographers to reach broader publics while helping ground our scholarship in issues relevant to our communities of the past and present.

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Keywords: Archive; Archival intervention; Participatory historical geography; Participatory research

In this short intervention I seek to advance efforts toward and discussion around what I term a 'participatory historical geography'—scholarship that strives to work with, give back to, and forward the agendas of the people whose lives we study, along with efforts to work with contemporary communities to aid them in understanding their past(s).¹ I first review the nature of participatory research. From this I extract core elements that qualify research as participatory, stressing the role of close and interactive engagement with contemporary communities. In one sense, historical research cannot be fully participatory as historical geographers typically can no longer interact directly with the communities we study. Yet this does not mean that the participatory ethos cannot be applied to historical geography, nor that

historical geographers have little to contribute to contemporary participatory research. Here, through a case study of my research on women pilots who flew in the US in the late 1920s and early 1930s, I detail three ways in which I have attempted to forward community-based agendas through historical geographical research: archival interventions, volunteer service, and public scholarship. There are other modes of engagement of course. My point is not to put forward my own example as a model, but rather to initiate broader discussion about the multiple avenues available in efforts toward a participatory historical geography. Debates over participatory research raise important ethical and methodological issues for historical geographers. Although not all historical (or contemporary) scholarship need be participatory, I argue that a

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¹ D. DeLyser, For a participatory historical geography, in: C.E. Colten, G.L. Buckley (Eds), *North American Odyssey*, New York, 2014, 294.

participatory model has much to offer historical geographical scholarship.

Participatory research

As Rachel Pain puts it, participatory research is ‘the growing practice of working with research “subjects” as collaborators in defining questions, selecting methods, analysing data and disseminating findings, with the goal of pursuing social justice and change directly’.² Participatory research has a number of key objectives. First, it seeks to bring a community-engaged, action-oriented dimension into academic work otherwise often seen as quietist. Second, participatory research has a liberatory agenda; it seeks to empower local people and reverse discriminatory and exclusionary policies and practices. Third, participatory researchers seek to engage in collaborative efforts that give voice to research participants, validating and even prioritizing their knowledge (rather than academic ‘expert’ knowledge). And fourth, participatory research demands a different model for research assessment because for participatory researchers, participation is research.³ These compelling contributions have made participatory research in various forms a growing field of endeavor for academics in a wide array of disciplines—so much so that in 2004 Duncan Fuller and Rob Kitchin saw fit to recognize a ‘participatory turn’ in human geography.⁴

But how can we extend such efforts to historical research, when members of the researched ‘community’ are typically no longer alive to participate? Here I sketch my efforts to contribute to one community where my research has found a place. I suggest that we can have a ‘participatory historical geography’, and, that as with contemporary participatory research, we can integrate participatory goals into a project from the outset in order to hope to harness

our research to make progressive contributions to broader communities—of both the past and present.

Let me be clear: others have engaged in participatory historical research before me and since—some have engaged in research practices similar to my own, while others have sought different paths forward. Public historians (geographers included) have long devoted significant efforts to progressive research geared to an audience outside academia,⁵ while archival and museum scholars (including geographers) have sought engaging ways to make collections speak to different publics.⁶ And, of course, much valuable historical (geographical) research engages people with whom we would not desire to ‘collaborate’—uncovering injustice and oppression is important work.⁷ My point, in this context, is to bring into open discussion practices of historical geography—practices some of us have already been doing but writing little about. My aim is not to claim my work as template or a ‘first’, but instead as an illustration of a portion of the possible, and hopefully also inspiration for others to do much more.

Towards a participatory historical geography: women pilots in the 1920s and 1930s

Participatory research, by nature, can be very personally intense, and this was the true in the case study I relate here.⁸ In 2005, after earning tenure and promotion I wanted to challenge myself with new empirical and theoretical ideas, and was drawn by the then-new mobilities turn.⁹ At that time, few had yet looked in these ways at gender issues in mobilities.¹⁰ And while people were working on walking,¹¹ cycling,¹² driving,¹³ being an airline passenger,¹⁴ and even waiting,¹⁵ I knew of nobody then looking at flying (actually piloting an airplane). The idea of studying women

² R. Pain, Introduction: doing social geographies, in: S. Smith, R. Pain, S.A. Marston, J.P. Jones (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Geographies*, London, 2009, 507–515, 512.

³ P. Reason and H. Bradbury (Eds), *Handbook of Action Research*, London, 2001; S. Kinson, Participation, in: S. Smith, R. Pain, S.A. Marston, J.P. Jones III (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Geographies*, London, 2009, 517–545; Pain, Introduction: doing social geographies (note 2).

⁴ D. Fuller and R. Kitchin, Radical theory/critical praxis: academic geography beyond the academy?, in: D. Fuller and R. Kitchin (Eds), *Radical Theory, Critical Praxis: Making a Difference Beyond the Academy?*, ACME ebook series, 2004, 1–20; See also Kinson, Participation (note 3); Pain, Introduction: doing social geographies (note 2).

⁵ See, for example, D. Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, Cambridge, MA, 1997; L. Jordanova, *History in Practice*, New York, 2006 [2000]; D. Fuller, Public geographies: taking stock, *Progress in Human Geography* 23 (2008) 834–844; D. Fuller and K. Askins, Public geographies II: being organic, *Progress in Human Geography* 34 (2010) 654–667; D.D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History*, Amherst, MA, 2012; R. Samuel, *Theaters of Memory*, London, 2012 [1994]; and F. Driver, Research in historical geography and in the history and philosophy of geography in the UK, 2001–2011: an overview, *Journal of Historical Geography* 42 (2013) 203–211.

⁶ See, for example, C. DeSilvey, Memory in motion: soundings from Milltown, Montana, *Social and Cultural Geography* 11(2010) 491–510; H. Geoghegan, Museum geography: exploring museums, collections and museum practice in the UK, *Geography Compass* 4 (2010) 1462–1476; N. Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, Santa Cruz, CA, 2010; A. Flinn, Archival activism: independent and community-led archives, radical public history, and the heritage professions, *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7 (2011) 1–20; F. Driver, Hidden histories made visible? Reflections on a geographical exhibition, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013) 420–435; W.M. Duff, A. Flinn, K.E. Surrtnamm, and D.A. Wallace, Social justice impact of archives: a preliminary investigation, *Archival Science* 13 (2013) 317–348; D.K. Wakimoto, C. Bruce, and H. Partridge, Archivist as activist: lessons from three queer community archives in California, *Archival Science* 13 (2013) 293–316.

⁷ See, for example, C. Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographical Change*, Vancouver, 1997; F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*, Oxford, 2001; W.G. Lovell, The archive that never was: state terror and historical memory in Guatemala, *Geographical Review* 103 (2013) 199–209; and J. Morrissey, D. Nally, U. Strohmeier, and Y. Whelan, *Key Concepts in Historical Geography*, London, 2014.

⁸ Kinson, Participation (note 3).

⁹ Mimi Sheller and John Urry termed it the mobilities paradigm: M. Sheller and J. Urry, The new mobilities paradigm, *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006) 207–226.

¹⁰ Exceptions include: T. Cresswell, Embodiment, power and the politics of mobility: the case of female tramps and hobos, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24 (1999) 175–192; K. Morin, Peak practices: Englishwomen’s ‘heroic’ adventures in the nineteenth-century American West, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89 (1999) 489–514; and later T. Cresswell, Mobilising the movement: the role of mobility in the suffrage politics of Florence Luscomb and Margaret Foley, 1911–1915, *Gender, Place, and Culture* 12 (2005) 447–461; and T. Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, London, 2006.

¹¹ Morin, Peak practices (note 10); J. Wylie, A single day’s walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers NS* 30 (2005) 234–247.

¹² J. Spinney, A place of sense: a kinaesthetic ethnography of cyclists on Mt Ventoux, *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 24 (2006) 709–732.

¹³ M. Featherstone, N. Thrift, and J. Urry, *Automobilities*, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2005; P. Merriman, *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England’s M1 Motorway*, London, 2007.

¹⁴ M. Gottdeiner, *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel*, Boston, 2001; S.B. Cwerner, Vertical flight and urban mobilities: the promise of reality of helicopter travel, *Mobilities* 1 (2006) 191–215; C. Lassen, Aeromobility and work, *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006) 301–312; P. Adey, Airports and air-mindedness: spacing, timing and using the Liverpool Airport, 1929–1939, *Social and Cultural Geography* 7 (2006) 343–363; P. Adey, L. Budd, and P. Hubbard, Flying lessons: exploring the social and cultural geographies of global air travel, *Progress in Human Geography* 31 (2007) 773–791.

¹⁵ D. Bissell, Animating suspension: waiting for mobilities, *Mobilities* 2 (2007) 277–298; D. Bissell, Travelling vulnerabilities: mobile timespaces of quiescence, *cultural geographies* 16 (2009) 427–445.

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