Susan Christopherson nailed it with her letter to the discipline, or more accurately its radical outposts. Naming “the project” as such and pointing out its exclusions, occlusions, limits was at once a calling out of masculinist Marxists and a calling up to feminists and others who felt—and were—marginalized by much of the practice and writings of radical geographers, to say nothing of more conventional practitioners.

Carefully documenting the importance of gender and race as categories of analysis in geography, Christopherson charted the problematic effects and limitations created by disregarding them in understanding political economic processes. But she also made clear the importance of position in theory construction and consumption, the situatedness of knowledge production and exchange, the intertwine of biography and history, the place of experience and the experience of place. Her anger was palpable, but in its folds were patient and lucid explanations of how and why things might change; had to change, though she doubted they would. Still she wrote it, and it mattered.

When the piece came out, I was just starting my career. The year before, at the AAG meetings in Phoenix, Arizona, just out from under the rock of writing my dissertation, I had endured the shock of feminism’s absence in a series of sessions on structuration theory. Paper
after paper by mostly, if not all, men (I don’t remember)—many in pink shirts (that I do remember)—marked the intersection between the social and the individual without so much as a mention of feminist theory or cultural studies, both of which had long been productively concerned with those connections and their radical consequences. Certainly, they were instrumental for me and so many others in recognizing and examining the deep and twisted connections between individuals and the social, cultural, geographical, and political economic contexts of their lives.

Christopherson’s paper was affirming, inspiring, a solace, and a call to action. It felt like solidarity in print. It spurred and was part of a torrent of scholarly pursuits that made clear the difference that attending to gender and race makes in producing theory and discerning what problems matter and how. The recognition of “difference” and its consequences for theory and practice is at the core of the politics of knowledge—not just in what is considered worth studying, but in the “struggle over whose theories will have validity and significance” (p.84) as Christopherson made clear. This concern, she underscored, is epistemological, thereby exceeding any particular focus such as gender, sexuality, or women. She was intent on rocking “the project” of critical and Marxist geography so that its conceptual and methodological structure shook. She succeeded. Sort of.

Christopherson’s article and the work of feminist geographers writing at the time, among them Linda McDowell, Suzanne Mackenzie, and Audrey Kobayashi, altered our objects of inquiry, stretched the social relations of production and reproduction to encompass often overlooked arenas of labor and insist on the importance of social reproduction, and called into question the ambit and scale of geographical analyses. Christopherson made the crucial argument that gender and race are not modifiers of class but interstitial and co-constitutive with it, that these relations are in constant flux and that they are not sensible without one another, but not in any sort of fixed or reductive way. Her piece focused on what she called “the politics of method” (p.86). Addressing the consequences of position, she marked how as Geography, or any field,
becomes more diverse, the range of practitioners’ experiences and relationships to power will alter the concerns addressed, the arguments made, the methodologies deployed, and the theories drawn upon and constructed. Certainly, the slow but ongoing diversification of the field in the years since Christopherson’s piece has altered and expanded the sorts of research undertaken and valorized, the range of publications, and the composition of gatekeepers.

So, then, why “sort of”? Geography is less white, less masculinist, less straight than it was in 1989, but the erasures, occlusions, mansplaining, and minimizing go on; somewhere I called it all “blah, blah, blah”, it’s really so tedious (see Katz 2006: 239). It would be so easy not to care anymore, but we must, not so much because it’s painful to not be fully recognized, but because it would be transformational to the field and to the scholarship of many of its “key thinkers” if they took seriously the work that is done outside of their comfort zones and the zones they keep creating to keep themselves comfortable. To paraphrase The Big Lebowski, “the project” abides, and that’s a loss for all who want to better understand the workings of social and environmental justice, and their manifestations and effects in our everyday lives as much as in our praxis.

Susan Christopherson pointed the way toward and celebrated the potential for this kind of transformation of geography through new modes of teaching and teachers, and the sorts of recognition of subjectivity and its differences that would offer a “basis for resistance to authority, including our own” (p.87). She was pessimistic that the transformation she envisioned would come about because of the enormity of the struggle over “the construction [and reconstruction] of power through theory” (p.88). But in so many ways it has, and the ways it has ensure that while the struggle continues, the contours and consequences of geographical inquiry have been altered for good, and for better. “The project” abides, but to the extent that it remains impervious to recognizing the fluid relations of subject formation along with the place of political economic experience, and their consequences for theory construction, its power to define what questions matter and how they are answered by whom just keeps shrinking. The political stakes of working
in and with a more vibrant differentiated community are huge, and occluded at great cost. Susan Christopherson knew that, and in naming and analyzing some of the possibilities and effects of remaking “the project” in and for an expanded field, she opened multiple spaces for thinking, teaching, theorizing, and acting that so many of us now inhabit and struggle to extend.

Reference